

Fanatical Publishing's

Weekly Review

Issue #62

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AND NOW, a word from the publisher:

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

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

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

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

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NEW AGE OF HEROES-THE FOREST AND LABYRINTH

by Saviortofew
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They ran to the Hunter Forest and found the Golden Stag of Artemis. Using the Soul of Pan, Isalus spoke with the Stag and asked it to take them to Artemis.

In the heart of the forest, they found the Goddess of the Moon and Hunt.

"Hello, nephew. My brother informed of your mission, and I know Chaos will find me soon, so I want you to take my Bow, the Selene Bow."

Nickolaes took the bow, and Artemis said, "Now I want you to kill me so you can take my Soul."

Nickolaes said, "No."

Then Chaos appeared and said, "Then I will."

He killed Artemis, and vanished.

Isalus took her Soul and gained the powers of the Moon and the Hunt, and shared it with Nickolaes and Artemis.

"Now we can go to the realm of Death. I know where the entrance is."

Naminas said, "Where?"

"My home. The cave in the Typhon Mountains."

They ran to the cave on the side of the Typhon Mountains. He took the maps of the Realm of Death and the Labyrinth. He then knocked on a wall and it opened the entrance. They went through and walked to the Palace of Thanatos without any obstacles.

Inside the Palace was the body of Thanatos and a giant Minotaur skeleton.

Isalus flew to it right arm and found some cracks in the bones, and said, "Fly around and break the bones!"

He broke the arms, Naminas broke the legs, and Nickolaes broke the torso. As the skull fell, it screamed and shattered on the ground.

Isalus took and shared Thanatos's Soul with them.

Nickolaes said, "Where is the Labyrinth?"

"Right underneath us." He tapped at an out-of-place stone floor and a staircase opened. They walked down to the many corridors of the Labyrinth. He took out the map and breathed on it. It went from 3000+ halls to just 1 leading to Daedalus's workshop. He found Daedalus's Wings and quickly made 2 more pairs of Wings for

Nickolaes and Naminas.

He also found schematics to Project Bane-The Spear of Retribution.

He read the list of materials: Wood from the Tree of the Hesperides, 3 Phoenix Feathers, the Omphalos Stone, and Orb of the Winds, and a Piece of the Sky.

They decided to get the feathers after everything else, because the Phoenix is at Mount Olympus. Isalus drew paths to the Underworld and the Hunter Forest on the map and the paths became real.

Nickolaes went to the Underworld for the Sky Piece, Naminas went to the Hunter Forest for the Wood, and Isalus left the Labyrinth and the Realm of Death to Typhon Mountains.

HARSH RAIN

BlackTealways

This story was inspired when I was sitting on my couch in front of the TV while it was raining hard and thunder storming. I'm also pretty sure I was a bit pissed off during that time as my parents just finished lecturing me about my grades and stuff. I had lingering anger and stress in me when the storm hit my area. Generally speaking, whenever it rained, my head would tilt a bit upward and my mind starts to daze off. It then wanders into this place where I start "talking" to mother nature. I've grown up believe that when it rains and storms, Mother Nature is pissed, mad, sad, and angry about something. I'd always ask her why she's crying, or why she's screaming. She was my muse for this story. I hope you all enjoy.

It's thunder storming.

The loud booms echoes, or is it even thunder storming.

Maybe it's a gunshot too loud, or a bomb thrown into a valley.

The sounds give off shivers, as I stare off to the distance. *How did I even get here?*

Before me lies emptiness. A wide soccer field that's supposed to be filled with noises is abandoned. Whatever of life is left is covered in mist.

The cracking of lightning...my eyes keep searching for that strike of light. Anger runs through me, as I curl up into a ball more and more.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Crash.

In the distance, a baby starts crying. I can't help but to smile. Evil slipped into my soul as the lightning cracked and the thunder boomed. My soul yearned to wash away everything....so it rained.

Rain, light at first, but it grew, harsher and stronger, the rain fell like hail.

It rained everywhere but over me. The rain wouldn't slip in. It couldn't slip in, through my shelter. I'm curled up in a ball next to an almighty tree. Its leaves grow tightly packed together leaving no space for rain to pour through. The almighty tree, my almighty tree.....is my shelter, my home...*my* place.

Taking in the scenery outside my safe zone, I closed my eyes and imagine myself in the middle of the deadly rain.

I was dancing. I felt free from anything. In the mist of the hail-like-rain, I smiled a wicked smile. I started laughing as a hysteric witch. I felt myself shrinking. . . . shrinking into a small ant and rain drops that where thousand times my size fell.

Correction, fell around me. As an ant, I scramble around dozens.....millions of drops. They weren't stopping, the drops weren't stopping. It was falling, falling, and falling...STOP!

I won't make it. Stop rain, stop. You'll be the last of me. Stop, I can't make it. Why? *why?* why aren't you stopping? Are you that sad? *sad enough to drown me?*

I took a few remain steps forward, the only steps I can't take. I was worn out from running. It's a maze, a long tiring maze. The rain won't stop creating new paths. It was too much.

I needed to wake up. WAKE UP!!!.....

.....a scream... surrounding everywhere. A high pitch scream can't be unheard. It was needed in the mist of rain.

Yet, even after screaming, the storm did not cease to stop.

Awaken from my nightmare, finally, I felt stiff from that experience. I slowly stood. Urge from my brain made me take a step forward. Step-by-step, I ended at the border between my nightmare, and my shelter. I stretched out a hand to reach across the border.

Drip drop. Drip drop. I felt it, the water. I felt it, the sadness. The sadness and anger I had felt before. I stared into the sky.

"What happened?"

What made you angry and sad? Who fueled your anger? Who created your tears?

Forget it all. The pain, the madness....stop. It's burning, burning through the earth. It's hurting, hurting in the heart....I can't stand it.

Pain erupted through my body. I pulled my hand back to me, and ran back to my safe place, right next to the tree. Slowly, I fell to the ground. Slowly I felt my hand.

Why?

The nightmare faded away without answering I looked back to the empty field. Except....there was no field anymore....

It was just rain.

IDIOT RIOT EPISODE S FOR SASHIMI

Justin Hillis

DORAGON MAA-TO Z

Disclaimer: welcome back...wait, why the hell am I welcoming you back? Shouldn't you be crawling back thanks to the lack of Idiot Riot-rrificness in your life? It's ok; I accept your apology...along with any offerings you bring. Money, preferably. Now, move down the aisle and get to reading.

Look over there.

No, seriously. Over there.

NO, DAMMIT. Over THERE.

Finally. Shit. See that supermarket with the oriental dragon coiled up around the massively over-dramatic Z? That's where we going.

What? You don't wanna go? Fuck you, we're going.

As the sliding doors open, Sashimi...Prince of the Sashimi looked upon his front end crew. The cashiers, the bag-boys....and Stacy. His upper lip curled into a sneer as he glared at her; making his contempt known. He adjusted his apron, a quiet white with the words "I am Sashimi, Prince of the Sashimi, and I Heart" with a picture of a rooster.

It was the biggest rumor around the store he was gay, but he had destroyed that rumor long ago. Everyone thought it was because he hated Stacy, but he was just extremely...flamboyant. Of course, it didn't take long for everyone to know the truth about Sashimi...that he was incredibly egotistical on an impossible scale.

"I can't believe that I, Sashimi, Prince of the Sashimi, must be forced to do...manual labor. This is simply...oh, fuck. Bryan, what is a

long, unnecessary word for annoying?”

“I don’t kn-”

“I don’t recall asking you a damn thing!”

He heard the door open, and turned to look. An old lady walked in. He grinned, and walked up to her. The old lady almost fainted on the spot thanks to the fact that Sashimi’s jet-black hair was two feet straight up, and he was wearing only an apron and a white speedo. Ugh.

“Ma’am, can I help you look for something?”

“Why yes, I was looking for some fru-”

“You want cucumbers? They’re in our produce section.” Sashimi waved a hand in the general direction of the produce section.

“Well, there’s also the brea-”

“You’d like a rump roast? Please, head back to our meat market and see Beast. He’s the bulky motherfucker, you can’t miss him. If I might make a suggestion...would you like to add some...buns...with that roast? We have a wonderful selection.”

“Well, no, what I really wanted was-”

“Perhaps some melons? They’re large and ripe; quite wonderful to the touch, if I say so myself.”

The old lady looked shocked, and potentially disgusted, but Sashimi kept on.

“If you’re interested as well, we have tuna on sale this week.” He flashed his biggest grin before the old lady walked past him, trying to avoid him as if he were a freak.

But we all know Sashimi has issues, even if she doesn’t. Poor old lady. Couldn’t handle Sashimi. Then again, he’s more than most people can physically or mentally handle. You don’t have to agree with me, it’s just the truth.

He then grabbed the walkie-talkie radio from underneath his apron and spoke into it as his voice suddenly broadcast over the

intercom.

“Hello everyone, this is Sashimi, Prince of the Sashimi, your manager. I would like everyone to come to the front end, I need to call an emergency meeting.”

He then added, “Yes, Beast. You too, you bulky motherfucker.”

He then heard from across the store, “Shut the fuck up, Sashimi!”

Sashimi replied over the intercom, “That’s PRINCE of the Sashimi to you!” He slipped the walkie-talkie back underneath the apron as he watched everyone approach...even...Stacy.

For the record, no one knew what he had against her, but Sashimi wasn’t exactly the easiest nut in the shelf to crack. When everyone had gathered, Sashimi stood in front of them, and clapped sharply before yelling, “All right ladies. Pop quiz time! I want you to tell me who I am, and what I love. How about you....Stacy?”

Stacy sighed; he always picked her for pop quiz time. She felt everyone’s eyes on her as she shook her head.

“... You are Sashimi...”

“Yes?”

“...Prince of the Sashimi...”

“...Go on...?”

“And...you lo-.”

“I LOVE COCKS! Though, not nearly as much as I love Kraft...Macaroni...” He took a second to sniff the air; he always did that when talking about his favorite food, “ ...and Cheese!”

He then looked at everyone and shoo’d them off.

“All right everyone, pop quiz is over! You may all return to your posts!”

As they began to disperse, Beast spoke up.

“Fuck...finally. I gotta take a shit.”

Sashimi’s eyes widened as he groaned and realized he would need to put police caution tape up on the men’s restroom.

Again.

Sashimi signaled for Bryan to retrieve the police caution tape from the Emergency Box. People around the store say he had stolen the tape, but no one really knew. As per the usual, he pushed the question to the side and left it unanswered. He instructed Bryan to then retrieve the gas-mask, and upon Beast’s exit, to tape the bathroom down.

He figured it would take a day or so to get rid of the stench. THAT would be bad for business, unless he sold gas-masks to all the customers. That, however, would be showing mercy. The customers would need to man-up and take the stench on full-force.

He turned and noticed a tall, lanky young man standing there. He was dressed nice; did Sashimi have an interview? He forgot, honestly.

“Hello, I’m here for my interview?”

Oh, so he did have an interview. Fancy that.

“Oh, really now? Tell me your name, and let’s get on with it.”

“My name is Stacy-”

“You’re hired.”

The boy paused. He blinked. That quick?

“I’m sorry?”

“I said You. ARE. HiReD. Do I need to...spell it out for you...STACY?”

The young man blinked again. What was that empty contempt and hatred in the saying of his name? He thought fast as he caught an apron. He looked at Sashimi.

“...That is PRINCE of the Sashimi to you!” Sashimi pointed angrily at the sky.

Oh shut the hell up, you blowhard.

Stacy, the new Stacy, looked up at the sky following Sashimi’s finger and he wondered if he had been hired by a lunatic.

Sashimi then turned his wide-eyed gaze sharply at the new Stacy.

“You start now, Stacy! Put on that apron and go assist D.J. in the freezer!”

“But I applied for a bag-boy positi-”

“I don’t care! Go assist D-Wayne Jenkins in the freezer!”

Stacy ran off for the freezer, wondering if getting hired here was a good idea.

Sashimi turned sharply to Stacy #1, and mused to himself.

Haha, don’t I feel fortunate...for I now have TWO employees named Stacy to torment.

Sashimi is nuts. Yes, I said it. You can confirm it here. Yes. Here. Sashimi Is Nuttier Than A Fruit Cake.

Moving on, just had to say that.

“How dare you say that of Sashimi, Prince of the Sashimi!”

Oh shit, are you talking to me again? Seriously, shut the fuck up. I’ll erase your mouth.

“...” Sashimi paused in silence.

There, that’s better. Anyways.

Sashimi stared hard at Stacy #1. She looked up from her register and directly at him. For a few seconds, the universe stopped moving. Everything. Even that giant slab of meat that Beast tossed in the air to entertain a shopper as he cut it up.

Seriously, look back there. It's suspended in the air. That's some freaky shit.

Holy shit, I just noticed how big Beast's butcher knife is. Isn't that illegal in 50 states?

...Where was I...oh yes. Sashimi and Stacy #1.

Stacy wasn't sure what Sashimi would say as he opened his lips in slow motion.

“...Take a break.”

The very second Sashimi spoke those words, a car exploded through the wall, slammed into an old lady and her grocery buggy, and made her fly perfectly through a nearby random basketball hoop for a perfect 15 points.

Also, a register died, and a Bigfoot appeared and crashed through an aisle holding ten boxes of Ritz crackers.

What? Don't look at me like that. At least there isn't a Yeti buying a 24 pack...hey what do ya know, there's one now. Looks like Yeti loves Coors Light.

As Stacy #1 nearly fainted from that, Sashimi strutted to the back of the store to talk to The Beast. He had heard complaints from one or two of his customers that Beast had gotten drunk on the clock and streaked across the store a day or two ago. He couldn't remember whether or not this was true. After all, within the last few days, he had been forced to take down the enormous golden statue of himself that he had placed in front of the store, so his attention was focused on much more important things.

Like bitching to himself that he can't totally have his way.

Back then the store was known as...Sashimi Mart. Not so anymore, thanks to several customers complaining about it. For some reason, everyone thought it was an oriental food store.

Sashimi told them all off, and they got pissy about it. Go fucking figure.

Sashimi stood in front of the meat cooler, where Beast was having a beer. Or four. While cooking steaks on a grill. In the meat

cooler. Sashimi had his hands on his hips in his defiant manner as he watched. He still couldn't believe just how...massive...Beast was. It was so bad that Sashimi had even put the words "Bulky Motherfucker" on Beast's name-tag.

He simply couldn't believe that Beast had been born this way.

"Don't you dare put on that atrocious song!" Sashimi shouted at the sky.

...What the fuck...again? Seriously, Sashimi, shut the fuck up.

Beast looked at him. He looked bored, and annoyed.

"What do you want?"

"I wish to inquire about an...incident I heard of recently. I received a customer complaint that you got drunk and decided to go...streaking...around the store. Is this true?"

"Yes."

"You won't even try to deny it?"

"Fuck no."

"You realize this may lead to your being fired, right?"

"It ain't gonna happen."

"Why do you say that?"

"I have too many fans."

"...Ah, right. You and your...wrestling championship."

"Besides, the people who saw me streaking were fortunate."

Sashimi raised an eyebrow; this he had to hear. "Why is that?"

"Because they're never gonna see another trouser snake that big again."

Sashimi rubbed the bridge of his nose as he groaned. He wondered how in the hell people could put up with The Beast. He

then felt a certain sensation down by his...lack of pants. He reached down and removed the walkie-talkie from his special place and spoke into it.

“What the hell do you want?”

“Sashimi, we got a situation up here.”

“What do you want?”

“Well...it might be better if you get your flamboyant ass up here.”

Sashimi frowned; a frown that marked his excellence with an unnecessary form of negativity...he really hated manual labor. He strutted to the front end, past the various aisles that sold products with his likeness on them: like Sashimi-Os, or Chef Sashimi, or Sashimi Dinner Rolls.

Or better than all of those...Canned Sashimi; so good they put it in a can.

Right before he got to the front end, he spied the back of a magazine that a customer was reading. He snatched it out of their hands, while putting his hand in their face to silence them. He saw a big picture of a gay rock troll dressed in drag, with the word Bruce in cursive writing. Next to the name were the words “Coming Soon! We interview Phil, the Vegetarian Sausage from the Future!”

Sashimi grimaced a bit at the image of a giant, smiling sausage who was holding a piece of cabbage in his hands. He then tossed the magazine in the trash, and noticed the woman was still staring at him in disbelief.

“What? What the hell is it?”

“That was MY magazine you threw away.”

“Oh, well, I’m sorry that I threw away your magazine, lady. Be thankful that Sashimi, Prince of the Sashimi even stopped by you. Here is something to reward you.”

With that, Sashimi pulled an enormous book from underneath his apron, and slammed it in her buggy. She stared at it in shock as it bent the basket, and damaged her groceries. The title on the book

said, "Sashimi, You Will Love Him Like I Do." She stared at it even more before Sashimi finally cleared his throat.

"It's around 1,000 pages."

Her eyes widened as he walked off. He finally reached the front end, and immediately saw the problem: an old lady had gotten a massive package of meat; it looked like it weighted about thirty pounds. He knew Beast had done it; other customers had mentioned incidents like this.

He strolled up to the plain-looking register and moved the checker, a plain girl named Chelsea, out of the way. He began to push the buttons with lightning speed, almost tapping out a rhythm that almost made you wanna dance. He then stopped suddenly, to the embarrassment of all those dancing.

Chelsea and the old lady looked at him; his face was twisted in shock and horror. Chelsea arched a plain eyebrow before asking what was wrong.

Sashimi muttered, "...it's over 9000..."

"What?" the old lady asked while cupping a hand to her ear.

"I said...it's over NINE
THOUSSAA
AA
AA
AA
AA
AAAAAAAAAND!!!!!!!!!"

(No, seriously, keep screaming until you run out of breath, or your voice cracks.)

As Sashimi had screamed out his sudden revelation, the effect was immediate. The old lady's glasses shattered, another register exploded in a torrent of sparks, the glass doors cracked and shattered, an oven in the nearby deli exploded(with people running around on fire), an old man's toupee grew wings and flew away, and a light fell from the ceiling and landed on a kid.

Wow, look at all that carnage.

Then Sashimi looked at the screen again. "...Oh, my mistake.

It's only \$200."

He rang up the meat at the right price as Bryan and Stan watched from behind a wall. Bryan muttered to Stan, "...That's a new record. Last week wasn't this intense."

Sashimi then summoned Bryan and Stan. "We have a mass amount of...glass on the floor, and it must be cleaned up. Summon one or two more helpers and get...to it."

Sashimi stepped on the glass, while barefooted, and looked over the broken glass doors. It was while looking, he noticed a large ham enter. He looked like a law official.

The Ham waddled up to Sashimi, and he was instantly recognized as Sergeant O' Ham. Sashimi then exclaimed, "What the fuck! You haven't been seen for...how many chapters? Sixteen?"

O' Ham nodded. "Aye, laddie. Me Name's Sergeant O'Ham, and I'm a long time veteran of this here series, despite being buttered for over ten chapters. I'm here with a request." He brandished a piece of paper, which he then handed to Sashimi.

Sashimi took it, somewhat reluctantly, and looked at it. His eyes instantly widened as he saw what was written: an old photo of Corn Dogg, who hasn't been seen in this series for 12 or so chapters, and the words "Have You Seen This Person?" above the picture.

Sashimi looked up.

"What is this? Why do you bring this in my store? Do I honestly look like I care if I have seen Corn Dogg, that ridiculous bastard? Despite being the supposed main character for this infernal series, he hasn't appeared in around ten chapters."

"Aye, that's part of the reason I'm trying to find him. So he can finally put his worthless ass back to work."

Sashimi stuffed the paper in a nearby trash can and said, "If anything, the real main character of this series should be me. Why, you may ask? For I am Sashimi," He took a dramatic pause, "Prince of the Sashimi. And I have a love for Kraft...Macaroni..." He took a deep breath through his nose, "...And Cheese. It just cannot be denied. I think I shall...run a petition to see who wishes for me to become the new main character."

It was then both Sashimi and O'Ham heard Beast bellow out some nonsense about Sashimi's previous statement. Or at least, that's what Sashimi thought he heard. When it came to his massive ego, sometimes he only heard himself talking. Or he thought he heard people praising him when they were really insulting him(which tended to happen often.).

Beast towered over Sashimi within seconds. He stank of alcohol, and it was so rank that a soccer mom that was twelve feet away fainted from it. She fell into a display of soda. Sashimi groaned; he had spent fifteen hours setting that soda display up. It had been perfect. He then muttered, "What the hell do you want, you giant bastard?" to The Beast.

Beast pointed one big finger in Sashimi's face. "That's bullshit," he exclaimed. "If anyone's gonna become the main character of this series, it's me, motherfucker. Hell, I've at least got two or so stories to my name. Your Sushi Six Pack gang are probably standing in the unemployment line...well, except maybe that guy Tempura. I heard he entered some world eating championship league."

Sashimi practically had to bring out an umbrella because Beast was spitting as he talked. "Say it, don't spray it, you buffoon."

What Sashimi saw next shocked him: Beast ripped off his apron and his shirt with it. He flexed his massive muscles, and while Sashimi was appalled, Beast made another register explode. Also, as Sashimi looked on, a herd of small pigs ran down the main walkway.

Beast then spoke up again. "Now I'm gonna put up a petition, because not only do I fucking quit, but I also know I'm a better character than you, and I want to have a beard."

Sashimi pictured Beast with a beard for a second, blinked a few times, and erased the image from his mind. He shuddered to think how much more manly and popular The Beast could get from such an accessory. After all, he knew The Beast was the kind of guy who would put swim trunks and sunbathe on a snow-covered mountain for the hell of it.

He then looked down at the torn apron and then back up at Beast. "I...suppose I should take that as a...resignation?"

Beast looked down at it as well; for a moment he considered pissing on it right there. But he knew better. He had plans; big plans.

“Yeah, I fucking quit. I’m done cutting meat for you, you egotistical blowhard.” He then ran back to the meat department for a moment, and returned with that enormous-illegal-in-50-states butcher knife.

“I’m keeping this, though.”

Sashimi stared at Beast before finally uttered, “Fine, get out of here. Don’t ever come back.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me; I’ll be fine as long as I don’t work for you.”

Sashimi watched Beast stomp out the door in a (rare) moment of silence. He then noticed O’Ham was still standing there.

“What do you want?! I will let you know if I see that degenerate gangster-ghetto bastard! Now schoo, you damn fool!”

O’Ham simply nodded and left, having given the message so he could leave (finally, sheesh).

It was not longer after that Stacy walked back into the store (she had run out of the store when she had been told to go to break). Sashimi glared at her for a few moments, until he noticed the woman who walked in behind her. Of course, when you think about it, everyone in the store would notice her. Even the old lady on the toilet in the back of the store would notice her, for crying out loud.

Sashimi realized everything had slowed down considerably, to where everything was going in slow motion. He also heard the song “Stacy’s Mom” playing over the PA, and briefly wondered who messed with his recorded 30-track CD he had made all about himself.

(And no, I have no intention of trying to sing, so kiss my ass.)

As she strutted her stuff across the front end, lots of things happened. There was the register that exploded (the fourth one within the past ten minutes), the old man having a heart attack, a grocery cart traffic wreck (it consisted of fifteen carts, all trying to check out at the same time, only to be sidetracked by Stacy’s Mom), and the best of all?

The manager of the deli department looked up from rummaging in a drawer, and was holding a squeeze bottle of mayonnaise. He saw Stacy's Mom, and squeezed the bottle so hard a stream of...white...stuff...came out. All over the chick standing next to him. She looked at him in disbelief, and he just mouthed the words, "It's Stacy's Mom!"

And the real best part? This all happened in slow motion.

She finally stopped in front of Sashimi, and the slow motion stopped as well. Sashimi looked her over; from her stiletto heels on up. It had been obvious she had chosen her outfit to maximize sex appeal. He reasoned to himself she might be a part-time hooker in the seedier sections of New Pork City, an area known as...Hooklyn. Whether it was true or not, he didn't care. After all, he was Sashimi...Prince of the Sashimi, and if he says it is so, it must be.

"Are you...what is it..." Stacy's mom stared at his apron for a moment, "...Sashimi?"

"That is Prince of the Sashimi to you, you dirty street dishwasher!"

Stacy's Mom was obviously unimpressed. She puffed her chest out, much to the delight of every guy (and girl) in the area. Sashimi was the only one unimpressed.

"Just who are you?" He asked, his contempt ranging to more than one person today.

"I'm Stacy's Mom."

Sashimi raised an eyebrow as high as it could go on his head. He then reacted with faux-shock.

"Stacy's MOTHER? I can't believe that such a disgraceful human would have a...mother. She is a bother, a true employee, wonderful and always on time, yet a total pain in my royal sculpted ass!"

Stacy's Mom raised an eyebrow. She shifted her hips. Sashimi shifted his hips in the opposite direction.

"Really? Are you always this contradictory?"

“Yes, and No. For I am...Sashimi...Prince of the Sas-”

“Yes, I know that, now why is there a problem with my Stacy?”

Sashimi’s eyes went wide with shock; no one interrupted him.

“How dare you! No one interrupts Sashimi, Prince of the Sashimi!”

His eyes darted to the ground, where Beast’s apron was still on the ground. He picked it up, and tossed it at Stacy’s Mom. She took a big whiff of it as she caught it, and she noticed it smelt like Old Spice. She then looked at Sashimi, puzzled.

“Your punishment,” he said while pointing at her, “for interrupting me is you will fill the position The Beast just gave up! We shall see how well you can handle meat while working in a cold area! Do you love meat, Stacy’s Mother?!”

Her eyes lit up; she had lots of experience with meat. “I loooove meat! All kinds! Steaks, beef, sausage, tuna! All of it!”

Sashimi stared for a second as he watched Stacy’s Mom react to being a meat lover. He figured she probably was from Hooklyn. He then looked around at his front-end team, and saw they were all drooling. He then got an idea.

“You start immediately, yet on your way to the back, you will be...welcomed by everyone; customers and employees alike. Starting with you, Bryan!”

Bryan had been staring at Stacy’s Mom’s ass the entire time. Though honestly, who can blame him? With what she’s wearing? (use your imagination, dammit.)

“Bryan! You damn buffoon! Welcome Stacy’s Mother to Sashimi Mart!”

Bryan did so, with gusto. His welcoming, a swift, hard slap on the ass, was followed by the others; checkers and clerks alike as she made her way to the meat counter. Even the customers got involved; though admittedly some of them welcomed her a bit much.

However briefly it was, Sashimi wondered to himself if, to

promote the addition of Stacy's Mom to the roster of Dragon Mart Z, he should put a bed in the middle of the store and have her model on it in a bikini or something.

Though, he mused to himself immediately that was probably a horrible idea, given how everyone in the store "welcomed" her. He then noticed Stacy staring at him.

His lip curled upward into a sneer as he glared at her. "What the hell do you want?"

Stacy glared back. "You hired my mom?"

"Yes, I think she would do an excellent service, hanging back in a cold area surrounded by all the meat she could desire. Women love meat, after all. Now get to work! You're back on the clock, aren't you?"

Stacy did as she was told, before realizing her register had exploded, so she had to find a new one to set up at. It was the dreaded Express Lane...or better known as Lane 1.

It was then Sashimi heard heavy stomping as the glass-less entrance door slid open. He snapped his head to the entrance, and his eyes widened at what he saw, but it might be better if he says it first.

"...That...is the biggest cock I have ever seen."

Standing in the doorway was a six foot-five inch rooster, dressed in a secret service suit. It was bobbing its head to something; on closer inspection, Sashimi noticed earbuds. Then he saw the rooster jerk the earbuds from his ears and turn his head sharply at Sashimi, glaring him down. The Burly Brawl theme from The Matrix started.

Ok, cut that shit off. That's going to get annoying quick.

Sashimi's eyes widened for a moment. "...It's you..."

The Rooster let out a clucking sound before tilting his head at Sashimi.

Sashimi came close to replying "Me, Me, Me..." before he realized that would have messed up the dialogue for that scene.

Oh come on, you idiots. Can't you think of something better than stealing dialogue from the Matrix? Look, move on or I'll kick your asses, both of you.

Sashimi paced around the rooster; the rooster watched him closely, never taking his sharpened gaze off of the egotistical man in front of him. The rooster thought this one was strange, especially to be wandering around declaring he loved cocks/roosters. He thought this one was especially strange because he was walking around in just a white speedo and an apron, with his love for fowl emblazoned on the front.

"It has been quite some time...Mr. C." Sashimi finally spoke after pacing around the rooster. He stopped in front of the rooster, and the cock in question jerked his head at Sashimi and clucked when he heard the name "Mr. C."

"...Or should I refer to you as...Bruce See? World famous badass and undefeated champion of cockfighting?"

The rooster ruffled his feathers at the mention of that name; it was his old name, one he had kept hidden for years as he did Secret Service work for President Bear and Vice-President Timber Wolf.

Mr. C narrowed his eyes at this one; he had fought Sashimi, Prince of the Sashimi in the past. They both changed during that fight, whether for better or worse.

Mr. C looked around; everyone on the front end of this store was staring. No business was being conducted, all the employees were taking bets, a fitness junkie got run over by a old lady in an electric scooter; it seemed like this kind of thing happened everyday.

"Let me guess, Mr. C....you're on a crusade to promote the eating of beef? As in, Eat Beef, not Chicken?"

Mr. C jerked his head back to face Sashimi as the Burly Brawl theme now came on over the store PA system.

Oh, for crying out loud.

Sashimi looked like he wanted a fight; Mr. C was irritated enough that he wanted to fight now as well.

You can see where this is going.

To be continued(eventually.).

“Whoa, whoa, hold on. Don’t end this thing yet, motherfucker!”

...What the hell...Beast? What the hell do you want?

“I have something I wanna say.”

Really? You couldn’t say it in the story itself?

“That’s because I had made my exit by then.”

...ugh...fine. What do you wanna say?

“Stacy’s mom has got it going on!”

...

To be continued(seriously, this time.).

LAND OF INSANITY PT5

by riolightwarrior
of <http://riolightwarrior.deviantart.com>

Four weeks later. "Ah. You are finally awake Mister Lane. Please rest, you are not fully healed yet." I looked around the room to see a young woman standing at the side of my bed. All that ran through my mind was, *What happened? Where were the two men? How did I end up here?*

"Where am I? How did I get here?" The young woman turned around to face me, as I asked. What beauty. I saw long black hair and brown eyes, and I think my heart skipped a beat.

"You were brought here by a nice old man. I don't know his name. He left a phone number, and told us to tell you to call it when you felt better." She handed me a card with the number on it. The man had unique, strictly cursive handwriting, and a unique way of writing his phone number. It was in an entirely different language than the phone number itself.

"zes drie eine twee twee vier zeven zeven negen negen" Thinking on it for a moment, it was Dutch. Interesting. Was this man Dutch, or was he just using this as a way to hide the number? Either way, I was asked to call this number. Maybe this man can help me figure out why Jonithan attacked me.

"Would you like a phone, Mister Lane," the nurse asked. With a nod, the young woman went out the door. I wondered who this man was, and why he brought me here. Were the two men working for him and not Jonithan? Or did he do something I'm not aware of? The nurse came back into the room with a phone, and placed it on my bed.

"Thank you, Ma'am. Would you mind leaving the room for a moment?" She nodded to me, and left the room while I dialed the number. All I heard for a good while, was ringing. When I was about ready to hang up the phone, someone pick up the line, and a distorted voice spoke to me.

"Ah. Mister Lane. How are you today? Better I hope." By the sound of the distortion device, it was right up against his mouth. It had a lisp of sorts. *Why did this man need a distortion device? And why did he want me to call him?*

"Yes, much better now that I'm no longer in pain. Who are you, if you don't mind me asking?" Only silence was given to my question, then a slight chuckle rang out from the other end. The laugh was kind of creepy too, since this man was wearing a distortion device.

"You may call me Mister X, and I have an offer for you. I am putting together a little group of people to help me right all the wrongs that have befallen our dear country, and I need someone with your talent to hack into any security system. Would you be interested? The pay will be good --more than your friends could ever muster up. Who knows, maybe you will meet Mister Jonithan again and settle the score for that scar he has given you." I rubbed my head. Feeling the scar and nodding for a while, I listened to what this man had to offer.

"All right. What all do I have to do if I accept your offer, Mister X?"

"Glad you asked. Your job mainly will be to gather information for your partners, and hack into several security systems to make it easier for your partners to infiltrate a building. Every now and then, you might have to go out into the field to get some information yourself," he said. I thought on it for a while and let out a sigh. A smile crept onto my face at the thought of meeting Jonithan again.

"Sounds fun. Count me in. When do you want me to start," I asked eagerly waiting for my answer.

"Right away, Mister Lane. Paul will be there in a few hours to bring you to me. I will be waiting, Mister Lane. I hope you won't disappoint me, I have heard a lot about you." He hung up the phone. I sat there for a moment and chuckled. A chance to use my talent and not get reported for it. This had to be a dream. A few hours passed, and an old man dressed in an all black tuxedo tailored to fit just right, walked into my room. He had a gentle look about him, but something told me if I pissed him off, it would not be a pretty picture.

"Mister Lane, I am here to take you to Mister X," he said in an elderly voice, sounding almost forced. He escorted me to a limo with tinted windows so dark, that nothing could see in. On the way to Mister X, my mind wondered what this man looked like, and why he needed a distortion device?

RESPECT

by Solilska
of solilska.deviantart.com

As my ninth written piece i attempted to talk about respect:

Respect is an odd thing in this day and age, people who have done nothing demand it and people who deserve don't ask for it, respect is the feeling of admiration for someone because they possess certain qualities, abilities or achievements. Respect is not given to anyone and anything, it is earned.

Now someone I have never met and never has done anything for me tangibly will rarely get my respect, unless they have achieved certain things and shown themselves to have a great ability in something I have mutual interest and appreciation for. For example, a biologist who makes a great discovery and is able to explain and put this forward, helping and educating the people who have interest in this subject and adding to the subject as a whole, that would earn my respect.

Respect seems to be a key problem with either the older generation or parents, begetting someone doesn't earn you anything, its the love, the tenderness and education that has formed this great child into an even greater adult that gets you respect.

While with the older generation they feel they instantly deserve respect for their age and actions in youth, I would never be disrespectful to such a person (Or any person for that matter) Unless they outwardly show me disrespect in the first place and unfairly. We must always be aware of how we come across and that it usually isn't how we think we do, if you do respect someone, do your best to earn their respect in return, and of course, earn your own respect (which is the most important and hardest things to do), because you judge yourself harsher than anyone else but don't forget to reward yourself when you do something worth doing and you can see you have made progress.

Respect Is a tricky thing, you have to constantly watch and be vigilant of how you treat others and how they are treating you, and constantly regulate accordingly.

AMONG US

by Ambiguous-Catharsis
of <http://Ambiguous-Catharsis.deviantart.com>

“I think I’m seeing things,” I say to my therapist. She blinks, easily switching gears from school to... to whatever it is that I want to talk about now.

“You think?”

No judging. She’s just questioning my word usage, because I didn’t say, “I am seeing things.”

I take off my glasses, because I think better when the world around me is fuzzy. I twirl them by one of the ear-pieces. “Out of the corner of my eye, you know? Just something small and dark, like it’s falling to the ground. And then I turn and there’s nothing.” I shrug.

She points her pencil at me. “Don’t do that. The shrug is you dismissing whatever you just said, and whatever you say here is valid.” She breaks, to emphasize the reprimand and to collect her thoughts. “Can you identify whatever it is that’s falling?”

I shake my head. “No. I never really... see it. I just kind of... catch it, I don’t know. I feel like it’s accidental.” I almost shrug again, but I remember the warning.

She leans forward a little bit, and her eyes are almost glowing. “Those are interesting words. ‘Catch it’. Have you ever tried to do just that? Have you ever tried to catch whatever it is that’s falling?”

I’m still thinking about that after our session ends. I’m pretty sure she means it in some figurative way, like I’m supposed to catch myself before I fall off the edge of sanity or something like that, but I’m thinking about it literally.

I’m on edge for the rest of the day, waiting for the fuzz to appear at the edge of my vision, but it doesn’t. I go to bed that night a little disappointed, but very resolved to wait until I get the chance.

The next morning, whatever it is falls before I’m even fully awake. I groan out loud and curse myself silently, because I feel I should have been prepared, even at five in the morning.

The Moment comes two days later, after another therapy session, when I’m walking home. I see the falling fuzz and I spin, my hand reaching out in a lightning-fast grab. My fist closes in on itself. Finishing my turn, I come to a stop and bring my hand up to my face.

I swallow. I can feel something inside my fist, and that alone is making my arm shake and my teeth chatter. I close my eyes and breathe deeply, imagining myself to be somewhere else, and that helps ward off the panic attack, although the leftover adrenaline in my

system will leave me shaky for the next ten minutes.

But I don't care about the next ten minutes. I care about right now, and whatever it is that I've caught.

Licking my lips, I open my hand.

It's just a little black feather, crumpled and bent from my fingers. I feel relieved and confused all at once, and I look up and around, trying to figure out where it came from. There are birds overhead, crows and blue jays and the occasional hawk, but the birds don't explain why I'm seeing falling things in my house.

Over the next week, I collect eleven black feathers.

Two are from my room. Six are from the street. And three are from my classrooms. I've gotten a couple strange looks, because a girl suddenly reaching out to grab at the air isn't normal. But it's not like I care. I've got eleven little feathers, black and shiny.

I'm sitting on my bed with them spread out in front of me. I haven't shown them to my therapist, and I haven't even talked about them to her. They're my secret for now, my private collection. That's not bad, is it? I mean, they're just feathers. Feathers can't hurt anyone.

... not like guns and knives and punches and kicks and cutcutcutcut and scream for your life, darling...

When I wake up, I'm in the hospital. My mom is asleep in the chair next to my bed, but she's covered with a coat that's two sizes too big for her, which means my brother is here to.

And that means I relapsed.

I drop my head back onto the pillow and try to ignore the pain behind my eyes. I don't know where my glasses are. They would help with the pain, but they'd also make it harder to think, and I don't know if I want to think or sleep.

"God, I need help," I murmur, and it sounds desperate.

My bed creaks and shifts to the left. I don't open my eyes, because I don't want to deal with my mother's sympathetic look and her tearful eyes, her hand-holding and hopefulness. I know she means well, but she can mean well just as easily from her house or her work or anywhere but here.

A hand slips into mine, and my heart rate starts picking up, because my mother's hand is smaller than mine, and this one isn't. I know it's not my brother. He won't hold my hand. He'll run his hands through his hair and worry about the bills, but he won't hold my hand.

I raise my head.

The pain that seems to always sit on top of my heart is reflected in his eyes. He holds my hand between his like it's something precious he's afraid to lose, and his eyes are filled with unspoken apologies and comfort and sadness.

My gaze wanders to the pair of coal-black wings that sprout out of his back. I can see enough of the sleek black feathers that I can tell

that they would be beautiful, if they weren't so bare. I can see patches of pale skin between the feathers, and some places are dotted with dark red blood.

"I'm so sorry," he says, and his voice is filled with emotion. "You never asked for help. I couldn't... I can't help you if you don't ask. I... I'm so sorry... I tried..." He gestured at his wings. "I tried to get your attention." His eyes meet mine, pleading. "I truly did. Please, believe me."

I blink, and nod. He drops his head, and I see a few tears drop from his eyes onto my bed sheets. I sit up a little bit, and I bring my other hand up to his drooping inky black wings, stroking the remaining feathers with the back of my finger. He squeezes my hand tighter, his whole body shuddering.

"I can protect you now," he says, so quietly that I almost don't hear him. "You'll be safe, I promise. You won't ever end up in here again."

His voice is soft and comforting, and it's putting me to sleep. I tangle my fingers in his feathers, smearing blood over his skin and my skin. I lay my head on his shoulder, and he stiffens only for a moment before he shifts and wraps his arms around my body.

I've never felt safer.

"I'm Angelina," I say into his neck, breathing in his scent of sweat and dust and oil.

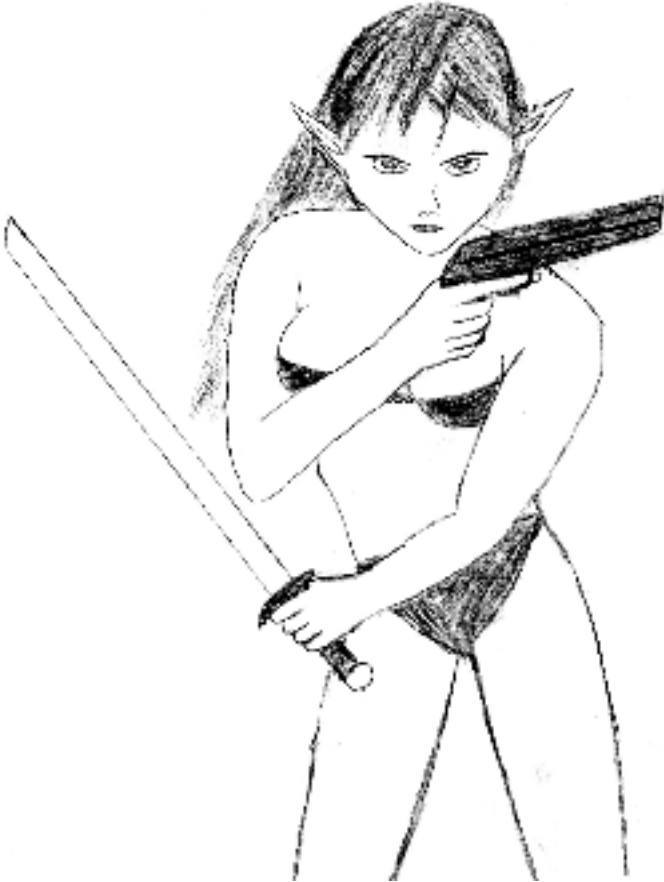
I feel him smile. "I know."

I'm almost sleep when he says, "I'm Nicholas."

"Mmm," I murmur. "And you're my guardian angel."

Guardian... guardian, yes, definitely your guardian, Angel. Definitely your guardian. But you're the angel. You're the my angel...

FAN FICTION



or: Leanna's Return

Brought to you courtesy of Gunslinger, the wandering Vigilante.

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ME2 HELLDIVER SAGA CHAPTER 29

SINS OF THE FATHER

by Veyron722skyhook

Dinner was ending up being a lot better than Austin had thought. The day was drawing to a close, but Uthenra was still on board. She'd been particularly keen to learn of Austin's relationship and had even said some very encouraging things. Though she had a lot of love for interspecies relationships, that didn't mean she didn't regret marrying Dell. She loved him dearly and she couldn't have asked for a better husband and daughter.

All that was at the table was just the Arturus', Austin, Liara, and also Urz who was tucking into his own meal just slightly further off. Despite Austin's concerns, Urz had been extremely well behaved and the Varren continued to impress. He was very well house trained, and he also had surprisingly good table manners, especially considering since the meal he was eating right now was a rather large piece of juicy meat. He wasn't making any mess at all.

X-5 had also managed to behave himself, despite his often childish maturity. Then again, it wasn't exactly the robot's fault. When Alpha Squad had first met him, he'd had a bit of a speech problem and spoke more like a drone soldier than an actual being. When he'd been struck by lightning however, he'd started actually acting human. He was very inexperienced with these feelings though and as a result, his personality was very similar to that of a child. Nowadays, he was a bit more grown up since by human standards he would be around the age of 12 now. During his time on the Normandy however, he'd been spending a lot of time with Sill, who had taken a liking to the sometimes shy robot. According to what X-5 had last said, Sill was teaching him a few things that he could expect should his maturity eventually graduate to the teenager stage.

Some aspects did worry the squad however; his attitude towards killing was one of them. Though he possessed the personality of a child, he didn't have any objections to killing and still fought in battle very fiercely. When asked about this, X-5 had said that it may be that his combat protocols have a small personality of their own which takes over when they are activated, hence his fierce and aggressive fighting style.

Nevertheless, the robot had proved to be a fine friend and a valuable asset in battle. His sensitivity was also helpful to Alpha Squad in a way as it usually encouraged them to speak as they would around a

child, rather than an actual adult and sometimes that did help their attitudes. It also made for more positive conversations as X-5 had once been rather frightened by a particularly violent argument between Kraan and Ventra many years ago. This had of course been long before Alpha Squad had slowly become friends and had learned to work together.

Everyone had mostly finished their meal by now and where mostly talking. Urz had also finished and was currently sat at Austin's side, and X-5 was also currently in his shut down state. He did often like to observe occasional adult conversations as a way of trying to make him more sociable and to also try and bolster his maturity.

"Where you always a teacher, Uthenra?" Austin asked as the ship's cook Rupert Gardner collected everyone's plates.

"Not at first. I didn't really start that until I married Dell. Before that, I was originally a simple study of human ways. It was part of the start of my training, as I wanted to learn more about this fascinating new race that had recently been found out about. That evolved slightly further when I met Dell."

"Hmmm, wasn't an easy one though." Said Dell.

"Indeed. I met him on the College steps and I knew it wasn't going to be easy. He was studying engineering and science, and I was studying human English literature." Uthenra smiled as she and her husband remembered their somewhat humorous first meeting.

"That's right. I was trying to explain the theory of relativity, and Uthenra was trying to explain Tennyson." Dell chuckled.

At this, Uthenra couldn't help but giggle.

"I still don't understand what he was talking about." Dell finished.

"Oh come on..." Uthenra laughed.

"I'm serious. Tennyson is more complicated than advanced science and engineering. It's like a Helldiver clashing with a Krogan." Said Dell.

"You studied Tennyson?" Austin asked, somewhat keen as he remembered that a really old friend of his loved that sort of thing.

"It was more a hobby than a study, but still." Said Uthenra.

"My friend Ashley Williams would definitely like you. She has a thing for a poetry."

"Your childhood Alliance friend? Interesting..." said Uthenra.

"Have you two spoken since...? well, I think you get what I'm trying to ask."

"We've managed to sort it out. It did take a few talks and a fight with an insane Cerberus assassin, but we sorted it out in the end." Said Austin. "In fact, she's even started a relationship with one of my squad."

"An Alliance marine and a Helldiver? That's an interesting new

combination.” Said Uthenra. “Anyway, enough about us. What about you? I hear a bit of talk around your ship that you and Doctor T’soni are... intimate.”

Surprisingly, Liara was ahead of Austin on answering that. Most likely, she knew Uthenra wouldn’t approve. Perhaps the Arkane reminded her a lot of her mother who also wanted to try and help form alliances with other races, work out peaceful solutions.”

“Austin and I are bond mates.” She said.

Uthenra was surprised by this, but pleasantly so.

“Nice to hear. Is it more than that perhaps?” Uthenra asked.

“Well, there have been talks of marriage from what I’ve heard.”

Said Sill.

Both Austin and Liara simply remained silent and shrugged at one another.

“With all due respect, I feel that’s a bit of a personal matter.”

Said Dell.

“Yes of course. Forgive me. Sometimes my curiosity can get the better of me.” Uthenra apologised.

“It’s alright. You’re not the first ones to ask about it. For now, we’re just taking it easy and making sure we’re focused on stopping the Collectors. After that, we’ll maybe try and focus more on the future of our relationship.” Said Austin.

“Well then, I’d say that’s worth drinking to. Wouldn’t you agree?” Dell asked as he raised his glass. “To our future.”

Everyone else did the same.

“To our future!”

It seemed that Thane was next one the loyalty mission list. Kelly of course had reported this too him and he had ventured down to life support to speak with the Drell.

“Kelly told me you wanted to see me. Is something wrong?” Austin asked.

“You could say that. My morality has me... dwelling on other things.” Thane replied.

The Drell stood up and walked over to the one of the weapon stand he'd set up.

“I had a family, once. I still have a son. His name is Kolyat. I haven't seen him for a very long time.”

“How long has it been since you talked?” Austin asked.

“Ten years He showed me some of his schoolwork and asked if we could dance crazy. We did that when he was younger.” said Thane.

“What about the rest of your family? Did something happen to them?” Austin asked.

“Oh, not all at once. Nothing dramatic. No sneaking out in the middle of the night. No final argument or slammed door. I just... did

my job. I hunted and killed across the galaxy. "Away on business," my wife would tell people. I was always away on business." said Thane, a small hint of regret in his voice.

"You never mentioned this before. Why now?" said Austin.

"When my wife departed from her body, I—attended to that issue. I left Kolyat in the care of his aunts and uncles. I have not seen him or talked to him since." Thane replied.

"That's not the choice I expected. Why didn't you raise him yourself?" Austin asked.

"My body is blessed with the skill to take life. The Hanar honed them in me. I have a few others. I didn't want that life for Kolyat. I hoped he would find his own way. If he hated me, so be it. He would not have shared the path of sin. I used my contacts to trace Kolyat. He has become—disconnected. He does what his body wills." Thane replied.

"You'll have to explain that one to me." said Austin, slightly confused by what Thane had just said.

"Disconnected. The body is not our true self. The soul is. Body and soul work as one in a Whole Person. When the soul is weakened by despair or fear – when the body is ill or injured, the individual is disconnected. No longer Whole." Thane explained.

"What's wrong with him exactly? Is he hurt?" Austin asked.

"Something happened that should not have. He knows where I've been, what I've done. I don't know his reasons, but he has gone to the Citadel. He has taken a job as a hit man. I would your help to stop him. He is—This is not a path he should walk." said Thane.

"Well, on the plus side, you timed this well. We're still docked on the Citadel, so we can go right now if you wish." Austin suggested.

"Thank you, Shepard."

"According to C-sec, a Drell recently passed through customs. The C-sec office may have more information." said EDI as Austin, Sarah and Thane departed the Normandy. In all the times Austin had been here since he came back from the dead, he'd been surprised how people didn't seem to notice him. Maybe it was because they were more used to seeing Helldiver here now. Or it could simply be that they weren't noting him because he didn't want them to. Helldivers where just somehow able to do that, pass unseen by most if they choose.

"Shepard. How can I help you?" Bailey asked.

"My associate is trying to find his son. We think a local criminal may have hired him." said Austin as Thane stood next to Bailey, keeping a calm expression. Sarah simply stood behind her brother.

"This should be easy. We don't see many Drell here." said Bailey as he typed away at his console. Within a few seconds, he found what he was looking for. "There we go. One of my men reported a

Drell recently. And he was talking to Mouse. Interesting."

"Mouse?" Thane asked.

"A petty criminal. Probably not the guy who hired your boy, but a messenger. He's a former duct rat, runs errands for anyone who'll pay." Bailey explained.

"What sort of trouble has Mouse been getting himself into?" Austin asked, somewhat curious.

"Odd jobs for shitty people. Duct rates take whatever's available to get by. Data running. Fencing stolen goods. Selling illegal VI personalities. Actually, he was selling one of you." Bailey replied.

"Me?"

"Yeah. When you erased a file, it would say, "I delete data like you on the way to real errors. Buggy, though. It crashed every half hour. The error message was about how the galaxy was at stake, and you should fix the problem yourself." Bailey explained.

"That's pretty extreme, Austin." Sarah giggled.

"Laugh it up, Sarah." Austin smiled. "Anyway, where do we find Mouse?"

"Mouse is usually upstairs, outside the Dark Star. He works out of a public comm terminal. You should pick up a copy of the "Shepard VI" when you talk to him." said Bailey.

"I don't think so. I'm not allowing him to use my likeness without my permission. Surprised the Arkanes haven't tried to have him arrested for it." said Austin.

"A shame. Thought you'd like a VI of yourself." said Bailey, he then turned to Thane. "It sounds like your boy's running with the wrong crowd."

"Yes. I agree." Thane nodded.

"If Mouse can't get you in touch with your son directly, he'll know who can. I'll help you if you need it." said Bailey.

"You hardly know us that well, Bailey. Why are you going so far to help us?" Sarah asked.

"I've worked Zakera for two years. Every day, kids turn to crime because they've got no other choice. Because their parents don't care." Bailey replied "You're trying to save yours." he said to Thane.

"...He faces a dark path." Thane replied in agreement.

"We better hurry then." said Austin as he and the other two left.

"You didn't tell him that Kolyat plans to assassinate someone." said Thane once they were out of earshot.

"He's a cop. He'd try to stop Kolyat, and one of them could end up dead. We don't want that." said Austin.

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Shepard." said Thane.

While the rest of Zakera ward was very nice, Austin still felt he preferred the Presidium. That had a more... beautiful and peaceful feel to it. As the group tried to see where Mouse was, Sarah suddenly

heard someone call the name Shepard. Austin heard it too. They both looked in the direction of the voice to see a rather unwelcome sight.

"Oh no. It's her again." Austin muttered as he quickly activated his cloak and vanished from sight.

"Didn't think you were scared of reporters." Sarah joked.

"Not scared, avoiding unwanted attention is the more appropriate phrase." said Austin as he the reporter walked up to Sarah. Mercifully, she hadn't seen Austin.

"Khalisah bint Sinan al-Jilani, Westerland News." she said as he held out her hand, only for Sarah to not shake it and simply cross her arms.

"Do I know you?" the N7 marine asked.

"I tried to interview your brother 3 years ago, when he first became a Spectre. He outright refused to be interviewed, made a lot of humans question what the Council was hiding, and then he went to that Emily Wong instead." said Khalisah.

"Is there something you want? We're busy." said Sarah, telling Khalisah to get to the point.

"There've been rumours that your brother may still be alive. Do you have anything to say on that?" Khalisah asked. Only now did Sarah notice that Khalisah was recording.

"What, so you can try and do another smear job on him? I know what you're like." said Sarah.

"Now... Shepard - you may object to my methods, but we're on the same side. Rumours are that he's back, and that's news. I just want to give his story its due." said Khalisah. "Sources claim that you and he were at the heart of the Presidium during that Battle of the Citadel. It's fair to say that the course of the battle hinged on his words. If true, you told Admiral Hackett to assist the Destiny Ascension, costing hundreds of human lives and securing the continued dominance of the Citadel Council."

"I don't have time for this. People die, we don't have time for this crap!" said Sarah as she turned to walk away. As she did however, she suddenly felt someone grab her arm.

"Oh no! You're not gonna walk away like he did!" said Khalisah.

"Don't you dare touch me." said Sarah as she whirled around and punched her very hard in the face.

Khalisah slowly got up, rubbing her now black eye and bleeding nose.

"You bitch! I'll make sure everyone in the Alliance sees that!" she spat.

"Well, good luck with that, Khalisah. I think your camera stopped recording." said a voice.

Khalisah turned to see Austin de-cloak right in front of her. She backed away in fright until she was right up against the wall.

"I... my god! It's really you. The rumours are true." she stuttered.

"You listen carefully. Everyone in the 5th Fleet and Helldiver fleet that died during that battle is a damn hero. The Alliance owes them all medals. The Council owes them a lot more than that. And so do you. Don't you dare suggest I made that call lightly!" Austin berated as he stood right up close to Khalisah.

"I wasn't trying too..." Khalisah tried to say, but Austin interrupted her.

"And don't you try to pin any of this on my sister. You ever come near her again and I'll have a bullet waiting for you. I don't even care if I lose my career for it. You and the press should learn to mind your own damn business."

The two Shepard's left Khalisah as she took several deep breaths to try and calm down, a look of guilt was on her face. Most likely she'd learned her lesson.

After a bit more searching, they finally find the man they were looking for, Mouse.

"Yeah. Sure. I can get you two cases by the end of the day." he said as he finished a call.

"You Mouse?" Austin asked.

"What do you- oh, shit! Krios? I thought you retired!" said mouse as he turned around and saw them. "Captain Shepard?!"

"Major, actually." Austin corrected.

"I thought you died! There were rumours that you were alive, but I never... What do you want with me?" Mouse asked.

"Be still, Mouse. You can change your pants in a moment." said Thane calmly as he put his hand on Mouse's arm.

"How do you know Thane?" Austin asked.

"Krios? He didn't-? Uh. If he didn't say nothing, I ain't either." said Mouse.

"When we heard the name, I didn't think it could be the same Mouse. He was a contact on the Citadel when I was active. He and some other children would gather information on my targets." Thane explained.

"You put children in danger for you?" Austin asked in surprise.

"Children. The poor. My people's word for their kind is "drala'fa":the ignored. They're everywhere, see everything. Yet they are never seen." said Thane. He then seized Mouse's collar, obviously to say that he and his friends meant business.

"You gave another Drell instructions for an assassination. Who's the target?" he asked.

"I... I don't know. I didn't ask. Cause the people I work for? They can make me disappear. I'd like to help you, Krios. You always done right by us, but I ain't gonna die for you!" said Mouse.

"Kid, we've made people much more important than you

disappear. Whoever you're protecting isn't worth it." Said Sarah.

"I... You wouldn't hurt me." said Mouse bravely, he still sounded nervous though.

"Do we have to?" said Sarah challengingly, Austin however put his hand in front of her, obviously telling her to calm down and be a bit more peaceful.

"Krios, man. I did good work for you. You gave me chocolate. Real chocolate." said Mouse.

"I never gave my own son chocolate." said Thane regrettably.

"I remember, whenever you talked about your kid, your eyes got like that. Like they was someplace sad. He had that holo you took of me, you know. That's how he proved who he was. But when he turned it on, his eyes got like yours do." said Mouse. He turned his back for a moment before he finally turned back. "The guy I carried for is Elias Kelham."

"One other thing. That Shepard VI you're selling?" said Austin.

"Oh, shit. You hear—Look, you were dead! It was totally legal to make a VI of you." said Mouse defensively.

"I don't care whether it was legal or not! I'm not dead any longer and I'm not giving you permission to use my likeness. You're gonna stop making them right now." said Austin forcefully.

"But they're selling so well..." Mouse tried to say.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me clearly. Stop making them or Kelham will be the last of your problems." said Austin, slightly more threatening this time.

"Alright. Alright. I'll stop making them." said Mouse.

"You did good, kid." said Sarah.

"Yeah, right. When Kelham finds out what I've done, I won't live long. And I can't do nothing about it but hide." said Mouse.

"You won't be mentioned. Kelham will never know it was you." said Austin.

"I hope so." said Mouse as he left.

"Let's head back to Bailey."

"Yes?"

"Can we talk about my associate's son?" Austin asked.

"You talk to Mouse? Did you get the name of the guy he's working with?" Bailey asked.

"Elias Kelham." Austin replied.

"Kelham? Shit." Bailey swore. "Ah, look. This is awkward. Kelham and I have a—an agreement. He doesn't cause too much trouble, and "buys tickets to the C-sec Charity Ball" from me. In return, I ignore him."

"He pays you off? C-sec is being bribed. Does the Citadel Council know about this?" said Austin, not even making any effort to hide how appalled he was to hear that C-sec was being bribed to

ignore a certain someone who obviously was trying to cause trouble.

"Are you threatening me, Shepard?" said Bailey, standing his ground.

"No. But I don't care if you have a deal with him either. He's obviously a criminal and you should take him in. You're either gonna arrest him or I'll take matters into my own hands. What's it gonna be?" said Austin.

"I said I'd help. It's just – There'll be repercussions if I don't handle it right. He and I... give each other space. It keeps the peace." said Bailey.

"Him hiring an assassin keeps the peace? Didn't C-sec learn anything for the Geth attack?" said Sarah.

"I'm not gonna argue with you about this, Shepard. I'll get some of my people to bring him in and set up in a private room. You can interrogate him yourself I'll stay out of sight. If I'm lucky, Kelham will believe that I had nothing to do with it." said Bailey.

"Bring him in. We might not have much time." said Austin.

"I'll make it happen. Wait here."

A few minutes later, some of Bailey's men came with a man in their arms. He was finely dressed, so there was no doubt this was Kelham.

"We've got Kelham. Tell Bailey we're ready." Austin said to one of them.

Bailey arrived shortly after.

"He'll expect me to get him out of this." he said.

"Not anymore, I think." said Austin.

"Captain? His lawyer's here. Bet Elias has his VI set to page him if C-sec gets within ten metres." Austin overheard from Bailey's earpiece.

"I'll stall him. Get in there. And work fast." said Bailey.

"We should question him together. Keep the pressure on. Thoughts on how we approach it? The good cop bad cop routine, as you humans call it, would be best." Thane suggested.

"Maybe. But Kelham's probably a bit too smart for something like that. I might have something better in mind..." said Austin.

"Get me out of these restraints, Bailey! Pretty funny, bringing me down here like this-" said Kelham as he struggled to break free of the chair he was tied too. The door then opened.

"The hell are..." he said, but he stopped when he saw who Austin and Thane had with them. Austin had a chain in his hand which attached to the collar of none other than Urz, who was actually looking a bit hungry. Kelham started to get rather nervous as Austin brought one end of the chain through a small ring on the wall so that Urz didn't get too close to him. The Varren was now eyeing him

keenly and looked as though he wanted to get at him.

"You ordered a hit on someone. You're gonna tell me who." said Austin.

"The only person I'm talking to is my advocate." said Kelham.

"Your advocate hasn't arrived. We're trying to find him." said Thane.

"Here's how it works. I ask a question, you answer it, and my Varren doesn't eat you. He's rather hungry you know." said Austin. As he spoke, he let some of the chain slip out of his hand, allowing Urz to step a tiny bit closer.

"And that's supposed to scare me?" Kelham laughed. His laughter however was short lived as Austin then let a very large portion of the chain slip through his fingers and Urz ran at the chair. Austin took hold again and Urz stopped, but he was now close enough to put both his front paws up on the edge, and right at Kelham's feet.

"Pay attention! Varren are much stronger than humans. One hard pull, and he'll start eating." said Austin.

"Nice scare. You just handed me your job. Let that filthy thing near me again and I'll take your money too." said Kelham.

Urz didn't seem to approve of this and growled very fiercely at Kelham.

"Easy, Urz." said Austin calmly. "I'd watch your mouth, Kelham. Urz doesn't like being called a "thing"."

"You're in over your head. Bailey won't let you touch me." said Kelham.

"He's done with you. How long did you think you could lean on C-sec officer before someone leans back?" said Austin.

"Oh right, Bailey's a Hanar – still waiting to evolve a spine." Kelham laughed.

"I believe his exact words were, "Do whatever it takes to make him confess." said Thane.

"Man, you guys are terrible at the good cop, bad cop routine. It's like bad cop, even worse cop." Kelham chuckled.

Once again, Austin let more of the chain slip and Urz edged a bit closer. Kelham did have to admit he was starting to get a bit nervous. He was slowly seeing that this Helldiver wasn't joking around.

"And then there's the cop that will actually kill you if you don't cooperate."

"You know what I do to you when I get out of here?" Kelham threatened.

"Keep it up, tough guy. When my Varren's done with you, he won't leave enough of you to be buried in a soup can!" said Austin.

"Go to hell!" Kelham shouted back.

"You first."

A bit more of the chain slipped. Urz once again got closer.

"Still doesn't scare me. I know you're not gonna let go of that chain." Kelham laughed.

Both Austin and Thane turned their backs to him. So far, this was taking a bit longer than expected.

"We're running out of time. Bailey can't stall his advocate forever." Thane whispered.

"Are we done here? Because I got people to see." said Kelham.

At that, Austin decided to take this to the extreme. To Kelham's utter shock, he quickly unsheathed his combat knife and cut the chain completely. Urz immediately reacted and leapt right on top of Kelham, his jaws inches from the human's face.

"Agh! No! Get it off me!" Kelham nearly screamed.

"I'm done being patient! Give me a name, or I'll order Urz to bite your balls off and then I'll sell them to a Krogan. He can have the rest of you." Austin demanded.

"Alright! Just... please tell him to get off! He's trained, right?" Kelham practically begged.

"Stand down, boy." Austin ordered.

Urz complied and hopped off of the chair and simply sat next to his master. Austin slipped him a small bit of Pyjak meat as a treat, which he ate happily.

"Now tell me. Next time I won't be so merciful." said Austin.

"Joram Talid. Turian running for office on the Zakera Ward. He messes with legitimate businessmen. I'm gonna stop it." Kelham panted as he tried to calm down from the shock.

"Where and when?" Thane asked.

"His apartment. The 800 blocks. You better hurry-" Said Kelham.

At that moment, the door suddenly opened to show Kelham's lawyer.

"What going on here? Get away..." he said, but was interrupted as Urz ran at him and barked, causing him to step back.

"Urz, sit!" Austin ordered sternly. The Varren instantly obeyed and came back to his master's side.

"You- You played me!" Kelham shouted.

"Thanks for the info, Elias. I'm sure you'll feel better in jail. Regardless of what Bailey might say, he is done with you. I ran your name through Helldiver channels. You're on their list. Now there's enough evidence for an arrest. You and your advocate will need a shovel the size of the Citadel to dig your way out of that mess." said Austin as he, Thane and Urz left.

"Bastard! When I..." Kelham shouted, but his advocate interrupted him.

"Elias, as your legal advocate, I advise you shut the hell up. As much as I hate to admit it, he's right."

They walked out to find Bailey and Sarah waiting for them. Sarah patted Urz on the head and the Varren purred happily.

"What's the story? Why did Kelham hire the boy?" Bailey asked.

"Assassination. A Turian named Joram Talid. You know him?" Austin asked.

"Joram? Yeah. You might have seen his posters around. He's promising to end organized crime on the ward. Thing is, his message is all mixed up in race politics. He's ant-human." said Bailey.

"Are things so bad that people can openly campaign as anti-human? That's pathetic!" said Austin.

"Before the Battle of the Citadel, the alien population thought we were violent upstarts. Look what's happened since then. A human fleet guarding the station for months because the Helldivers are on bad terms with the Council. C-sec filled with more humans. Anderson and a few others do what they can, but some people have lived on the station since before humans had starships. They see it as a coup." said Bailey.

"When you put it like that, I can't say I blame Kelham for wanting him dead." said Austin.

"Maybe, but that still doesn't make it right." said Bailey.

"True."

"Sergeant! Get a patrol car. These two need to get to the 800 blocks." said Bailey as he turned to one of the guards.

"Yes sir!"

"Sarah, would you mind taking Urz back to the ship?" Austin asked politely as he and Thane followed the guard. Sarah simply nodded and attached Urz's proper lead onto him before leading back to the Normandy.

The 800 blocks seemed a lot darker than Zakera Ward. A lot of good places to hide.

They could see Joram in the distance talking with some of his voters. He had a Blood Pack Krogan as his bodyguard.

"There he is. How do you want to play this?" Austin asked.

"Follow Talid on the maintenance catwalks. Tell me what he's doing. The Krogan bodyguard will make him easy to follow." said Thane as he pointed to the catwalks overhead.

"Where will you be?" Austin asked.

"The darkest corner with the darkest view." Thane replied.

Austin nodded and activated his cloak as he headed for the catwalks. Thane meanwhile put his hands together in prayer.

"Amonkira. Lord of hunters. Grant that my hands be steady, my aim be true, and my feet swift. And should the worst come to pass, grant me forgiveness."

Pursuing Talid was extremely easy with his cloak on. He did of course have to be careful he didn't accidentally bump into a Keeper who

was also up here. As he was forced to enter a warehouse however, he lost sight of Talid. At first, this didn't worry the Helldiver, but as the warehouse seemed to drag on, this changed.

Austin eventually managed to make it outside, and just in time too. A Drell had appeared just behind Talid and had drawn a gun in his direction.

"Kolyat!" he yelled.

Kolyat was momentarily distracted and looked in Austin direction before then firing at Talid. By this time however, they'd notice him and the Krogan bodyguard had drawn his own gun.

"Call C-Se—Argh!" he said as Kolyat's bullets hit him. Talid ran to his apartment with Kolyat in hot pursuit.

"Thane?" Austin called as he jumped down.

"I saw." said Thane as he came running up behind.

"He's heading to Talid's apartment!"

They managed to get into the apartment just in time. Talid was in his knees with Kolyat's gun aimed right at the back of his head.

"Kolyat." said Thane.

"This- This is a joke. Now? Now you show up?" said Kolyat, speaking in the same kind of raspy voice that Thane had.

"Help me, Drell. I'll do whatever you want." Talid begged.

At that moment, the doors opened again and Bailey entered with another C-sec officer.

"C-sec. Put the gun down, son." he said.

"Get out of my way. I'm walking out. He's coming with me." said Kolyat.

"They'll have snipers outside." Thane tried to persuade.

"I don't need your help! All of you, back off! I'll kill him!" Kolyat shouted.

"No you won't." said Austin.

To everyone's surprise, Austin fired his Revenant and shot Talid in the head.

"Oh my gods." said Kolyat as he watched the lifeless body fall to the ground.

"Hostages only work when your enemy cares if they live." said Austin.

"Interesting solution." said Thane, sounding somewhat unimpressed with Austin's decision.

"He was a racist and a criminal. Isn't that enough?" Austin replied.

"To some, I suppose." said Thane.

"I read your files. Isn't that what you do? Kill people who do bad things?" Kolyat retorted.

"Take the boy into custody." said Bailey.

"You son of a bitch!"

"Your father doesn't have much time left, Kolyat. He's trying to make up for his mistakes." said Austin.

"What, so you came to get my forgiveness? So you can die in peace or something?" said Kolyat.

"I came to grant you peace." said Thane after a brief pause. "You're angry because I wasn't there when your mother died."

"You weren't there when she was alive. Why should you be there when she died?" Kolyat retorted angrily.

There was a rather long silence before Thane finally replied.

"Your mother—They killed her to get to me. It was my fault."

"What?"

"After her body was given to the deep, I went to find them. The trigger men. The ringleaders. I hurt them. Eventually killed them. When I went back to see you, you were—older. I should have stayed with you."

"I guess it's too bad for me you waited so long, huh?"

Once again, there was another long pause.

"Kolyat, I've taken many bad things out of this world. You're the only good thing I added to it." said Thane.

At this, a tear seem to fall down Kolyat's cheek.

"This isn't a conversation you should have in front of strangers." said Bailey. He then turned back to the other officer. "Boys, take Kolyat and his father back to the precinct. Give them a room and as much time as they need."

"I'm surprised you're letting him do that." said Austin.

"You think he's the only man who ever screwed up raising a son?" said Bailey. "I have to get back to the precinct. Come on. I'll give you a lift."

It had been almost an hour now. Thane and his son were still in the room.

"They've been in there awhile." said Austin.

"Kid's been through a lot." said Bailey. "I ran some searches in the C-sec archives. About ten years back, a bunch of real bad people were killed. Like someone was cleaning house. The prime suspect was a Drell. We never caught him."

"Ten years is a long time. Whoever was responsible for that probably doesn't exist anymore." said Austin, knowing full well who the real killer was.

"Yeah. I guess you're right about that." said Bailey in agreement.

Thane then walked out. His expression was rather unreadable.

"How'd it go?" Austin asked sympathetically.

"Our problems—they aren't something I can fix a few words.

We'll keep talking, see what happens." said Thane.

"Your boy shot some people. No one I feel sympathy for, but there it is." said Bailey.

"I watched those guys shaking down businesses and threatening humans." said Austin defensively.

"But he can't just get away with it." Bailey argued.

"The kid wants to make a difference. Give him community service." said Austin.

"Community service for attempted murder? What jury would agree to that?" Bailey asked. Was Austin joking?

"None that I've seen. This would need to stay out of the judiciary. Strictly within C-sec." said Austin.

"Interesting. I'll think about it." said Bailey.

"Thank you, Captain." said Thane as he and Bailey shook hands.

Seeing as they been on the Citadel for quite a while now, Austin decided that everyone had earned a bit of shore leave and so Alpha Squad where in the usual private room that they had.

Most of Alpha Squad were sat at the bar and chatting with one another. Griffin was sat apart from the other and appeared to be chatting to someone over the comlink. Austin guessed it was Ashley.

He then noticed Samara who was meditating as she looked out over the view of the Presidium. He sat down next to her as she halted maintaining the biotic field she usually did.

"Morinth haunted my dreams and waking hour's equally." said the Justicar. "For the first time in 400 years, I am free. I am a ruined vessel of sorrow and regret, but I am free. It is not a feeling I can describe."

"Was it worth it?" Austin asked.

"It was never a question of worth, but of need. I had to take the action I did. As did she. This was never a story that would have a happy outcome." said Samara.

"You did your duty. What about your feelings?" Austin asked.

"One of my daughters is dead. My hopes, my dreams were all bound up in my children. Still, my feelings have always come after my duty." said Samara.

"You said that Morinth was a monster. But she was still your daughter." said Austin.

"She was the strongest and smartest. She would not accept the injustice thrust upon her. She fought to the end. I am so proud of her, Shepard." said Samara as she briefly smiled.

"You killed her for being what she was." Austin responded.

"And I would again. But I also know what it means to leave everything behind and fight. Do you realize that she went on the run

at the age of 40? I do not know human years well, but it is very young for Asari." said Samara.

Austin simply nodded as he understood.

"What will you do now that Morinth is gone?" he asked.

"Assuming I survive your mission? I am a Justicar. Injustice still exists... and perhaps even other Ardat-Yakshi." Samara responded.

"There's no way to correct the condition Morinth had?"

"We are an advanced species, but we don't have magic. When the trait manifests at maturity, it is too late for mitigation. It only occurs in purebloods like myself."

"But does that mean..."

"I am a lucky exception. Even in purebloods, it is rather rare. And before you ask, no. Liara isn't one either. If she were, you would've died during your first Union."

"Good." said Austin as he breathed a sigh of relief. "You almost had me worried there. Still, at least now I understand why her parents may have been worried, and why some don't hold purebloods in high regard."

"Perhaps that is the root of the stigma regarding Asari-exclusive pairings. I don't know." said Samara.

"So, you don't want to settle down eventually? No retirement or anything like that?" Austin asked.

"I did plan it originally. I returned to my homeworld and tried to start a family. I will fight and struggle all my life. That is my fate. When I die, it will not be in bed. I am at peace with that." said Samara.

"You still control the direction of your life." said Austin wisely.

"I have chosen this path. I truly am at peace, due in no small part to you." Samara smiled as she went back to maintaining her biotic field.

Austin then noticed that Liara was standing against one of the balcony's looking at the view.

"You sure you don't want to do something more exciting?" he asked as stood next to his girlfriend.

"I love this part of the Presidium. It reminds me of where I grew up." Liara smiled.

"Where's that?"

"Armani, back on Thessia." Liara replied. "My mother and I lived beside a Park. I spent hours there."

"Doing what?"

"Reading, exploring, getting in trouble digging for ruins in the grass." Liara laughed.

"You're kidding." Austin chuckled, imagining a young Asari covered in mud.

"I was very young." Liara smiled.

"You digging in the grass in a park as a little girl? Yeah, that's

actually very cute.”

“No one else thought it was funny. The lecture my mother gave me! But she did buy me my first history book the next day. I miss her, Austin.”

“What was she like?”

“She was confident and kind. She loved to wear yellow, your favourite colour. I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world.” Said Liara.

“I only wish I’d known her better. I would’ve been proud to have called her mother in law.” Said Austin.

“For a Helldiver war veteran, you can be surprisingly romantic. I didn’t know you had this many soft spots.” Liara smiled. “Am I one of them?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that a soft spot is the same as true love. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Definitely.” Said Liara happily as she gave Austin a peck on the cheek. “I wish we could spend more time like this, no Reapers, no Collectors, no war.”

“I’d like that too.” said Austin as he put his arm around her and she rested her head against his shoulders.

“That’s what friends are for after all.” the Asari smiled.

“Liara, I’d definitely say that you and I are more than just good friends.” said Austin.

“I know, I didn’t mean...”

“It’s okay. But still, I’d say doesn’t really cut it for us.”

“Hmm, that sounds serious.” said Liara suggestively.

“I am. No matter what happens, I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” said Austin as he took both Liara’s hands into his.

“Is that a proposal I hear?” Liara asked keenly.

“No quite. I’d prefer to wait until we defeat the Collectors. If it makes you feel any better though, I can make a promise.” said Austin.

“Don’t make a girl a promise... if you know you can’t keep it.” said Liara.

“I know I can keep this one, love. I didn’t come back from the dead just to die again. We’re going to live through this.” said Austin confidently.

“I only wish I could be as positive as you.” Liara said, her mood brightened slightly.

“You can be. Look into my mind, what do you see?” said Austin.

Liara did so and initiated a mind link.

“I see... your love for, love for your friends, hope, courage, and...” she said.

“And?” Austin asked.

Liara opened her eyes again, a slight look of surprise and happiness on her face.

"...and a lot of little blue children." she finished.

"I love you, Liara. Whatever happens, I'll stay at your side until the end." said Austin as he stroked Liara's face.

"Then you're extremely lucky I feel that way too." Liara smiled

"I know." Austin smiled back as he and Liara kissed.

THE MASK OF HAPPINESS: CHAPTER 4

by ReizYouUp
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Since the magic carpet was ruined, The Happy Mask Salesman and Tsuki had to travel on foot to return to the desert. Night was soon apparent once again as streaks of darkness reached across the skies. It was a long trek back, but they had made it safely to the Gerudo Foretress. The entrance to the desert was heavily guarded by Gerudos, but they had to get past it if they hoped to see The Carpet Salesman again.

"It seems a bit too quiet, here." said Tsuki.

They reached the watch tower guarding the desert. Two guards stood in it waiting for passersby to open the gate.

"Excuse me!" The Happy Mask Salesman called out to them. "Could you please let us through?!"

A guard came down from her post using the ladder and approached the two of them.

"Hello there. Whatever are you two doing out here so late at night?"

"We wish to pass through the gate." said The Happy Mask Salesman.

"I am afraid that will not be possible. The Great Ganondorf has imposed restrictions at this gate. No travellers will be allowed to pass until he returns."

"But I have to get through to see my uncle!" Tsuki exclaimed.

Ignoring the ladder, another guard swooped down from the post and landed between the first guard and Tsuki and The Happy Mask Salesman. This one was different, as she had a deep red jewel on her forehead and gold and silver bracelets on her arms and legs.

"What seems to be the trouble, Akila?" she stated.

"These travelers want to pass through the gate, Nabooru."

"Then let them."

Tsuki and The Happy Mask Salesman smiled. The other guard, Akila, looked back in shock.

"What do you mean, just 'let them'?" she said.

"I mean that man, Ganondorf has been acting pretty strangely as of late. He has been asking us to step up security for no reason, then just takes off with eight of our fellow Gerudo. I say just let travellers through until we know what that reason is."

"Well alright." Akila conceded. "I'll let them pass since you are above my station, Nabooru."

"Thank you." said The Happy Mask Salesman.

All at once, both guards returned to their stations, and the gate thus opened. The Happy Mask Salesman and Tsuki walked through it, more determined than ever to get to The Carpet Salesman.

Just before they exited the gate, Tsuki dropped the ocarina. Nabooru dropped down and handed it to her. "Here you are."

"Oops." said Tsuki. "Can't let an item like this just fall on the ground. Thank you for returning it to me."

With that, Tsuki and The Happy Mask Salesman walked towards the desert, the great storm concealing them both.

"I see more travellers approaching." said Akila to Nabooru. "Are you going to let them by, too?"

"It isn't travellers, it's our sisters!" said Nabooru.

They both stepped down to approach the eight other Gerudos.

"Iayisha!" greeted Akila. "Welcome back!"

"Where's Ganondorf?" asked Nabooru.

"Raising his new castle. We have successfully conquered Hyrule Castle Town."

"Hyrule Castle Town?! Is that where you were?"

"Yes." said Iayisha. "New orders are to find two travellers with an ocarina."

"We just let two travellers holding an ocarina get through." related Akila.

"What?! But orders were to let no one pass through the gates until we returned!"

"That is my fault." said Nabooru. "I let the travellers pass. I take full responsibility."

"Nabooru! You dare defy the great Ganondorf again?!" Iayisha retaliated. "How you got to be second in command, I will never know."

"He made me second in command because I question things, and not just follow orders. A bit of a risky but well-placed decision on his part, if you ask me."

"Well now we must go into the desert to capture those two. Thanks a lot, Nabooru."

"I apologize. Now you must continue your journey and it is because of me. Rest for a while, then be on your way. In the mean time, I must go on a journey of my own."

She turned to head for the foretress.

"Where are you going?" said Iayisha.

"To pack." said Nabooru. "I'm going to find out just what that Ganondorf has planned."

"You do that. I and my women will skip resting and head for the desert."

With that, the Gerudos parted ways once again.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

"What do you mean you ruined my carpet?!" yelled The Carpet Salesman.

Tsuki and The Happy Mask Salesman had already made it back to the tent and were explaining all that had happened while they were gone.

"Oh, it was only a fair trade." said The Happy Mask Salesman. "A ruined carpet for an exploded cucco mask."

"Stop arguing you two." Tsuki intervened. "Uncle, what do you make of this?"

Tsuki handed the ocarina to The Carpet Salesman who examined it with his red tribal eyes.

"This is indeed a very powerfull item! However that is all I am sensing. However did you come upon it?"

"A person on a horse threw it at us." Tsuki told him.

"Well, that is unfortunate. Sorry to hear that. ...Have you tried playing it?"

"No, we hadn't thought of that."

The Carpet Salesman began to play a few random notes.

"Well that did nothing. Perhaps it requires a special song for whatever it is supposed to do to work. In any case, thank you for the new shop item."

"What?!" exclaimed The Happy Mask Salesman. "We didn't bring that all the way back here for you to sell in your shop! We aren't just going to give it to you!"

"Then give it to us!" spoke a voice.

"Who is there?"

Without another word, eight swords slashed threw the tent. They found themselves surrounded by the Gerudo guards.

"Give us the what we came here for!" Iayisha commanded.

The Carpet Salesman's hands slipped fearfully and the ocarina fell from his hands. He then picked it up, then slunk away.

"Are you simply abandoning us, you coward?!" exclaimed The Happy Mask Salesman.

He turned to face the Gerudos. There was no time to waste. He used himself to shield Tsuki, then pulled out a mask. It was the one with the dark purple square on it. Two of the Gerudos charged him. The Happy Mask Salesman put on the mask, and out popped two purple prisms which encased the Gerudos. Two more Gerudos came at them, and he used the power of the mask to push the prisms towards the both of them, knocking them to the ground. One Gerudo tried to attack Tsuki, but The Happy Mask Salesman enveloped her in a prism of protection. Her sword knocked on it hard, but it would not cut through. The last three Gerudos also attempted to attack, but their swords were blocked by yet another sword. It was The Carpet

Salesman, back with a katana.

"There you are!" said The Happy Mask Salesman.

"Just in the nick of time, eh?" said The Carpet Salesman.

He threw the ocarina to The Happy Mask Salesman who watched in utter amazement as The Carpet Salesman continued to skillfully defend himself from the Gerudo blades. He assisted by entrapping their swords in more purple prisms. He was too late, however, as Iayisha's blade struck near The Carpet Salesman's heart, piercing it.

"Owwwwwahhh!" he screamed in agony.

"Uncle!" yelled Tsuki.

Iayisha withdrew her blade and The Carpet Salesman stepped forward cupping his chest, then collapsed. His red eyes stared blankly up in the air, then turned black.

Just then, the prisms began to wear off and the Gerudos were getting ready to attack once more.

"Hurry! We must escape!" shouted The Happy Mask Salesman.

Tsuki did nothing but wordlessly stare at her uncle's corpse, completely stunned and breathless.

"Come on!" The Happy Mask Salesman yelled.

He grabbed Tsuki and fled the tent with her. They ran as fast as they could, but the Gerudos were quickly catching up to them. They hid behind a sand dune and the Gerudos passed by them unknowingly.

"Are you alright?" The Happy Mask Salesman asked.

"...N-no. I am not alright." Tsuki said threw her tears. "My uncle is dead. He was the only family I had. My mother died by child birth and my father was too much of a deadbeat to take care of me. My uncle was the one to raise me, and now that he is gone, I have no one."

The Happy Mask Salesman was unsure how to console her. "I am sorry to hear that, Tsuki. I did not know. But you are not alone."

He placed his hand in hers.

"We have each other."

Tsuki beamed up at him. She gently placed a kiss on his cheek.

The Happy Mask Salesman blushed in embarrassment.

"Well...eh, thank you."

She giggled.

Together, they both stood up.

"Come, now." stated The Happy Mask Salesman. "We will go to Termina."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Link was still in the clutches of Ganondorf. He stood in the

wreckage of the slaughtered remains of the soldiers of the castle. He turned to Link with an evil glint in his eyes.

"Watch this, boy."

Ganondorf took out a small object from his hands. It was a minny castle, the size of his fist, complete with a lava moat. He approached Hyrule Castle's gates, then dropped it. The walls of the tiny castle grew until they were immensely tall. Link looked on as the castle crushed the other castle beneath its enormous weight. Ganondorf's black castle stood menacingly against a pitch black sky of dark storm clouds.

Just then Navi reappeared.

"Let go of Link, you big bully!" she cried.

Navi did the best she could, slamming into Ganondorf's head over and over. It was of no use, of course.

"Stop that, you insignificant fly!" shouted Ganondorf.

He opened up his palm and his hand glowed red. There appeared a cage just the right size to trap the fairy. Ganondorf caught her in mid-air then stuffed her in it.

"Navi!" Link exclaimed.

"Now you won't be such a nuisance to me."

Ganondorf floated over the lava moat using more of his magic. He carried Link and Navi down a flight of stairs all the way to his dungeon.

"I have a special cell for you, hero."

The dungeon was filled with more lava. There was a large cell going around in a circle. In the center of the dungeon was a cage hanging down from the ceiling by a rope. Ganondorf left Navi on a table, then floated over to the cage. He stripped Link of his equipment, then locked the door.

"I've been watching you for a while, kid. I was going to wait for you to enter the Temple of Time, but since you can't, I may as well leave you here. Its better of for me, this way."

With that, Ganondorf exited the cell room, slamming the door behind him.

Link ran over to the bars and clutched them tightly.

"Navi, Navi!" he outcried. "How are you?!"

"I'm fine, Link." said Navi from across the room. "We need to figure a way out of here! Have you tried climbing the bars?"

Link gripped the bars tightly and began to shimmy his way up them, towards the blue cieling. At the top, he could see the rope witch held the cage up in mid-air. It was only an ordinary rope. He cursed the fact that if only he had his equipment he could easily cut it. He found himself growing tired. His hands began to slip. He fell back down to the floor of the cage with a great crash.

"Link!"

"I'm okay, Navi. But it looks like we're not getting out of here any time soon."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Back at Kakariko village, the sun began to rise once again as Impa got ready to ship the prisoners away. The soldier was there and ready to collect the thieves. She was tying them off in a chain gang attached to a horse that the soldier brought.

"Now when you see Ganondorf, don't tell him of our location." Impa instructed. "It is too important that Ganondorf not know about us. Simply tell him you caught the men by yourself."

"Yes, Impa." the soldier said with a nod. "By the way, there is a drunken man outside your house. Would you like me to take care of him, too?"

"Yes, that would be nice, thank you."

The creak of the steps could be heard as "Shiek" slowly made her way down the stairs again. Her face looked grim and foreboding.

"Ah, Zelda. You are awake. Look sharp. We continue your training today" said Impa. Then she got a look at her face. "What ever is that matter?"

"I am afraid I have some frightening news." stated the princess. "I saw the dark storm clouds consume the ray of light. The prophecy has been changed. Link has been captured by Ganondorf."

All were silent as the news was indeed shocking and required time for all to collect themselves.

"That cannot be." Impa related. "The boy should be well away from here, now."

"I thought so, too, Impa, but he does not even possess the ocarina of time with him. I am afraid all is lost.

She hung her head solemnly.

"Don't worry, Zelda. I have a plan."

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The Curiosity Shop Owner awoke with a severe hangover. He had been sleeping all night long in front of Impa's house.

"Ugh, what happened?" he asked himself.

He stood up and shook himself off. That was then that he discovered he was all sore and covered in bruises. The packages of wine were nowhere to be found. He walked around the village to get his bearings.

He found Sakon lying in the foundation of an unfinished building. There was only one package, which was partially opened. Sakon still held a wine bottle clenched in his hand.

"Wake up, you moron!" The Curiosity Shop Owner quipped. He shook Sakon all around until he was awake.

"Alright, I'm up!" yelled Sakon.

"What did you do with the wine?!"

"Nothing! I did nothing with your crappy wine!"

"Right, like I'm going to believe that. I won't tolerate my own thief stealing from me. Now where are they?!"

"Alright!" Sakon conceded. "I hid them back at the windmill!"

"The windmill...?"

The Curiosity Shop Owner stopped in mid-shake of Sakon to stare off in the distance. His eyes found the windmill and a shiver of fear went up his spine. He released Sakon and let him fall to the ground. Sakon got up to check the contents of the one package while The Curiosity Shop Owner walked towards the windmill.

He slunk forward carefully. The Curiosity Shop Owner knew that this was not good. He knew someone who often inhabited the windmill and who Sakon knew well. He was terrified of meeting that person. He made it to the windmill door, opening it up carefully...

...No one was there.

The Curiosity Shop Owner heaved a heavy sigh in relief. The packages were safely kept on the floor. He carried them both outside.

Back at the house's foundation, Sakon had opened up the first package to see the inside of it.

"What's this fruit doing in here?" he inquired.

The Curiosity Shop Owner had just got back from the windmill and placed the packages on the ground.

"Looks like its Takkuri fruit." he said. "They ferment it to make the wine."

Sakon was about to take a bite out of the fruit.

"Its poisiness."

"Poisin?!" Sakon yelped.

He dropped the green fruit on the ground and it splattered.

"Yeah, its poisin. Good thing I was here, or you would have died, you moron. Now hurry up. Let's get this shipment out of here."

A large crowd was coming towards them. The crowd came closer to the foundation.

"Now what could be going on over there?" The Curiosity Shop Owner asked. "Excuse me! What's going on over there!"

An old man walked up to the two of them.

"Didn't you hear the news? Hyrule Castle Town is in ruins. I and my whole family have fled our homes to come here."

"Really? Good thing we weren't there to see it happen." The Curiosity Shop Owner said calmly.

"Hmmp!" said the old man in response to his rudeness. He walked away.

"Well Sakon, we need to get out of here."

"What's the rush?" said Sakon. "Didn't you hear what that guy said?"

"It's no concern of mine or yours what happened back at Hyrule Castle Town. Besides, I hate being near Kaiden this long."

"But he was captured by Impa!"

"Even so, I don't even want to be around him now that we got him arrested. He'll blame me completely and try to kill me if he ever sees me again. The worst of it is, now that he's gone, you're my only thief."

"Wait. Those guys were thieves?"

"Yup. They stole the wine off of some other guys I never caught the name of. Those winery owners are supposedly even tougher than Kaiden's men."

The Curiosity Shop Owner took both wine packages and made Sakon hold them.

"Oh, so I carry nearly everything and you get the fruit?"

"No, we're not taking the fruit with us, we're leaving it here."

The Curiosity Shop Owner checked the fruit box one more time. To his surprise, he found a white egg with green speckles on it. He pocketed the egg so Sakon couldn't see it.

"I thought we weren't taking any fruit?" Sakon asked.

"We're not. Now come on Sakon. We're headed for Termina."

MYKEL'S AVERAGE DAY

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

An average day in the life of Mykel "Brainy" Fiction

On the crossroad was the biggest truck the scientist yoshi had ever seen. A monster filled to the throat with explosive fluids, scrolling along the other street right in front of him.

And the yoshi was headed for it at full throttle. He could hear the deafening noise of the engine of a bike chasing him, too.

Mykel set the auto-pilot of the monowheel for a straight course and jumped. He curled up into an almost perfectly round ball and braced himself for the impact on the asphalt.

Roaring past him like a torpedo, the wheel crashed into the truck's massive bulk. As for Mykel, he kept rolling and rolling; only halfway had he slowed down enough to extend his limbs and stop on his side.

The yoshi quickly checked his body. *Minor scratches. No problem.* When he managed to raise his snout off the ground, his vision was blurry but he could still make out the truck. *It's picking up speed!*

For a moment, the monowheel just remained there, embedded neatly into the side of the truck. Then a string of smoke mixed with steam started coming out of its body as the engine went berserk, leaving a translucent trail behind the monster.

The truck disappeared behind the building at the angle of the crossroad. Knowing what came next, Mykel closed his eyes and pressed both hands against his eardrums.

Even through his eyelids, he saw the flash and felt the ground shake. And the shockwave of the explosion blew him away so hard, he flipped and landed on his back on the walkway.

When Mykel lifted his head again, the buildings all around him had blackened walls and shattered windows. *Good thing we're inside the industrial zone on a holiday. Material damage, that's all this city will be*

getting.

With the explosives gone, the local mafia couldn't realize... whatever big project they had wanted to realize - the investigative team he worked for hadn't had time to give him those details. But the young scientist was told the mafia had a plan B, and his other teammates were going to ruin *that* one and catch the baddies.

Allright! Now, about the idiot on his bike...

Without much surprise, the green yoshi figured the "idiot on his bike" had been blown off his bike; the yellow-shelled koopa was busy getting up a few yards away. The turtle didn't bear the smallest scratch - he had probably retreated into his shell upon realizing what was happening.

The massive shell rose, supported by large muscular legs, carrying long arms with poised claws, mounted by a short-necked head.

The head looked really, *really* angry. And deadly.

The dinosaur could almost hear his favourite song ringing in his head, the one his relatives would certainly play during his funera--

Mykel started. The song was *real*, coming from inside his saddle bag.

Must be someone from the investigative team, he thought as his hand swiftly swung behind him in search of his cell phone. Drawing out the electronic device and pressing it against his cheek, he snapped: "Temporary agent Fiction."

"Brainy, where are you?" came the reply.

Wide eyed, the yoshi couldn't respond for a second. The chelonian decided to take his chance, and Mykel could barely dodge the charging mass.

As his opponent clumsily staggered to a stop, the yoshi said in an unbelieving voice: "Mom... what is it? I'm busy right now!"

"Too busy to say 'hello' to your mother?" the female voice asked bitterly. *"I'm calling you because you promised you would come along with--"*

The scientist couldn't hear most of the rest as he was forced to jump aside once more to avoid the koopa's shell.

"--*too much to expect you to remember?*"

"Mom..." Mykel ducked as the chelonian charged, causing the big guy to trip on his dinosaur tail and slide on the shell's underside. Dashing away from the fallen turtle, he panted into the phone's mike: "I'll call... later... okay, mom? Just don't wait--"

The scientist was caught off guard this time as the yellow shell hit the side of his leg hard with an audible 'crack'. Popping out of it, an arm thrust up and the fingers at its end coiled around the cell phone; trying to keep a firm grasp on it, Mykel was shoved back by one of the thick legs and landed hard on his freshly crushed thigh. Rather than the pain itself, the suddenness of it caused him to yelp and gasp.

Eyeing the moaning wounded scientist, the koopa lifted the device to his beaklike mouth. "Special agent Dribbles, I presume?" he crowed with a grin.

From the way the smile froze and faded, he obviously didn't get the result he had expected.

Furious, the turtle threw the phone to the ground, where it shattered into dozens of pieces and components.

"Hey, that was my *mother*, you big dope!" Mykel shouted as he lunged for the yellow-shelled chelonian. The turtle held out an arm to guard himself but the dinosaur darted aside, thrusting out his sticky tongue and coiling it around the thick legs.

Using all the power he had, Mykel pulled hard enough to knock his opponent off his feet and flip him over. Although his tongue snapped free and nastily lashed back at his cheek, he ignored the pain to focus on the koopa.

"You could've *at least* let me bid her farewell, stupid jerk!" he yelled madly, and grabbed the chelonian by the neck before he could retreat his head into the shell.

Mykel groaned as the koopa's strong legs drummed his belly, but he focused on his Dizzy ability to confuse his opponent and counterattacked with well-placed tongue whips on the snout.

He then let go of the koopa and, before the chelonian could react, ducked to swing his tail up and forwards. The tip of his dinosaur tail lashed at the turtle's face hard, and the head briefly retracted into the yellow shell.

That's your second big mistake, my friend. First one was to break my cell phone while I was talking to mom.

Mykel spun around his injured leg, pushing on the other with all his might. The trunk of his tail struck the turtle's chest with such power, the koopa flipped twice in the air and was knocked out cold by the landing.

Tongue out, wheezing and panting, Mykel approached the unconscious form. "You could've just tossed my cell phone back," he muttered to the yellow-shelled turtle. "Moron."

He then looked around in search of a way to contact his team to report success.

ZE HAPPEE 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!

DRYING

Jon Ritter

There is a book of matches
on my floor here,
somewhere behind the
shelves of paper and wires
coiled in the corners.

And it always smells a little bit
like smoke and ink in here
especially when I open the window;
put myself on display
for a street where
only strangers walk by.

I am an old, tired zoo animal
and the kids don't even tap
on my glass anymore.

THE DETAIL

Zorveska

They say first impressions count.

All the same, it undeniably takes time
To fit every piece of the intricate puzzle together
To uncover the true picture
In order to understand someone entirely.

You look at me, guarded.
Shock fear panic
You're sifting through to find emotions to replace it.
You sense I'm one to collect every facet
Veracity in the forefront of my mind
A private eye.

You give others the impression of content
Though you're far from it.
An exhilaration overdose expels the exterior of a young individual,
Irrepressible yet placid, your movements fluid
Yet inside, your limbs ache from the eternal charade of cheer.

But you hide behind your smile
Your own Great Wall of China
Sealing the truth in four inescapable walls.
Security wardens shoot down anyone who
Hints at recognition.
The fear of betrayal ingrained in your subconscious.
Traces of the ancient haunt your nightmares
Your shattered mind a muted prison.

You can't hide forever.
Each minor detail will ultimately betray you
For who you really are,
Not who you invented.
A misunderstood somebody

SENSING FEAR

Maria Kubiak

I sense fear here,
It is wrapping me around,
Just like a rope made out of thorns.
I sense a tragedy here,
Something bad will happen,
Someone will get hurt.

I sense pain here,
My heart broke into pieces,
My eyes full of tears.

Will I ever sense a freedom here?
Will I ever be run away from suffering?
Will I find an asylum?