

Fanatical Publishing's

Weekly Review

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AND NOW, a word from the publisher:

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

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

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!

Table of Contents

Original Prose

SEAFOXES, J.B. Hickock
Page 5

Fan fiction

ME₂ HELLDIVER SAGA CHAPTER 37: DARKEST HOUR,
Veyron722skyhook
Page 14

Poetry

ALONE, Zorveska
Page 38

BEND MY KNEE, Solilska
Page 39

SWEET POISON, xShenlong
Page 40

DRIP, TheMeTheyDontSee
Page 42

SERVE THE STRINGS, E.V. Davis
Page 43

ORIGINAL LITERATURE

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<http://www.lulu.com/shop/jb-hickock/reign-of-terror/ebook/product-21171029.html>

SEAFOXES

J.B. Hickock

When the Anne reached the shore of Indea, the war between Indea and the United Counties was seven years old; the Anne herself was less than a year old, having only been launched the previous July and commissioned less than a month before sailing across the Adriatic on this, her maiden voyage.

Her captain, Commander John Gattacre strode her quarter-deck as she lay hove-to a few miles off the coast of Senzosium, a client city-state of the Grand Emir of Indea, and the home port of a thousand privateers who sailed forth to prey on the Counties' merchant shipping.

For seven years a squadron had lain off this coast to halt them, and for seven years had failed: from hundreds of islets and bays the pirates sailed out and brought back their prizes. Many were caught, but many more kept coming, lured by the prizes of the Counties' merchant fleet: intimately familiar with their own jagged and rocky coast, the privateers disdained the small Counties' squadron's efforts to catch them, until Commodore Chauncey had appealed to the Admiralty that he must have reinforcements or call off the blockade altogether.

Gattacre and the Anne were the Admiralties' reply to his appeal.

Yeoman Martin, a sparse Silver Fox from County Orange saluted. "Signal is to proceed, sir."

Gattacre, an auburn-pelted Red Fox acknowledged. "Take us in, master Hardachre!" he called.

Sailing Master Hardachre, one of the few experienced seaman aboard, acknowledged. "Aye-aye sir! Get on up there!" he roared through a thick County Kain brogue. "Loose the tops'ls! Take in the reef lines! Let's give 'em a show!"

Gattacre felt a surge of pride as the topmen bounded into the rigging and the sails shook out to catch the light breeze; the Anne was a new ship of the ill-famed Cruizer class: a flush-decked Brig-Sloop of 18 guns, she rolled terribly and was overcrowded. Her crew were new too: landsmen, volunteers and press-ganged men. But she was a fast sailer and seaworthy, as she had proven in the long journey across the Adriatic Ocean, and her crew, led by the example of Gattacre and the other sailors, had come together on the long journey. To her captain she was a fine ship and a fine crew indeed. His first ship, and he knew whatever other vessels he gained, she would always be his favourite.

The freshening breeze carried them past the buoys marking shoal water into the lee of the island of Ereos; a narrow rocky island, it commanded the passage into the bay of Senzosium and gave the United Counties their only safe anchorage on the western coast of Indea. That the blockade had lasted at all was due entirely to Major John Lantry, who planned and led the bold assault that captured the island and delivered its defenses intact to Commodore Chauncey.

The bones of that brave officer lay in a narrow trench alongside those of many other brave foxes brought low by a plague of Typhus – an enemy no soldier no matter how brave could contend with. Gattacre had known Lantry as a young man, and mourned his passing when he heard of his death.

As the Anne eased into the narrow anchorage, her crew crowded the rail to get a look at the island and town that was perched upon it.

The narrow streets and adobe buildings of Ereos tumbled down the rocky slope almost to the edge of the sea. Enclosed by spiked walls it was a dirty crowded place, known for its infamous underground labyrinth and the plethora of diseases a sailorman could catch in its brothels.

In his 22-year career Gattacre had seen plenty of bad berths, but Ereos shocked him: the docks were green with mold and almost falling into the sea; the streets that he could see were almost packed with men, sick and crippled men, wearing the tatters of uniforms and soldier's garb. Gattacre glanced away, and was thankful he was too far to see more.

To occupy himself, he looked over the island's defenses, such as they were: before the war, Ereos was a stronghold of the Indean Emirate with which they controlled their often-unruly vassal, Senzosium. Its defenses had weathered many assaults, and had been expensively kept up. Six years of blockade seemed to have done what weather and war had failed, and brought them low: everywhere Gattacre looked, he saw the walls crumbling, in places they had burst open and the rubble spilled down to the shore; cannons were stained with rust and manned, if at all, by invalids. He glanced once more to the sick and crippled laying in the streets and suppressed a shiver. This was no base for a campaign; this was a battered fortress on the point of destruction.

#

Commodore Chauncey's once-brilliant fur was limp and wan, his tail drooped, and his eyes had the lost, far-off look of a man who had seen too many of his friends die. Still, he received Gattacre politely enough and accepted the despatches he delivered. Only once the

commander had finished his report, did he nod quietly, as if to himself, and say: "I hoped to get at least a squadron, and supplies."

"There were supplies gathered," Gattacre said. "But they and the ships to transport them were diverted to the attack on Lithabya."

Chauncey nodded again without enthusiasm: the fortress of Lithabya had already weathered half-a-dozen attacks by the United Counties and their allies, the prospects of success for this one were hardly encouraging.

"The Admiralty said they would send further reinforcements as soon as they became available," Gattacre added limply.

Chauncey nodded again with the same resigned air. "As soon as you are ready to depart, I should like you to sail in company with the Bandang to take up station before the Texican shore," with that, Gattacre was dismissed.

As he departed, Gattacre thought not a little of how sorry he was that his first command was to be in this mess, but more of his thoughts were of pity toward the man who held command of it.

#

The Anne had weathered the crossing of the Adriatic very well, so it was only a day later that her sails were set to catch the strong offshore breeze and she sailed out from the protected anchorage on her first patrol.

The Bandang was a Xebec, with lateen sails on two masts; she had a distinctive hull with pronounced overhanging bow and stern, and displaced about 200 tons, making her a good deal smaller than the Anne's 384 tons, carrying 16 guns to the Anne's 18. Her commander was lieutenant White, a Gray Fox from County Orange; Gattacre was in command of the small squadron, but he had largely deferred to White, the more experienced in these dangerous waters.

As they sailed together, more than a few men on both vessels couldn't help but mark the difference between the two: the Bandang was a prize; a former privateer captured and taken into service; she had a dirty look about her, with ill-patched sails and drooping lines, and her crew were an odd lot including many Mongooses, native of Senzodium; disaffected with their titular allies, some had volunteered to join their titular enemies, and desperate to replace his irreplaceable sailors lost to combat and disease, Chauncey had accepted them.

Lieutenant Depardieu approached Gattacre where he stood at the rail, watching the Bandang. "Do you suppose we will look like that, soon?" asked Depardieu, marking the Bandang's unwholesome appearance. "Possibly," Gattacre said, and turned to face his first lieutenant. "I hope not."

Depardieu nodded. He was a coyote, his grandparents were

Resistants who fled to the United Counties from religious persecution in their homeland of Ceylannum; their grandson spoke with a slight accent and practiced the Resistant creed, but otherwise marked no difference from his comrades. Fresh from the naval school, he had proven an able officer on the voyage across the Adriatic, and now he'd have his first taste of combat; he seemed unfazed by the prospect.

Once they were free of the shoal water, the small squadron sailed northeastward, tacking into the landward breeze; the Texican shore, as White had explained to Gattacre, was where the Hyromey river reached the Adriatic; in peacetime the swampy river delta was an entrepot for smugglers, and now was a favourite haunt of privateers.

Three days of sailing brought the Anne and Bandang within sight of the Texican coast; it was a low, swampy place, the only signs of life, even at midmorning were a few fishing craft that scuttled away at the sight of the two warships.

Yeoman Martin approached Gattacre and saluted. "Message from Bandang, sir; 'advise we divide our forces to cover more sea.'"

Also, Captain White would prefer to sail without an inexperienced crew on an ill-starred ship in company, Gattacre thought to himself. "Reply; 'acknowledged; good hunting.'"

No sooner was the signal hoisted then the Bandang pulled away from the Anne, heading out to sea. "We won't see her again soon," muttered the sailor at the helm.

"I hope not," Gattacre said aloud, then turned about with a show of breezy confidence. "We'd have to share our prize money then, wouldn't we?"

The helmsman grinned. "Yes sir!"

Gattacre nodded, and turned away. "Mister Hardachre!" he called.

That worthy fox hurried to join him on the quarter deck. "Yes sir?"

"Put a double watch aloft; tell them to watch the seaward quarter carefully."

"Aye-aye sir!"

While Hardachre hurried to attend to that, Gattacre turned to Depardieu. "Get aloft," he ordered. "Find somewhere inconspicuous we can drop anchor, but it must have a clear route out to sea."

"Yes sir," Depardieu said with a salute then leaped up into the rigging and climbed quickly aloft.

Gattacre took a breath of the hot swampy air, then let it out; this could prove a long wait.

#

Depardieu found several possible anchorages, but none satisfied

Gattacre; after a few hours of sailing along the coast, he had the Anne tack about and return the way she came; that they were observed he had no doubt, and hoped that some privateer would see the Anne had passed on and put out for sea.

The ship's bells chimed 4 O'clock when his hope came true.

"Sail ho!" a sailor called down from where he perched precariously on the topgallant yard.

Men crowded the starboard railing and peered out to sea; Gattacre opened up his telescope and sighted through it.

A Polacre-Xebec was studding out to sea, her sails wide to catch the light breeze coming off the shore. "Mister Hardachre!" Gattacre called. "A double ration of rum for that man! Hard a-starboard, sound general quarters! Let's catch ourselves a prize!"

With a cheer, men leaped into the rigging to put out the canvas while others ran out the guns, cleared the decks and readied ammunition. The drum beat general quarters and the Anne gracefully turned out to sea in pursuit of her first prey.

Gattacre had expected the lateen-rigged Xebec to turn for shore; she could sail closer to the wind than the Anne, and hence might have been able to outmaneuver her, but instead she put on more sail and beat out to sea. A great mistake: in this straight run before the wind, the Brig-Sloop's fine hull and great sail plan gave her the advantage. Perhaps the privateer captain hoped that with his long head start Gattacre would grow discouraged of catching him and turn back. If that was his idea, he was gravely mistaken: this was Gattacre's first chase as master of his own ship, and he was determined that it should be a successful one.

The crew seemed to feel the same way, and set to their work eagerly, readying the Anne for battle; they threw out the studding-sails to catch every gasp of breeze, and even readied the boats in preparation for taking possession of their prize; Gattacre overheard the two junior lieutenants, Dewey and Magary light-heartedly arguing over which would be the first to board her. Gattacre ordered them to attend more closely to their duties.

As they gained ground on their quarry, Gattacre found himself suffering from an unexpected apprehension: he had been in combat before, but now he realized that he had always taken a certain comfort from knowing that another man was in charge; now he was, and he felt it a terrible weight on his shoulders.

Privateers typically carried very large crews, he recalled, what if this one should prevail? He would be a laughingstock, his first ship captured on her first voyage, to say nothing of what would happen to his crew, sold off into some Indean slave-hole, and his fine ship doubtless would be taken into the Emir's navy and turned against the United Counties.

They drew nearer their quarry, his fears multiplied, and Gattacre almost called them off. Only shame kept him from opening his mouth, that and the fear of the stain of cowardice. So he clamped his mouth shut, and tucked his hands into the back of his belt to hide their shaking, and when he must speak he was terse and short, as he was with the two lieutenants.

By 8:30 they were within long cannon-shot of the poleacre-xebec and Dewey requested permission to fire.

Not trusting himself to speak, Gattacre gave a tense nod, and Dewey ran to the forecastle to command the two 6-pounders that were the Anne's bowchasers.

"Fire!" Dewey called, and the first shot rang out: it splashed astern of the poleacre-xebec, her name now clearly legible as the Eagle. The second gun crew did better, putting their shot into the Eagle's stern.

Jeering their less-successful comrades that gun crew hurriedly reloaded, but the other did them one better and put their next shot into the Eagle's mizzen mast; the crew raised a cheer as the mizzen toppled over the side and into the water. The enemy responded with a ripple of musketry that did nothing more than nick the ear of an over-eager marine. The foxes jeered the enemy and Gattacre felt a bit of his worries ease: clearly the Eagle carried no stern-chasers, so the Anne could bear down on her without fear of serious harm.

The bow-chasers did not repeat their success, but Gattacre put the Anne's squad of marines to snipe at the enemy sailors trying to cut the mizzen mast free and repair their rigging. This they did with somewhat more activity than effect, but neither were the enemy much more successful with their musketry.

The enemy captain realized, too late, that he could never outrace the brig-sloop, and tried to bring her around the pursuer and make back for the distant shore, but it was too late, she had no room to maneuver: as the Eagle bore about, Depardieu glanced questioningly to Gattacre, who nodded and called "At your discretion, Mister Depardieu!"

Depardieu nodded. "Stand by!" he called to his gun teams on the larboard. "Aim well into his hull as she passes!"

The Eagle heeled over, her broken mizzen dragging in the water, and the Anne passed her stern, in the perfect position to rake her. "Fire!" Depardieu roared.

They cut loose with a cheer, pouring shot after shot into the privateer's hull: apart from her 6-pounder bow-chasers the Anne was armed with 16 32-pounder carronades, a fearsome broadside on such a small vessel. With every blast the Eagle shuddered, and even over the cannonade Gattacre could hear crunching of wood and the screams of men as the raking broadside struck home through the Xebec's hull.

Then the Anne passed her quarry. "Hard a-larboard!" Gattacre roared. "Bring us about!" he turned to watch the Eagle while foxes leaped into the rigging to carry out his command: the Eagle wallowed in the water; even from this distance he could see the wide holes in her hull through which seawater was pouring in. She'd never escape the Anne now, and the only question remaining was whether she could be taken as a prize, or must be left to sink.

"Musketmen to the rigging!" Gattacre yelled, making his decision. "Prepare to board her!"

The crew raised a cheer as they drew alongside the Eagle; Gattacre watched the privateers marshal on deck to resist boarding, but the musketeers in the rigging fired a volley, driving them back below.

The two ships met with a crunch of splintering wood: grapnels were thrown to catch the Eagle and hold her, then Lieutenant Magary leaped over the side, first man to board. With a cheer, the whole crew followed him.

A Mongoose intercepted Magary with a rusty pike; the lieutenant swung his blade, but the privateer dodged his wild swing, and set his polearm. Magary tried to stop himself, but ran straight into the point.

The stricken lieutenant fell with a strangled cry, but the mongoose had little time to rejoice in his victory, for a silver-furred topman uttered a shout of rage and swung a cutlass with wild strength, lopping his head from his shoulders with a single stroke.

Then the melee was joined, and all details were lost: Gattacre fired a pistol into a Mongoose's twisted hate-filled face, it vanished behind a curtain of smoke. The captain dropped his pistol and swung his sword at a scaled Indean; the lizard desperately blocked the stroke, then slashed back. Hemmed in by the press of combat, Gattacre had no room to dodge, and kicked out: his kick landed on the Indean's belly, knocking him back, and the point of his blade missed Gattacre's belly by an inch.

Gattacre grinned and took a step forward, point of his sword held low, then lunged with it; the off-balance lizard tried to block, but Gattacre's rising point caught him in the chest. The lizard grabbed at the blade with his bare hands, screaming shrilly. Gattacre kicked him again, and tugged his sword free. He turned away as the lizard fell dead, looking for his next prey.

Gattacre loved combat: the smell of blood, his pulse hammering in his ears, the adrenalin rushing through his veins, he grinned bloodthirstily, feeling truly alive. In his sane moments, he hated this, feared it, but once in the thick of battle, he gave himself over to it completely.

The Indean privateers fought desperately, but Gattacre's men

fought just as savagely, determined to take the ship. In minutes it was over: the privateers began throwing down their arms and raising their hands in surrender.

Gattacre found himself covered in blood, not his own, his sword hanging heavy in his hand. He gasped for breath, suddenly exhausted, bone-deep tired.

He dropped his sword, and leaned against the mainmast, his shoulders heaving for breath as he glanced around the bloody deck, watching as his men cleared away the dead and wounded, gathered and stacked arms, and shoved the prisoners together.

Lieutenant Dewey rushed up to Gattacre, his teeth bared in a wild grin. "Sir, the ship is ours!" he cried ebulliently.

Gattacre silenced him with a silent heavy glance, then turned to face Depardieu who approached. The Resistant coyote held himself quietly, looking with a little distaste at the blood that washed the decks and splattered his fur and uniform. "The prize is secure, sire," he reported with a salute. "One hundred and thirty-six prisoners taken: I have men below to inspect the hull; she seems dry." That meant that none of the Anne's cannonballs had pierced the Eagle below the waterline, which was good; if she started taking on water, that would mean a long journey back to port, pumping the water out by hand the whole way, if the prize could be brought back at all.

Gattacre nodded wearily. "Take charge of the prize, lieutenant," he said to Depardieu, then turned to Dewey. "Take half the prisoners and transfer them to them to the Anne; I want them kept separate from each other." That said, Gattacre waved his subordinates away, then stooped to retrieve his sword, and returned to his ship.

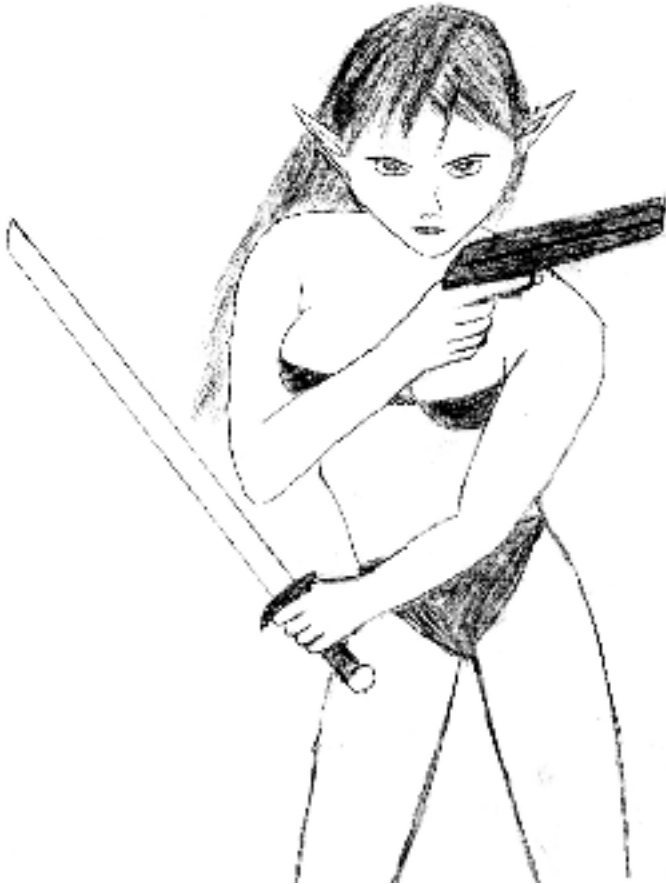
In laudable time, the Eagle was ready to depart: her fallen rigging cut away, her pirate crew under guard, and in company, the Anne and her prize turned astride the wind toward Ereos.

Gattacre took his hat off and threw his head back, feeling the wind blowing through his fur. He smiled, then turned to Hardachre. "Let's make way, master Hardachre!" he called.

"Aye-aye, sir!" Hardachre called, then turned to the waiting crew. "Hands to the rigging! Set all sails, m'lads! We're going for home!"

The Anne's crew cheered, and were answered by their fellows in the prize-crew aboard the Eagle. Gattacre smiled again: his first ship, his first cruise, his first capture.

FAN FICTION



or: Leanna's Return

ME2 HELLDIVER SAGA CHAPTER 37: DARKEST HOUR

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“Hey, Major. Good news. Looks like the Reaper IFF is finally hooked up and ready to go.” Said Joker.

“That is not entirely accurate, Mr Moreau. The device is powered, but it is causing some unusual instability in other systems. I recommend a more thorough analysis before we attempt to use it.” Said EDI.

“We can’t put our mission on hold forever. How long will this take?” Austin asked as he observed the galaxy map.

“A full scan? Who knows with this thing. Maybe you better take the Hellhound for this mission. I’ll make sure we’re up and running when you get back.” Said Joker.

The Arkanes had given Austin one little mission they wanted him to do. There was a ship that had sent a distress signal after it had been invaded by Geth. The Normandy was the closest, which it rather coincidentally often was and so the Arkanes had picked them to assist the ship.

“Major, Alaara. I’ve already notified the team. We’ll meet you on the shuttle.”

“Then I guess I’ll head down to the dropship. Joker, ship’s all yours. Take care of her.” Said Austin.

Austin would decide on who to take when they docked. He’d even felt it best to take Dell and Sill just to be on the safe side. It was only a couple of Geth, but it was always “better to be safe than sorry” as he always said.

“I’m telling you, EDI, your readings are off. It’s radiation bleed, just white noise.” Said Joker worryingly.

Ever since EDI had started testing IFF out on the Normandy’s systems, worrying readings had been coming in at his end.

“I have detected a signal embedded in the static. We are transmitting the Normandy’s location.” Said EDI.

Transmitting? To who?”

His question was quickly answered when a ship suddenly dropped out of a mass effect jump. To the pilot’s horror, it was the familiar rock like structure of a Collector ship.

“Oh, shit.”

The Collector Ship slowed down as it seemed to instead be attempting to board the Normandy rather than destroy it.

“We’re getting out of here!” said Joker urgently. As he effortlessly typed away at the holographic controls however, nothing.

“Propulsion systems are disabled. I’m detecting a virus in the ship’s computers.” Said EDI.

“From the IFF? Damn it, why didn’t you scrub it?!” Joker groaned.

“Primary defence systems are offline. We can save the Normandy, Mr Moreau, but you must help me.” Said EDI.

Down in the engineering deck, all of the crew were assuming battle stations. With all the Helldivers and the team gone, they were the only defence the Normandy had now. They all assumed positions in front of the door the Collectors would no doubt be boarding in. The ship suddenly shook hard and the door gently opened to show several Collector troops, guns at the ready.

Joker could feel the Normandy shudder as the Collectors boarded and there was also the distinct sound of fighting that he could just hear coming from below..

“Give me the ship.” Said EDI.

“What? You’re crazy. You start singing “Daisy Bell” and I’m done.” The pilot objected.

“Unlock my sealed databases, and I can initiate countermeasures. The maintenance shaft in the science lab will allow passage to the AI core.” Said EDI.

Joker knew he had no choice. What other options did he have? All the systems were offline, the Collectors were boarding and with his condition, there was little he could do to help the crew fight them.

Giving in, he gently got up from his chair.

“Main corridors are no longer safe.” The Collectors have boarded.” Said EDI. “The emergency floor lighting will guide you, Mr Moreau.”

“Ah, damn it.”

Joker had to make sure he didn’t run or the force would crack his legs and then he’d be really screwed. Best he could do was a light jog. It wasn’t fast, but hopefully it would do.

As he followed the red lights on the floor, the elvatro door to the CIC opened, emitting a Praetorian.

“Oh my god! What is that?” said one of the crew.

Another one fired a grenade at the massive insect husk, but it did hardly any damage.

“We’ll hold it off as long as we can. Hurry, Joker! Go!”

Joker didn’t need to be told twice and continued to the door

leading the science lab.

The Praetorin lunged at one of the crew, impaling him on one of his legs. That was the last Joker saw of the fight before he disappeared through the door, but he could still hear the gunfire and screams.

“Shit.”

He continued through the science lab, over to a small ladder that would lead into the vents and therefore to the next level down.

Joker very nearly jumped back in fright when he saw another Praetorian through the glass window that overlooked the drive core.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.”

“Multiple hostiles detected on the crew deck.”

Joker gently got down the ladder until his feet touched the ground of the Life Support room. One other crew member was present in there with a pistol in his hand.

“Joker! This deck is crawling with those things! Stay close – I’ll protect you!” he said as he made his way out first.

Just as Joker followed, the body of the crew member was suddenly flung into the air. The elevator was also open with a Scion standing in it, and it had Kelly in its hand. The Yeoman could only struggle and scream as the Husk hauled her inside.

“Shit, shit, shit!”

“Main fusion plant offline. Activating emergency H-fuel cells.”

“What the shit!”

Joker dared not stop. He felt so guilty in leaving the crew, but he knew there was nothing he could do. He almost felt helpless.

The pilot quickly hurried through the medbay and into the AI core. He resisted the urge to look back in case a Collector or husk happened to be right behind him. The shock would topple him over.

“All right, I’m at, uh, you.” He said as the AI core sealed itself and he stepped up to the control panel.

“Connect the core to the Normandy’s primary control module.” EDI instructed.

“Great. See, this is where it starts, and when we’re all just organic batteries, guess who they’ll blame?” Joker groaned to himself. “This is all Joker’s fault. What a tool he was. I have to spend all day computing pi because he plugged in the Overlord.”

There was a brief flash and then everything returned to normal. EDI’s avatar then appeared behind Joker, the bright light giving some more illumination to the dark room.

“I have access to the defensive systems. Thank you, Mr Moreau. Now you must reactivate the primary drive in engineering.” Said the AI.

“Argh! You want me to go crawling through the ducts again.” Joker groaned.

“I enjoy the sight of humans on their knees.” Said EDI.
Joker didn’t know what to say to that and simply raised his eyebrow.

“That is a joke.”

“Right.”

“The shaft behind you connects to the engineering deck. Good luck.”

The cost seemed clear and Joker wasted no time and hurrying up from Jack’s usual spot to the drive core room. He was hoping the Praetorian that had been in there had gone.

“Hostiles are present in engineering. They are heading towards the cargo bay.” EDI advised.

Sure enough, just as Joker reached the stairs, he saw a shadow moving at the top of them. He did nothing but wait until it was clear. The risk was far too great for him to risk being seen.

After a few tense seconds, the shadows seemed to move on and he heard the sound of a door shutting.

“Engineering is clear of hostiles. Proceed immediately to minimize chances of detection.” Said EDI.

Joker hurried up the stairs and into the drive core. There were signs of a fight, but no bodies. The Collectors had obviously planned to take as many prisoners as they could.

“Activate the drive core and I will open the airlocks as we accelerate. All hostiles will be killed.” EDI instructed again.

“What? What about the crew?” Joker objected.

“They are gone, Jeff. The Collectors took them.”

“Shit.”

“I am sealing the engine room.”

The drive core then started to gently hum and then it increased.

“I have control.”

The Normandy gave a sudden lurch as it accelerated at top speed. The force caused Joker to fall, but it didn’t damage his legs.

“Purge is complete. No other life forms on board. Securing airlocks and cargo bay doors.”

“Send a message to Shepard’s shuttle. Tell him what happened.” Said Joker as he gently got back up.

“Message away. Are you feeling well, Jeff?” EDI asked.

“No. But thanks for asking.”

The mission had been a success, but the victory was short lived. Everyone had returned immediately as soon as they’d heard what happened.

Joker was currently sat on the table in the briefing room. Miranda then came in, a cross look on her face.

“Everyone? You lost everyone -- and damn near lost the ship, too?!” she nearly shouted.

“I know, all right? I was here!” Joker retorted.

“It’s not his fault, Miranda. None of us caught it.” Said Alaara.

“Captain T’onrak is correct. The harmful data in the Collector drive was even more sophisticated than the “black box” Reaper virus I was given.” Said EDI.

“Are you okay, Joker? I heard it was a rough ride.” Austin asked.

“There’s a lot of empty chairs in here.” Joker sighed.

“We did all we could, Jeff.” Said EDI reassuringly.

“Yeah, thanks, Mom.”

“Is the ship clean? We can’t risk this happening again.” Austin asked.

“EDI and I purged the system. The Reaper IFF is online. We can go through the Omega 4 Relay whenever you want.” Said Joker.

“Don’t even get me started about unshackling a dammed AI.” Said Miranda.

“What could I do against Collectors, break my arm at them?!” Joker nearly shouted. “EDI cleared the ship. She’s all right.”

“I assure you, I am still bound by protocols in my programming. Even if I were not, you are my crewmates.” Said EDI.

“EDI has had plenty of opportunity to kill us, and she saved my life when she turned against Cerberus and helped me escape from them. We need all the help we can get, now more than ever.” Said Austin.

“Sounds like we have everything we need to rescue the crew.” Said Alaara.

“I agree. We’ve done everything we can. It’s time to take the fight to the Collectors. I believe you Helldivers have a saying “Give them hell.” I believe is the phrase?” said Miranda, her mood slightly brightened.

“You got that right, Miranda.” Said Austin. “Joker, head back up to the bridge. The rest of you, to your stations. It’s time for us to light our darkest hour!”

“Aye, aye, Major. Just punch up the galaxy map when you’re ready.” Joker saluted as he and the other returned to their posts.

Before he made the call, Austin decided to have one last talk with the team.

Mordin was the first one he went to.

“Shepard. How can I help?”

“You got a minute to talk, Mordin.”

“Yes. Personal matters on mind, actually. Got call from nephew. Promising geneticist himself. Just turned 16. Got tenure at university. Following in my footsteps.” Said the Salarian proudly. “Had to lie about

what I was doing. Think he was suspicious. Doesn't matter. Still good to hear his voice."

"Does anyone in your family know about what you really did for the government?" Austin asked.

"No. Know I'm lying, but won't pry. Salarians curious as a people, but also have social cues. Keep two types of secrets from family. First type personal or guilt-based, invites suspicion, exploration. Puzzle to be solved. Reward for curiosity, intelligence. Drama! Other secrets more serious. Dangerous if discovered. Signals discourage curiosity for protection of family." Mordin explained.

"Why wouldn't everyone give clues that their secrets were too dangerous to be uncovered?" Austin inquired.

"Not conscious. Social. Reflexive body language. Can't fake it. Example: yawning perceived as contagious among humans. Subject observes yawn, sensory input deactivates left periamygdalar region, subject yawns in response. Social empathy. Also works with dogs. Salarian faking signals to discourage curiosity similar to human faking a yawn. Can try, but effectiveness limited." Mordin explained.

"Your nephew got tenure at 16? Is he a genius or a scientific prodigy?" Austin asked, somewhat humorously.

"No. Wait, don't want to insult him. Yes, but not in manner you meant. Remember, Salarian lives short. Mature rapidly by your standards. Don't live much past 40." Said Mordin.

"Are you calling him because you're worried we won't make it back?" Austin asked.

"No. Aware survival unlikely, but have faith in team and you of course. But actually contacted him for family connection. Hard to imagine galaxy. Too many people. Faceless Statistics. Easy to depersonalize. Good when doing unpleasant work. For this fight, want personal connection. Can't anthropomorphize galaxy. But can think of favourite nephew. Fighting for him." Mordin smiled.

"I'm glad you got to talk to family before we finished this. And I'm glad we talked too, Mordin."

"Honoured to be part of this, Shepard. Helped preserve galaxy before with Genophage. Dirty work, ethically ambiguous. Problematic. Collectors mission simpler, cleaner. Will be proud to see it in Mordin Solus biography vid. Unless we all die. Proud posthumously in that case. Regardless... thank you."

"Shepard." Said Samara.

"Anything new?"

"There is something I've wanted to tell you."

The Justicar stood up and walked up to the window. Austin followed until he stood next to her. They then turned to face each other directly. "I've done many things in my lifetime. I thought the

galaxy held nothing new for me. Since joining you, I've realized how much there is. You have been a good friend to me."

"That means a lot to me. I'm honoured to say the same for you, Samara." Austin smiled.

"If we both still live when this is done, you may call upon me for aid at any time. I will come for you, Shepard." Said Samara.

"When the Reapers do eventually arrive, I'll be sure to take you up on that." Said Austin as he and Samara shook hands.

"I will stand with you, no matter the danger, my friend."

"Shepard." Said Grunt.

"Just checking in. How are you doing?"

"Battlemaster, I have everything. Clan, kin, and enemies to fight. I'm branching out. Got a list of enemies now. They all give me joy when I picture cutting them, crushing them. There's imprint, a Salarian with the -- what are they? -- things on his head pulled apart. Bet it caused a generation of revenge. What is that, a few weeks for them?" said Grunt. "So, what did you want?"

"You know, I kind of thought connecting with your past would bring stability." Said Austin.

"Ha! See, now we're having fun. Me remembering good deaths, and you with your... funny human thing you're doing. My job is to hurt things. Direction, control -- that's your job, Battlemaster. You're why I'm a soldier, not dead or crazed like an animal. Thank you, Shepard. You gave me purpose. Now let's find something big to kill, like an army of Collectors." The Krogan smiled.

"I look forward to seeing what your kill count will be, Grunt."

"Shepard. Need me for something?" asked Garrus.

"You got a minute, Garrus? I figured I'd chat to everyone one last time before I set us on course."

"Sure. I've been trying to kill the time, anyway. I wanted to thank you again for your help with Sidonis. Whatever happens with the Collectors or the Reapers or whoever else comes after us, I know you'll get the job done." Said Garrus as Austin sat on a nearby crate.

"You actually think we'll find something worse than Collectors or Reapers?" Austin asked.

"I like to expect the worst. There's a small chance I'll be pleasantly surprised." said Garrus.

"I couldn't do this without you, Garrus."

"Sure you could. Not as stylishly, of course." The Turian chuckled. "It's strange going into a suicide mission on a human ship. Your people don't prepare for high-risk operations the way Turians do."

"I thought you'd be used to high-risk operations on human

ships. I mean, think about tracking Saren to Ilos.” Said Austin.

“Sure, but that was quick. We raced out, blew up some Geth and Thresher Maw Husk, and saved the galaxy. This time we’ve got all these new faces, two Ex-Cerberus operatives, and that AI all telling us what we’re up against. I think I preferred blind optimism.” Said Garrus.

“Honestly, Garrus, what do you think our chances are?” Austin asked, a bit more seriously this time.

“Honestly? The Collectors killed you once, and all it did is piss you off. I can’t imagine they’ll stop you this time. Besides, your old Squad is with us and that certainly increases our chances to the point where I doubt there’s any chance of this failing.” Said Garrus, almost with pure confidence.

“Do you... regret leaving C-sec or the Turian military?” Austin asked.

“Not for a minute, especially when I’m wearing this armour. When it comes to it, Shepard, I don’t think I’m a very good Turian.” Said Garrus, a small hint of regret in his voice. “When a good Turian hears a bad order, he follows it. He might complain, but he knows his place. I just don’t see the point in staying quiet and polite. Not when the galaxy is at stake.”

“How do Turian crews get ready for high-risk missions?” Austin asked curiously.

“With violence, usually. Turian ships have more operational discipline than your Alliance, but fewer personal restrictions. Our commanders run us tight, and they know we need to blow off steam. Turian ships have training rooms for exercise, combat sims, even full-contact sparring. Whatever lets people work off stress.” Garrus explained.

“You mean Turian ships have crewmen fighting each other before a mission?” Austin asked, surprised as what he’d heard.

“It’s supervised, of course. Nobody’s is going to risk an injury that interferes with the mission. And it’s a good way to settle grudges amicably. I remember right before one mission, we were about to hit a Batarian pirate squad. Very risky. This recon scout and I had been at each other’s throats. Nerves, mostly. She suggested we settle it in the ring.” Said Garrus.

“I assume you took her down gently?”

“Actually, she and I were the top-ranked hand-to-hand specialists on the ship. I had reach, but she had flexibility. It was brutal. After nine rounds, the judge called it a draw. There were a lot of unhappy betters in the training room. We, ah, ended up holding a tiebreaker in her quarters. I had reach, but she had flexibility. More than one way to work off stress, I guess.”

Austin laughed at this, which made Garrus smile a bit.

Admittedly, it was a good joke.

“Then again, judging by the many times we’ve heard sounds coming from your quarters, I think you’re already familiar with that.” chuckled. chuckled.

“Watch it, Vakarian.” Austin chuckled. “Still, I never thought you’d be the ladies’ man type, Garrus.”

“Guess I picked up a few bad habits from you, Shepard.” Garrus smiled.

“Thanks for the talk, Garrus. I’ll see you later.”

“Sure thing.”

Austin went to leave, but Garrus quickly called to him.

“And Shepard... Whatever happens out there, I am, and always will be honoured that I got to serve and fight alongside not just you, but you’re squad.”

“We’ll all give the Collector’s hell, Garrus. That I can promise.” Said Austin confidently.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if we gave them their version of the apocalypse.” Garrus grinned.

“Heh, don’t start stealing my sense of humour, Garrus.” Said Austin.

Austin went into the Life Support next to find Thane in his usual meditations pot.

“Do you need something?” the Drell asked.

“Have a few minutes to talk?”

“Of course, Shepard. Join me.”

Austin sat down in front of Thane.

“Still talking to Kolyat?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s still difficult. But he seems less angry. Will you hear my confession, Shepard?”

“I wouldn’t talk to you if I didn’t want to hear what you have to say.”

“When I married Irikah, the Hanar let me leave their service to raise a family. But I had no other skills, so I freelanced. When Irikah was killed, I pursued those responsible. Once I’d eliminated them, I had no goal. I accepted the Dantius commission because I didn’t know what else to do.” Thane explained.

“I guess you’re lucky we came along when we did.” Said Austin positively.

“It was an intervention by the gods. I would have died in that penthouse. I would have fulfilled my contract. If Nassana’s guards caught me afterwards – it would have been a good death. But someone else was pushing to reach the target. Forcing me to move faster. Challenging me. I had to reach her first.” Said Thane.

“I had no idea you’d planned to die in there.” Said Austin,

surprised.

“It wasn’t a plan. My body had accepted its death. My mind had been dead a long time. Your mission gave me purpose. A cause to die for. A chance to atone. I was able to speak to my son again. I can leave my body in peace.” Thane smiled.

“You’ve had a hard life. You deserve some peace.” Said Austin.
“Whatever may happen, my gun is yours.”

Austin headed down to Jack’s hiding hole. He knew that she and Kelly had been close. She’d been far too quiet after hearing that all of the crew had been taken.

“Jack?” he asked cautiously.

The convict didn’t seem to take notice of him and simply continued staring at the floor.

“Jack, look, I... I know how much Kelly meant to you. We’ll get her back, I promise.” Said Austin, trying to sound reassuring.

“I know.” Jack eventually said. “But that doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“I...”

“Just leave me alone, Shepard. You once said I should save my anger for the Collectors, we’ll let me do that. Just let me vent my anger on those bastards for taking her.” Jack simply said.

Austin felt it best not to argue with Jack. In a way, she was also right. If she was angry at the Collectors, it might give them the advantage.

“Okay. I understand.” He said. “But if you want to talk at all, don’t hesitate to come to me.”

“Alright, I get it. Just please leave me alone.” Said Jack.

Austin simply lay on the bed looking up into the vastness of space from the sky window in his quarters. He could not deny that he was nervous. His heart was beating a little faster than usual and he was sure he could feel just the tiniest hints of his body shaking.

What would they find beyond that Relay? Could they succeed? Would they be coming back alive?

The Helldiver quickly pushed these thoughts from his head. He shouldn’t think like that. He had great faith in his squad and this fine team he’d put together. He let determination slowly take over. He hadn’t come all this way just to fail now! His suit hadn’t brought him back from the dead just so that he could die again. They would be coming back from this mission, with their crew, alive, and the Collectors exterminated. If fate decreed otherwise, it could go to hell for all he cared.

His confident thoughts and contemplation were then interrupted when he heard the doors open. He looked up to see the

love of his life walking towards him. Liara smiled at her bond mate as she descended the stairs, doing her best to sound calm even though she now felt the same way she had felt 3 years ago before the battle of Ilos.

“I thought I might find you here.” She said.

“I know. That’s why I came here.” Austin smiled as he sat up on the bed.

Their connection to one another had continued to grow stronger and stronger all the time. With each time they consummated their love for one another joined minds, their bond continued to grow. It had now come to the point where they could practically anticipate each other.

Liara walked up to her bond mate and sat down next to him.

“So this is it. This is what it’s all been building up to.” She said. “Nervous?”

“Not really.” Austin replied confidently, his mind now clearer thanks to his earlier thoughts and the fact that he now had Liara sitting right next to him. “You?”

“No.” Liara replied.

After a moment however, she quickly rested her head on his shoulder.

“Hold me.” She said.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Said Austin reassuringly as he put his hand around Liara and held her hand with his other. “I have faith and everyone. We’ll make it through this.”

This seemed to cheer Liara up and she looked into Austin’s brown eyes.

“You’re very brave. I don’t know how you do it sometimes.” She said.

“You’re what primarily keeps me going, love. I don’t know where I’d be without you.” Said Austin.

“You sure do know how to cheer me up.” Liara smiled as she gave Austin a kiss on the cheek.

A question then popped into Austin’s mind. Should he do it?

While he had faith that this would not be a suicide mission, there was still that tiny little voice in the back of his head that was saying there was every chance they could die. He briefly looked down at the small lump in his pocket. Would now really be such a bad time? It would bolster both their spirits and it gave them both something to truly fight for and look forward to when it was over. Austin couldn’t help but smile a tiny bit when he heard another voice in his head telling him one thing.

“If you’re gonna do this, then do it.”

“What are smiling about?”

Austin’s mind snapped back to reality. With his mind made up,

he turned to Liara while he right hand reached into his pocket.

“I have something I’d like to ask you.” He said.

“Oh really? And what would that be? Wouldn’t happen to be how would like to spend the night?” Liara asked.

To the Asari’s utter astonishment however, Austin did not say that. The Helldiver slid of the bed, got down on one knee and brought out the small box that had been in his pocket.

“Liara T’soni, if we make it through this... If we destroy the Collectors and walk out alive...”

The box opened.

“...will you marry me?”

Liara was left completely lost for words. She just couldn’t find her voice as she stared at the sliver ring with an Azure stone sitting comfortably in the box. A happy tear managed to escape from her eye and trickled down her cheek.

“I... I... Yes, Austin. I will.” She said.

Before Austin could speak, Liara suddenly threw her arms around him and crushed her lips against his. When they finally separated, he took a sharp intake of air.

“How long have you had this?” Liara asked as she looked closer at the Prothean markings on the ring’s silver band.

“Quite a while, actually. It was just a matter of deciding when the time was right.” Said Austin, almost in relief that Liara had said yes. He hadn’t doubted that she’d accept, but in a way it still felt almost like a dream.

“It’s beautiful! I didn’t think they made rings out of Prothean metal anymore.” Liara smiled.

“Seemed like the perfect ring for you. Prothean band, and an Azure stone in the middle.” Said Austin.

“I hope you didn’t mean that in a sexual way.” Said Liara suggestively. “You do remember that the word Azure has a different meaning among Asari.”

“How could I forget after I’ve taken you that many times in it?” Austin smiled slyly. He then fished inside his jacket and pulled a small piece of paper out. “If we’re going to truly commit to this, then we need to sign this as well.”

“What is it?” Liara asked curiously.

“Nothing much. Just a form.” Said Austin as he unfolded the piece of paper. “It took a great deal of research, quite a few calls to some very important people and even asking Alaara and Sandra for advice, but I got it in the end. As you know, Helldivers are allowed to pursue relationships with each other if they choose. If they want to take it to take it to the next step however, one or two things need to be done.”

Austin noticed Liara’s concerned expression however and

quickly made sure to properly explain in order to calm her.

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing extreme. All this form basically does is it officially allows us to marry and have children if we so choose. Alaara and Sandra had to sign it before they got married, and I was hoping you and I could sign together, here and now.” He explained.

“You went through all that just to get this for us?” Liara smiled.

“What can I say? I’m madly in love with you and I made a promise that I’d marry you. People do crazy things when they’re in love.” Said Austin.

“Couldn’t have put it better myself.” Liara smiled. “I’d love to sign this with you.”

The two lovers kissed one another as Austin took a pen from his jacket and handed it and the form to his future wife. The Asari didn’t even hesitate in signing her name. She then handed it back to him and he did the same.

“And there we go. Our marriage can now be official.” He said.

“Goddess... I can’t believe this is actually happening. I fear than any second I’m going to wake up and this’ll all be a dream.” Said Liara.

Austin smiled slyly at this. His hand reached around Liara and grasped her behind.

“I guarantee you, Liara. This is really happening.” He smiled.

“I love you so much, Austin.” Liara sighed.

Austin then took the ring from out of its box and gently slid it onto Liara’s finger.

“I love you too... my future wife.” He smiled. “Now, then. Since that’s all out of the way. I was thinking... if you’re not busy...”

Before he could finish however, Liara suddenly threw him down on the bed and kissed him like never before.

“Just try and stop me.” Said the Asari flirtingly.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Said Austin.

“Make love to me, Austin! We’ve always talked of making this night something we’ll remember forever, let’s not disappoint each other.”

“I’m all yours, Liara.”

“Embrace Eternity.”

Kasumi was sat on the sofa in her usual spot, simply looking out into space. She was just about to consider going to Jacob, when the door suddenly opened. Speak of the devil, there he was.

“Kasumi? Look at this – sneaking into your quarters. Heavy risk, but the prize...” he said slyly.

Kasumi simply smiled and stood up.

“I was wondering when you’d show. What’s your intention, Jacob?” she said flirtingly.

“To give the Collectors every kind of hell I can, suicide or not.

But until then, I want all the time I can get. Win, lose, doesn't matter. I want you." Said Jacob as he walked up to the thief and took her hand in his.

"Sounds like you better make every minute count, Mr Taylor." Kasumi smiled.

Jacob complied and stepped back. He then pulled his shirt up over his body, exposing his muscular chest to Kasumi.

"Very nice. Those exercises I've occasionally spied on you doing have been put to good use." The thief smiled.

Jacob pulled Kasumi into his arms and kissed her. Just as they both fell back onto the sofa (all they had since the room didn't have a bed) Jacob felt Kasumi's hand gently sneak into his pocket.

"I don't know why you've got your hand down there, Kasumi. I haven't got any creds on me." He said.

"I may have my hand in your pocket, but I'm not looking for credits." Kasumi winked.

Jack was still sat in the same place, looking down at the floor. She dreaded to imagine what the Collectors planned to do with the crew, especially Kelly. She hoped she wouldn't find out. She'd kill every last Collector who tried to keep her from the one person she had grown to truly love in her love. The one who had managed to break through the barriers she'd put up over the years, and seen who she really was.

After many long minutes, she got bored of simply staring at the floor. Sighing, she activated her omni tool which projected several images of Kelly and her together. One was even of Jack teasingly removing Kelly's outfit.

"I'll kill every single one of those Mother Fucker's for taking you, Kelly." She said. "The last thing they'll know in this life is just how much they can suffer when I become pissed off."

She smiled at the pictures for almost an hour before she finally decided she needed to rest and prepare herself for the coming battle. As she turned off her omni-tool, Jack gave an idle thought to what they're up against: A mission with supposedly suicidal odds against an ancient race possessing super-advanced technology that answer to a bunch of giant metal squid-like spaceships that have killed untold numbers of people?

Jack smiled grimly as her biotics flared as if in agreement with her murderous intentions.

"Yeah? Well, wait till they get a load of me."

Ventra was in his own quarters checking on his arrow stocks. He

had the main box attached to his bow and he had more of these which carried on his back so that when the current one ran out, he could then simply change it for another full set of arrows.

He made sure each one was in perfect condition and ready for battle. They couldn't afford any mistakes or unforeseen problems that might happen, especially on this mission.

Just as the Turian sat down on his bed, ready to get some shut eye, the door suddenly opened to admit a very welcome face.

"Ventra."

"Leena."

The Quarian Helldiver sat down next to the Turian she'd slowly grown to love over almost 13 years now.

"Still a bit on edge?" she asked.

"You could say that." Ventra sighed.

"We've been through things like this many times and we've always come through. I see no reason why that should change now. Shepard will get us through this, I know he will." Said Leena, putting her hand on top of Ventra's reassuringly.

"You know... it's been a while now since we started this relationship and I've never seen your face. I often do wonder what you really look like." Ventra suggested.

"Are you asking me to take my helmet off?" Leena asked teasingly. "Because if you are, I'd be happy to take off a bit more just for tonight."

"Didn't think you'd be the sort to act sexy." Ventra smiled.

"Let's just say that a very handsome Turian came along one day and slowly brought the best of my back out onto the surface." Said Leena.

"Won't you get sick from this though? I don't want to risk your health." Said Ventra, his tone now changing to concern.

"I've taken every precaution and minimized the risks. Antibiotics, herbal supplements, you name it. I may still get sick, but being with you tonight definitely won't kill me." Said Leena reassuringly.

"This is beginning to sound like a scene out of that Fleet and Flotilla movie." Said Ventra as he reached up to take off Leena's mask.

"Don't give me ideas, Prarken." Leena chuckled.

The Quarian deactivated the seals on her helmet and allowed Ventra to gently detach her visor. The visor hissed as it detached and for the very first time in her life, Leena felt cool air on her face.

Ventra was lost for words when he finally saw the face of the Quarian he'd grown to love.

"Spirits... you're beautiful."

Leena then pulled Ventra in close and kissed him, for the very first time in her life.

“I’ve waited so long to do that.” She sighed when they finally stopped for air.

The Quarian then pushed Ventra down onto the bed and begun the process of taking off everything else.

“This will totally be worth it.”

Alaara was bored. She was sat in her quarters, alone. Silence didn’t really suit her. She always preferred to be busy, or even better sex with her wife.

The Asari then suddenly heard the door opened, and the person she’d just been thinking about stood in the door way. She seemed to have her shirt unbuttoned slightly to expose her cleavage. That alone was enough to start getting Alaara aroused.

“Permission to come in, Captain?” he saluted jokingly.

“Thought I told you that you don’t need to call me that in private.” Alaara grinned.

“Old habits die hard.” Sandra smiled.

The human sat down on the sofa next to her wife and kissed her on the cheek.

“So... seeing as this is going to be a special night, why don’t I let you pick something for us to do for change?” Alaara smiled.

“Sure. I brought a movie.” Sandra suggested as she held up the cover of a somewhat familiar movie.

“Vaenia? Again? Ah, why not? It always is my favourite.” Said Alaara.

The two sat in silence for a long while as they watched the movie. Sandra soon seemed to notice that her bond mate didn’t look as happy as normal.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Just a bit nervous is all. We’ve been through tons of suicide mission before, but this... this is nothing we were ever trained for.” Alaara sighed.

“Shepard won’t let us down. He wasn’t our successful leader for 10 years just to fail now. Besides, you also led us for two years. This squad couldn’t ask for a better second in command.” Said Sandra as she put her hand on Alaara’s lap.

“Thanks, darling. I can’t tell you how much it means to hear you say that.” Alaara smiled.

“Is that why you’ve suddenly been acting more mature than usual these days? Because you’ve been unsure of what everyone else thinks of you as second in command?” Sandra asked, almost in surprise.

“In some ways, yes. Also, the realities of command change you in some way. Let’s just say that being the leader of Alpha for a time opened my eyes a bit. Helped me see things how Shepard sees them.”

Alaara admitted.

“You never let us down, Alaara, and as long as I’m fighting by your side, you never will.” Said Sandra.

At that moment, the movie started playing it’s well known love scene.

“This is my favourite part of the movie.” Alaara smiled as watched the two Asari actors start to undress and have sex. “I used to masturbate to this sex scene a lot.”

“Don’t let me stop you now. In fact... I’d love to join in.” said Sandra seductively as her hand sneaked around Alaara’s waist.

“Goddess, how I love you Sandra.” Alaara sighed, arousingly.

“I love you too, Alaara.” Said Sandra.

“Call me your dirty little Asari again, like you used to. It’s been a while.” Alaara almost begged.

“Make me.” Sandra smiled naughtily.

Sandra’s hands sneaked around her wife and firmly grasped her behind, electing a squeak of pleasure from the sexy Asari.

“Aaaah! Oh, you are gonna get a major spanking for that!” said Alaara challengingly as she started work on tearing Sandra’s top off.

“Bring it on, my dirty little Asari.”

“That’s more like it.”

Tali was typing away at the holographic projections of the engine. It felt very lonely without Gabby and Ken with her. She’d really grown to like those two, especially after she and Austin had played a game of poker with them (which Austin had rather cleverly beaten Ken at by telling him to “be gentle on the rookie” Austin of course was far from a rookie when it came to things like Skyllian Five Poker)

Tali was interrupted from her engine work when she suddenly noticed a Turian figure standing behind her.

“Hey, Tali.” Said Garrus.

“Hello, Garrus. What are you doing down here?” Tali asked in surprise. She hadn’t expected the Turian to be here, but she was happy to see him.

“I... uh, how do I say this?” said Garrus, somewhat nervously.

“Is something wrong?” Tali asked.

“Well, I just thought you might be a bit lonely down here.” Garrus explained. “Look... we both served on the original Normandy and you’ve been a good friend. I have faith that Shepard will get us through this, but there’s still every chance we might not be coming back from this. These could be our last moments.”

“What are you asking exactly?” said Tali.

“I just thought we could spend these last moments together. You know, just as friends? Certainly better than spending the hours

alone, wouldn't you say?" Garrus suggested.

"I... Thank you, Garrus. That's very thoughtful of you. You're right. It certainly is better than spending the hours alone. And you are a very good friend." Tali smiled under her helmet. "I'd love to spend my last moments with my best friend."

Garrus had his own quarters on the Normandy which had a nice little view out into space. The two sat down on the sofa and Garrus poured out some dextro DNA wine for the both of them.

"You know, this actually reminds of the times on the Citadel three years ago. You ever miss those talk we had on the elevators?" Garrus asked.

"No." Tali simply replied.

"Come on. Remember how we'd all ask you about life on the Flotilla? It was an opportunity to share." Said Garrus.

"I'm not talking about this, Garrus."

"Tell me again about your immune system."

"I have a shotgun..." said the Quarian, warningly.

"Okay. I'll drop it." Said Garrus quickly.

After a few minutes, Tali leant back on the sofa and relaxed a bit.

"Thanks, Garrus. This was a good idea. Of all the people I could spend my last moments with, I'm glad it's you." She said.

"Me too, Tali. Me too." Garrus smiled.

After saying his daily prayer before bed, (customary due to him being Christian) Griffin had one last thing he wished to do before getting some much needed rest for the coming battle, and that was contacting the woman he'd really grown to love, Ashley Williams.

He walked up to his holo communicator and turned it on.

"Connect me through to Ashley Madeline Williams of the Alliance." He said.

There was a brief pause as the connection was established. A holographic projection of Ashley than appeared out of the device. She looked happy to see Griffin, but at the same time concerned. They usually chatted with each other every three days and they had only just talked yesterday.

"Griffin? Is something wrong?! We only called each other yesterday." She asked worriedly.

"The, uh... the Normandy got boarded by the Collectors while we were planet-side. They took all the crew except Joker. We're going to get them back." Griffin explained.

"Oh. I see. So you and Shepard are really gonna do it? You're going through the Omega 4 Relay?" Ashley asked.

"Yeah. I thought I'd call one last time. I'm sure the Lord will

grant us victory, but still..." said Griffin.

"Yeah, I know. In a way, I feel the same." Said Ashley. "Be safe out there, Griff. Come back alive, and... bring my friend back with you."

"You have my word, Ash." Griffin smiled.

Just as he went to end the call though, Ashley stopped him.

"Wait! Before I go, I just wanna say... I love you."

Griffin was deeply touched by this. He'd hoped to hear those words for a while now. He slowly reached out and touched the hologram, his fingers going right through it.

"I wish you were really here so I could touch you one last time." He said. "And I love you too."

Liara yearned for her bond mate's touch as they hurriedly removed their clothes. Liara couldn't help but feel as though she was about to be completed as she became one with Austin once again. Something about their constant bonding had made her body so receptive to his touch.

The Asari's eyes once again went black as they initiated their Union. Liara suddenly felt as if she'd found where she belonged, as if she'd finally reunited with a part of herself. Despite the fact that she knew that they'd still meld often in the future, she still didn't want the Union to end.

Austin lowered Liara gently onto his shaft to fully complete their love. Aside from the extra pleasure it now brought them both, it also made them feel so fulfilled, and complete.

Both their minds and nervous systems recognized each other. When they really felt in the mood, their bodies anticipated and properly prepared for it at almost any time.

The muscles in Liara's Azure had become used to the length and girth of Shepard's shaft, and having slowly adjusted themselves accordingly. Not only was Austin's length now able to slide in without any resistance, no matter how tight she was or even if she wasn't wet enough, but it was now a "perfect fit".

They weren't hard or rough this time at all. Tonight it was just slow, gentle and tender. They were going to savour every second of this night. It was almost like they were reliving the night before Ilos when they had first truly committed to each other and become full bond mates.

With each gentle push Austin made into Liara, she moaned in gentle pleasure. For some reason it actually felt better this way than when they were usually more wild with one another. The feelings of pleasure seemed to last a lot longer as well as Austin was slowly push in, hold for a moment, and then gently withdraw only to thrust back in again.

They refused to separate for air as they kissed, both enjoying the taste of one another as they ran their hands over each other's skin. In all their lives, they'd never felt truly at peace. This was pure heaven for the both of them.

As their minds entangled with one another and they truly became one, Liara began to feel something new. Something about this particular Union seemed almost... different.

The level of depths they were going to was so much more than before, as though they were each sifting through each other right down the very core.

"By the Goddess. How are we doing this?" she thought in her head, forgetting that Austin could hear her speak in her head while they were joined.

"I don't know, but I'm loving it. You always make it so easy for me to escape reality. I can't tell how tempting it is to just remain like this forever and leave everything else behind." He said.

"If our meld is becoming his strong though, she should be careful. Sometimes people can become pregnant by accident when their bond becomes this intimate." Liara thought, gently moaning out loud as Austin continued thrusting gently into her, her Azure was wetter and wetter with each thrust. She feared she might end up with release too quickly from the amount of pleasure she and her bond mate were feeling.

"It'll be fine, love. I think we've earned the right to enjoy each other fully, and not just in a physical way." Said Austin as one of his hands caressed Liara's breasts eliciting a small sigh of pleasure from the Asari.

Austin couldn't deny that even after this many times of melding with her, it did still feel a little weird to actually speak to Liara without using his mouth. Even in this day and age, he always doubted whether telepathy was a reality.

"You say the sweetest things, my love." Liara thought as she slid her tongue into their kiss. Austin was happy to oblige.

They did nothing but slowly make love and kiss passionately as the minutes ticked by. For now, Liara was on top, but that all changed Austin flipped them over so he now had his future wife underneath him.

He focused some of his attention on her breasts as she touched his face passionately from the pleasure he was giving her. As Austin continued to gently thrust into Liara, her hands moved downwards and touched his muscular chest.

The Helldiver lowered himself down and once again kissed Liara, savouring the feel of her lips on his. Liara once again touched his face affectionately, feeling his clean shave jawline and brown hair. Even today, after the hundreds of times that she'd woken up to the

sight of his face, she still could not get over how incredibly handsome he was. Despite the number of scars he had, this failed to diminish him at all, in fact it only added to how dashing he was. Any other women would faint at the sight of him. She'd been an exception.

Austin's mouth trailed slightly lower and he started slowly planting kisses first on her cheek, then down her neck until he reached her left breast. Liara couldn't help but moan in pleasure. She was impressed that she'd managed not to orgasm from that alone. She truly did love it when her bond mate was tender with her like that.

After several long hours of tender kissing and romance, they could both feel they were nearing their release.

"We're both close, my love." Liara moaned in her mind.

The thought that they'd be spending their lives together, made Liara experience something. There was something about tonight's orgasms that made them so much more. Not only were they stronger and more intense, but something about them suddenly seemed so much more fulfilling, so happy. After her very last orgasm for the night, the sheer pleasure, bliss and ecstasy in her orgasmic afterglow while she was still clinging to her future husband, made her emotions so high that she didn't notice that her biotics were slowly lifting them into the air. Austin soon noticed this.

"Err... Liara? Is this meant to be happening?" he asked telepathically.

Liara opened her eyes and noticed what was happening. Quickly realizing that she was doing it, she gently put them back down again on the bed.

"How many hours do we have left?" she asked, trying to forget what she'd accidentally done.

Austin looked at the clock. They'd been making love for about 2 hours now and had three left. They should use those hours wisely and rest.

"We've got three left till we arrive. I'd recommend we sleep. I'm more than happy to continue making love to you in our minds of course." He said.

Liara smiled and simply rested on her bond mate's chest, her breasts pressing against him.

"I love, you Austin." She sighed as she drifted off.

"I love you too, Liara."

Sarah simply stared out of the window in her quarters. She almost felt a tiny bit lonely. She'd seen her brother with a ring in his pocket recently and seeing as how she'd spotted Liara heading up to his quarters just a few minutes ago, she had a feeling she knew what was going on.

Eventually deciding to get some sleep, she shrugged off her red

dressing gown, and now in nothing but her red underwear, gently got into bed.

Sarah slowly drifted off wondering about if she'd be alone for the rest of her life. Her brother had found someone, why hadn't she? She was strong, intelligent, attractive... why couldn't she find anyone?!

A smooth hand touched her back, gently, soothingly. She could feel a presence behind her, but dared not move. Gentle arms encircled her, slowly lifting her body off the floor and into their soothing embrace. The stranger held her, stroking her back tenderly. She tried to look up, to see the face of her enigmatic caretaker, but it was already slipping away. The scene dissolved, leaving Sarah alone once again.

Sarah awoke with the warmth of the entity's embrace still lingering on her skin. She couldn't remember the dream, but the dried tear stains down her cheeks indicated it had somehow affected her. She also saw that she seemed to have awoken bolt upright and with her hand reaching for her nether regions. It was a shame she couldn't remember what she'd been dreaming about.

Flexing her muscles to alleviate the stiffness, she rose to her feet and, remembering the events of yesterday, glanced at her omni-tool's clock display. To her shock, she had slept for nearly 5 hours. They'd be approaching the Relay very soon.

Despite not remembering her dream, she did feel somewhat more happier. Almost as though she'd been at peace for a while.

Regardless, she now felt prepared for what was to come. She would stand at her brother's (and hopefully her new sister in law's) side as well, as they took on the Collectors. Not only had those creatures taken the crew, but they had robbed her of Austin two years ago.

It was time for some payback!

Both Austin and Liara gently woke from their sleep. They were approaching the Relay soon. Everyone would be getting ready by now.

"We're there already?" Liara yawned.

"Afraid so, love." Said Austin as he gave Liara a good morning kiss.

"You feeling okay?" Liara asked.

"I've been through these sort of situations before. Having you by my side also helps. I wouldn't be the same if I didn't have you along for this." Austin smiled.

"I'm glad I became a Helldiver." Said Liara.

"As am I."

Austin gently got up from the bed and started putting his suit mesh on. As he did, their Union bond finally ended. It almost brought

tears to Liara's eyes, like a part of herself had been severed from her forever. The fact that her future husband was standing in front of her though prevented her from becoming depressed or anything like that. Not to mention that they could still feel each other in their minds.

"Better suit up. They'll be waiting for us." said Austin as he threw Liara's mesh to her.

"To tell you the truth, I actually want to just get this done so then we can sot our wedding out." Said Liara.

"I'm glad I decided to ask now rather than later." Said Austin.

Once the two had finally zipped up their mesh outfits, the familiar arms came out of the floor and started assembling their armours, piece by piece.

Within just a few seconds, they were both suited up and ready for the battle ahead.

Before they put their helmets on, they took one last moment to be in each other's arms.

"Whatever happen out there, you mean everything to me, Liara. You always will." Said Austin.

"Austin... I am yours." Said Liara.

The two kissed one final time before the helmets assembled.

"Now... let's give the Collectors hell!"

POETRY

If you like the poetry here, you can find more like it at my storefront:
<http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/fanaticalpublishing>

ALONE

Zorveska
of <http://www.zorveska.deviantart.com>

Glinting Knife, sharp and deadly
Beating Heart, small and fragile
Past flows into future
The only noise your heavy breathing
In

Out

In

Out

Repetitive
Like life
A mockery of all you live for
Unfulfilled
You need more
A parasite
Meaning escapes your fumbling grasp
Hold on
You want to let go
Hold on.
Time is running out.

Why?

Hold on

No.

You need a reason?

Life is pure

Life is a lie

No truth

I give up.

Hold on

You can't make me

It isn't your decision

I'll walk this path alone.

BEND MY KNEE

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

Living out savage days
We find our path and discuss our ways
People leave and pass me by
And always I think of one.

Blessed with beauty
Such as I had not
You interest me beyond comprehension
Staining the scent of my skin.

I bend my knee to just one
Pledged myself In days I can't remember
For her grace I am anything
Thoughts of her...I feel like nothing.

SWEET POISON

xShenlong
of <http://www.xshenlong.deviantart.com>

You're everything I'm not
You are the brilliant light to my dullness
Today, once again, I fake a smile
A sheepish laugh, a vague excuse
It doesn't even surprise me anymore, that no one notices. No.. Does anyone even care?

Fool! The answer is obvious
Poison spills from honeyed lips
Poison that is fatal to me alone, and pleasing to all else
It wounds, it burns
I writhe and crawl
But it hounds me. It seeps in. It ruins me.

Acquiescing, they say. I will never argue with you. Never.
Nice? Nay;
Maybe it's because inwardly, I know
That victory will never be mine
Failure stares me in the eyes, like a rising spectrum
And it swallows me whole

Yet.. Yet I think I love you
And my mind omits the lonesome memories
My arms envelope you of their own accord
And I'm comforted by the warmth

Until the sweet poison again spills
You slip away from my grasp
And I am left in the cold
A bitter winter that burns with frost

Still, I go back
Like an addict to your spikes
And I'm infected by the darkness
Self-made, perhaps, but I'm poisoned nonetheless
The contrast is astounding
Yet still..

Today, again, sweet poison spills

And I drown and suffocate
Until one day.. Everything ceases to exist
And these infernal beings called emotion
These feelings would become nothing

When will that day come..?

DRIP

TheMeTheyDontSee
of <http://www.TheMeTheyDontSee.deviantart.com>

Drip, drip, drip.
Rain pours on me,
Over my face.
Wash away my tears.
Wash away my sadness.
Wash away my emotions.
Wash away me.
I am the rain.
Crack!
Thunder booms.
Everything's clear,
In that moment.
I am reborn.

Serve The Strings

By E.V. Davis
of <http://www.EV507.deviantart.com>

Let tie the strings of fate
The invisible threads of the dancing marionette
Control you, own you, and
Dance, dance on, tunelessly little puppet
Dance until the strings fall slack and you fall shattering, collapsing into
the nothingness of which you came.
And remember you are replaceable, predictable
And are no longer the object of my desires.

I will let you go now
Falling into darkness.
I have many more copied of you in which to play with,
And you are all the same.

So tell me, Little puppet
Why should I care if one of you is to go?
You are all the same, little puppet.
Why is that so?

It is because you were made so...

So dance and laugh and move with my strings.
Do as I tell you
And I will not cast you out into that pitch-black darkness
and you will be the same as my other dollies
Be as I say
And you will live a life of luxury.
Be who I want
And you will live forever.
But if you go against me
You will die
Alone and hated by everyone....