

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!

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

I've got a website, where you can download old issues:
<http://fanaticalpublishing.weebly.com/wr-archive.html>

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!

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ORIGINAL LITERATURE

Your original literature is published here for free, but if you want to help keep it free, check out some other things I publish, like

WHAT WAS I FIGHTING FOR?

LGROSARIO

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

"The world around me flew backwards, as everything around me began to slow down. I could only stare as I saw the world ahead of me. Here I was falling to my death from the top of schools tower, laying on floating glass. The last images I saw was the girl of my dreams in the arms of another. I was in a state of confusion as I saw my true role in this. I wasn't meant to be the hero. I wasn't meant to be the villain. I was meant to be your puppet, attached with black strings of blood. You made me have hope again, just to take it away. You have no heart, no soul. So now I must ask myself. What was I fighting for? Were you really worth it? I did what I can for you, when you asked for help. I was there for you, when you were alone or scared. But you were never there for me. You've hurt me more times than I can count. I've betrayed friends, those you've claimed are the ones who hurt you. But it seems they were the victims. You just won't stop with your constant lying, and constant betrayal. You have ruined my life, and yet I still feel sorry. Not for me, but for you. So as I fall to my death I smile. There will be no happiness for you in the end, only sorrow and misery. At least I can die no longer filling sorry. In these final moments I close my eyes and smile, "Good bye you ungrateful Bitch." An inch from the ground I fell my body afloat, as I am lifted into the skies by a bright light. Above the earth in the clouds I float with wings, as a angel stands by my side and holds my hand. "It's okay now. I won't hurt you." I smile at her words as the clouds closed.

THE OTHER SIDE

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

Welcome to the story, the story of a world you most likely had no idea existed. A story you most likely you will never finish, because it never ends. Within the text are the characters you will never fully come to know or understand. However, you are more than welcome to see and learn as much as possible. Open your eyes, your ears, and your mind to this world that does not truly exist outside of a delusional mind.

"We live on an island, that is lost in an endless sea. There is a sister island, but it has long been pulled under the waters of infinite abyss'. This island is maybe 8 or 9 miles long, and 5 or 6 wide. It has hills along the edges, and two enormous mountains that separate the top quarter of land from the rest of the island. Approach the island from the top, and you will see that the separated land is desert, vast and empty save the right side that is full of sandstone pillars. Climb between the mountains through their forests, and on the other side you come into a vast plain. Far off to your left stands a forgotten city by the sea, hidden partially by the hills and the base of the smaller mountain. Off to your right the forests crawl off the larger mountainside, and cover the hills down the side of the island. Within those trees stand forgotten homes, scattered through the forest collecting dust and rotting on with time. In this vast plain you see only one building, and upon approach you find no doors or windows built into the waving metal of the plane hanger. Going past it down the island, you reach a lone oak tree at the end of the plains, atop of a cliff side where the island drops 500 or so feet. Off to your left, buried in the hills stands a mansion. It is the only place that would seem habitable. Off to your right sitting in the edge of the plain by the cliff and nestled at the base of the forest covered hills is a large tent, home to mysterious women. Look out over the cliff, and you'll find an enormous lake that nearly separates the bottom of the island. The bottom which, is claimed by the forests and the few houses within taken by time."

"How is your story coming M'lady?" At the door of the bedroom stood a woman in black robes, her eyes covered by white bandages. On her back were two large, black feathered wings that were bound together by leather straps. Her long black hair fell around her face, her hands

clasped in front of her. At the desk sat a woman with equally long white hair, crisp snow white eyes, and donned in flowing white dresses with lace. She looked over to her second self, putting her pen down.

"Raven. It is coming along." She stood up, lifting her dresses some before clasping her hands and walking towards a stair case. Raven followed, the pair coming to the second story. Walking down a hall they came to two large glass doors. Raven opened them, the duo walking out onto a large balcony in the center on the face of the mansion.

"Ms. Nanami, how is our progress coming along?" Raven asked, Nanami placing her hands on the rails and gazing out to the plains. "Well, four is all we have right now. The endless darkness our existence was built upon is a foe worthy of fighting. There are still many in this place who have yet to convert to the light." Nanami rubbed the railing some, still gazing out to the island as she mentally thumbed through the list of names.

"This world was indeed born as a painting to cover the black canvas. Originally intended only as an illusion, you alone have succeeded in making it a real place. The light above is not yet brighter than the darkness below us though. Therefore, those on the ground are still too low to convert. Are we to raise them up?"

Nanami tapped her finger some, white eyes piercing the landscape to try and find some shimmer of hope.

"We can only hope that there is someone worth saving, otherwise the war between light and dark is likely to be lost. There are so many against us, I fear four is not enough to fight them all."

Raven smiled slightly as the doors opened again. Two young teenagers stepped onto the balcony. One was a young girl, long black hair and dressed in matching robes to Raven. The boy wore his white hair messy and his white button down not tucked in, no shoes and tight white jeans. Nanami turned, smiling brightly.

"Ah, Nostalgia, please." She motioned towards Raven. The boy turned to her, Raven turning and his hands quickly undoing the straps on her wings.

"Nani, go find The Fallen One, tell him he is ordered an audience with me here." The girl nodded, leaving the balcony with Nostalgia in

tow. Raven cocked her head a little to her right.

"Madame Nanami?" She asked, obviously worried. Nanami smiled, clasping her hands.

"Raven please, I have the two of them here, and even without them he is no match against me. Go recruit and return with at least 3. You know the rules." Raven nodded, Nanami entering the mansion again and closing the doors. Ravens large wings stretched out to their full span, the blind priestess taking to the skies. Raven flew out towards the city, taking it slow and scanning the lands for any non-threatening life. The sun was setting and the island seemed void of life. There were many on the island still alive, but those who weren't hiding out were looking for a fight. The darkness they fought was a cruel and empty trap for those who had lost their way. She dipped to the left, landing on a rooftop in the city. It stood tall and alone by the smaller empty buildings around it. Scanning the area she found nothing. Turning to the access door Raven pulled her wings in, going inside. It was an apartment building, one of the tallest ones in the city and one of the few safe places to hide. It was a more obvious hiding place, but that made it somewhere for the stronger fighters against the darkness to live. She carefully walked down the halls, scanning the apartments for anyone. Finally she picked up a reading, stopping and facing the door.

It was eerily silent. She cocked her head to the side slightly, suddenly kicking the door down. Walking in she listened carefully. A low, hushed yet deep growl could be heard from the living room in front of her. She walked forward, a large wolf watching her from the shadows. Red eyes followed her every muscle movement as he stood frozen. He growled again, Raven stopping. Her head snapped to face him, the wolf leaping. She threw a punch, slamming him against the wall, a second wolf suddenly pouncing her from behind.

Nanami made her way down the hall past Ravens room, Nani and Nostalgias, then down the stairs, and out of her own bedroom. She entered a hallway that went right down the middle of the house and emptied into a large room in the back. Going to it she followed the carpet down, and took her place on a large white marble throne. It wasn't overly decadent, just a simple marble, squared chair with a white pillow to cushion. Nostalgia slowly peeked over the back of it just before she sat down, Nanami smirking. He quickly ducked back down when she sat, crawling up the wall and onto the ceiling above

her. Nanami looked up, tilting her head and shaking in disbelief at him. He was a curious boy, never playful save when alone with her. The front door opened and Nanami looked forward, Nostalgia standing on the ceiling and crossing his arms, his shaggy white hair falling away from his face for once. Nani walked in, going up the step and standing beside Nanami. Following her was an unassuming man. He had black shaggy straight hair, dark green eyes and was dressed in a black hoodie and jeans. He was actively nibbling his lip ring, stopping before Nanami and waiting.

"Tobias. Pleasure to see you again." She spoke with no smile, her fingers touching in front of her.

"Oh I'm sure. What do you want with me now?" He asked. They had no relationship other than business, which with each other they didn't prefer. Nanami stood, clasping her hands together.

"Tobi, I would like to request information from you. It seems my allies are having a hard time finding someone who does not wish to...eat, them." She walked over to the wall, picking up a large leather book and opening it up. Tobi rolled his eyes, nibbling his lip ring more.

"Nanami, I believe your issue is that you know who is out there, but are not willing to make the effort it will take to convert them." Nanami walked towards him, flipping through the pages.

"I know you have a problem with harboring a dark-filled heart within, so I wasn't expecting much help from you.." She murmured. "Ah, Richard Quinn Renduo. The infamous Red Dragon, and older twin to my strongest Ally." She handed Tobi the book, the man looking at the page. There was Rics live feed, his shoulder length crimson hair, icy blue eyes closed. Like Nostalgia it appeared he was currently upside down, most likely sleeping. Tobi looked up at her.

"How do you expect to win him over? Brute strength? You don't have that. And any sweet words he would only hear as a lie." Tobi said as he handed the book back. Nanami took it back, handing it to Nani.

"Then I guess I'll have to use my pretty smile."

~

The wolf slammed into the wall from Ravens blow, yelping before shifting shapes. Raven reached behind her, grabbing the wolf on her back by its scruff and throwing it on top of the first wolf.

"OW!" The man exclaimed as the second wolf was thrown atop him. She shifted as well, the man shoving her off. He was thin but muscular, scruffy red hair and blood red eyes. His partner in crime was his older twin, short cut pink hair and matching crimson eyes that glared at Raven as she rubbed her head.

"AH it's just you! What do you want?" He asked as he stood up, brushing himself off. Raven crossed her arms.

"I've orders to bring you two back with me to Nanami, and you'll go without a fuss." She replied calmly. The pair scoffed simultaneously.

"Oh yeah, lemme just convert no problem." The girl said, waving her hands sarcastically. Raven raised a brow, cocking her head a little. "Look don't bother, we were never anything, so why would she even want us? I don't recall us ever even having partners." She continued as she plopped onto the couch, Ravens face following her voice.

"Well if I recall you both had assignments and failed. By making the mistake you made you chose your own faith and that put you here." The girl immediately jumped back up and was in Ravens face in the blink of an eye.

"My children were NOT mistakes!!" She screamed. Her brother grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back and into his arms before looking up at Raven.

"Look, I don't know how we're supposed to do any good when we were born from the darkness itself and wielded it's power." Raven dropped her arms, moving towards the door.

"Creft and Vicor are inbreds, and unless they are strong enough to join as a pair, they must remain on this side. Being their parents, you were strong enough to leave the darkness when they were born. It is up to you where the four of you end up. But if you don't come now, you will be left behind. Rules say they cannot follow you as family, but they are of this world and no other, so if they choose they may follow as a pair. Make up your mind." With that she disappeared into the hall. The twins looked at each other.

"What shall we do..?" She asked, afraid. He looked out of the window, hugging her tighter.

"Let's go find our boys.."

Raven spread her wings and took to the skies again, already picking up a reading off in the mountain.

"Well...that could be one of two people..." She murmured. There was a cave system built into the smaller mountain, and hidden within was a demon who cradled the darkness in his heart. Raven turned sharply, diving into one of the entrances and following the tunnel down to the core of the rock. She slowed, pulling her wings back and taking ground. Any quiet noise was being drowned out by the sound of wind cascading through the vast tunnel system.

"Devan?" She called. Just above her something shifted.

"Go away.." Raven leaned her head back.

"Devan come down here, I need a moment of your time." She said impatiently.

Above her, at the dead end of the tunnels hung the demon. His soft leathery wings were wrapped skin tight around him, the claws on them holding on tight to the ceiling.

"Time? There is no time. Here you delude yourself thinking time or space exist. There is nothing but the darkness, the light, and the endless battle between them when in reality they need each other for balance." His voice was gruff from misuse, and muffled from within his black wings. Raven crossed her arms once more.

"They're unbalanced, and is why we are currently waging war. Please I just-" He released the ceiling, swooping down swiftly. Raven jumped backwards away from him, her wings nearly being crushed between her and the wall as he slammed his fists on either side of her head and chipped the rock.

"YOU WANT MY TIME BUT I HAVE NONE TO GIVE. NO TIME, NO USE, NO POWER. I HAVE, NOTHING!!!!" His voice tore at the walls of the cavern like a thousand tons of steel was forced into the earth, echoing throughout the miles of rock. Other than trembling slightly Raven was frozen still before him. His voice shaking, he whispered for fear of his muscles disintegrating. "This is not some love story anymore....there is no one coming to save us from the prisons we've put ourselves in, no homes to have so we burn them

down, no children to love so we torment each other. Raven you had no lover, you had no love story, so what you fail to realize, is that asking us," He grit his teeth so intensely they made an ungodly sound. "to join you, is complete, BULLSHIT!!" He punched the wall beside her again, cracking it further while Raven turned her head away.

"So why could Ryan do it? The man that put you and me both here. Why can he do it but we can't?" Devan released his fists, leaning against the wall and gazing at her features. "Ryan lost anything that was dear to him when there was still time to have it. You and I never truly had something to lose so why is it so hard for us to join the light? You cannot say you were born in the darkness or that you truly carry it in your heart...so why put up such a fight?" She asked, still frozen and head still turned away. Devan pushed away from the wall, putting one hand on his hip and rubbing his mouth with the other as he looked at her. Raven relaxed, looking at him slowly. Devan scoffed, crossing his arms.

"I will go only if I may have a partner." Raven crossed her arms and cocked her head to the side, waiting. Devan grinned again, shaking his head.

"Well if you tell me I might be able to do something." Raven said impatiently.

"I want the person closest to my own existence."

~

Nanami sat at her desk, scribbling down more words into her story while she waited for Ravens return. Nani and Nostalgia sat at a chess board, playing as usual to pass the time. Raven entered, hands clasped before her as she walked over to the vanity table. Nanami looked up, putting her pen down and going over to the vanity as Raven picked up the comb. She sat down, Raven standing behind her and then carefully combing out her long white locks.

"So how did it go? Find anything?" Nanami asked, watching Raven in the mirror. Raven nodded.

"Yes M'Lady, and is why I've come to speak with you."

"Do tell." Nanami said as she flipped through the pages of the profile book.

"First I came upon Cindy and Caine." Nanami raised her brows, flipping to their pages. Their live feeds showed them both in wolf form, running it seemed. "As a pair they should do splendidly. Together they are stronger than Ryan. They were however created from the darkness, and used in the First War as its power." Nanami frowned a little.

"Yes but they made an amazing turn around when their twin boys joined this world..." Raven nodded.

"They did, and they still seem intent on being on the same side as Creft and Vicor.. I told them the rules prevented it from happening as a family, but that if Creft and Vicor were strong enough they could join the light as their own pair." Raven went on, setting the comb down and braiding Nanami's hair some.

"So it seems that is what they're after right now. Anyone else?" Nanami asked. Raven nodded once again.

"Devan." Nanami once more seemed surprised, flipping to his page. He was upright, awake, looking impatient though. "After negotiating our opinions, he agreed to join the light but only if he was in a pairing." Nanami sighed slightly.

"Makes sense, he would just be another number if he were by himself. Did we get in touch with Alex then?" Raven shook her head.

"Alex has not been in this world for quite some time now, like Jen and Nathan. No existence to have.." Raven answered almost sadly. Nanami's eyes flickered up to her.

"Well just who did he propose?" she asked. Raven put her hands down, face aimed to Nanami's reflection. Nanami was yet again taken aback. "You??" Raven nodded. Nanami threw her hands up. "What is this place coming to?!" She exclaimed before her hands fell to the vanity again. She looked up to Raven. "Who does he expect to recruit for me?" Raven took in a breath.

"Him and I both.. Adding a second recruiter as strong as him to your team would be a wise move. I feel we could recruit much better much faster with him." Nanami shook her head.

"I cannot have two demons recruiting for the light! That is absurd! It's already bad enough I have one doing it alone, two together would be just awful." Raven got down on her knees, Nanami turning around on

the stool. Raven placed her head on her lap.

"Both of us were born by Ryan. Alex is gone, and Ryan has already joined the light. There is no one for us left. Alone we cannot join for our weakness'. Together we would be formidable. I beg you...change me." Nanami was for the last time surprised. She took Ravens face into her hands, lifting it up.

"A demon turned angel?" Raven nodded weakly.

"I can handle the change, it's not like the first war.." Nanami lay her head back down, sighing before smiling softly.

"I suppose you'll make a better angel than a bat demon would."

~

The morning sun finally broke the horizon, light flooding the island and its inhabitants. Devan was fast asleep, wrapped up tight in his wings as he hung upside down over the balcony. His onyx eyes flickered some, hands coming up to rub his face as he yawned. Parting his wings a little, the sunlight blinded the demon and he hissed before snapping his wings back shut. Raven giggled from below him, Devan opening his wings at the top to stare down at her. Her feathery wings were white, and her robing a soft grey. Her hair was still the midnight black it was before, but she was radiant. Devan squinted his eyes at her, spreading his wings and quickly swooping up and over the roof, mumbling to himself as he looked for shadier sleeping.

Raven smiled some, spreading her own wings before taking to the skies. Just to the left of the mansion by the cliff stood the peak of another cliff, jolting into the sky for a perfect view of the entire island, save the desert. Standing atop it was Nanami. Today she was wearing tight shorts and a tank top in place of her long dresses, bare feet and her long hair tied up. She looked up as Raven came down, landing just beside her.

"Good morning Raven."

"Madame."

Nanami looked back over the island, scanning it for any signs of life.

"What are our plans for today?" Raven asked as she clasped her hands in front of her. Nanami stared at the sun before glancing off to the

forests.

"I have recruiting to do. You will go find Cindy and Caine and tell them that if they do not choose their allegiance before sun down, they will rejoin the darkness. Their boys too. I'm running out of patience."

Raven nodded, taking back to the skies in search of the wolves. Nanami watched for a moment before looking back to the forests. Out there somewhere was a man looking for a fight, and today it was with her.

~

The forest was shady and peaceful in the early morning hours, birds chirping...actually it was rather loud. The 6'7" man stood up, roaring at the edge of the clearing, flames singing the damp grass. From under his crimson bangs his icy eyes glared at the trees, everything falling silent.

"Well someone woke up on the wrong side of his....huh, can't think of anything.."

He spun around, Nanami standing before him. He grit his teeth, trying to keep his canines from growing.

"Please, I haven't slept in years..." He scoffed as he turned his back, sitting back down on his stump. Nanami looked around the clearing they were in. A large concrete slab sat in its center, blackened by ash and smoke from years ago.

"Your old home, Ric?" He stared at it, memories flooding back.

"It's over! They're gone, and there's nothing you can do about it!" Austin screamed through the rain as they stood in the yard. Tears streaming down his face Ric turned, letting out an enormous roar accompanied by a rain of fire on the large home. The wood took to it instantly, everything he had left burning to the ground. Ric fell to his knees, Austin turning away.

"It was a home...before the family left." he replied. Nanami had a hand on her hip, still looking around.

"Why'd you burn it down after all the time you spent on it?"

"Why?" Ric laughed, standing up and looking at her. "After all the time I spent on it? You think how much time you put into something

can save it?! We didn't even *mean* to fall in love, and look how little that meant. I was nothing all of a sudden!" Ric said as he slowly began to walk towards her, canines growing and red scales popping up over his body. "That BITCH, fucking took my daughter, my BABY away from me, I'm not like my younger twin, I WAS A DAMNED GOOD FATHER!!!" Horns that curled back and around to his cheeks sprouted from his skull and large wings with rips and tears tore from his back, his voice deepening to a rumbling growl. "I lost more than any of you!!!" A tail sprouted from his spine, pointed in a diamond at the end with ridges along the spine. "Even now when only I care at all for the one thing, my Lilith, worth saving, that woman is worthless!" His voice was a deep growl as he grew to tower over Nanami, who stood staring at him as if nothing was happening. "Everything that my life was, means nothing to anyone but me," His torso was stretching out, and he finally came to a full transformation. At a full 60 foot length, he reared his head back, blue eyes slit as he loomed over her. "You're all so selfish."

"Uh-huh, so why do you still give a single shit?" Nanami asked, meaning every word.

The dragon took in a breath, Nanami bolting just as he let out a burst of flames that set hundreds of square yards on fire. The queen darted through the trees, climbing atop a hill as the dragon followed closely. Facing him she put her palm up, a ball of white light slowly growing in her hand. Putting her palm to face him, the orb finished forming and shot a concentrated beam towards Ric.

~

Raven was flying back towards the mansion, four wolves running below her. Suddenly the entire island quaked, the small pack all stumbling to their faces. Raven swooped down, the four all transformed and staring at the base of the larger mountain. Its base was burned to a crisp, as well as half of the smaller hill beside it.

"You, go to the mansion!" Raven ordered before taking to the skies once again.

Raven swooped down to the base of the hill, Nanami walking towards the center of destruction.

"I'm okay." Nanami said before Raven could get her feet down. The pair then came upon Ric, his body bruised and broken. Nanami knelt down beside him, the man barely becoming conscious. She put her

hands under his head, pushing his bangs from his teary eyes.

"Your pain and bitterness has made you a wild animal Ric...like you were long before anyone had helped you. In the days of Runo and Donyaira..." she whispered, his blue eyes staring up at her. "On the other side, you are kept from this pain, but you have to choose, to be free from it Richard.."

"Lilith.." His lip was bleeding, eye bruised. Nanami shook her head.

"You are the only person in existence that has tried to continue on with a memory like that. Even the Terrible 3 don't feel this pain anymore." She smiled at the nickname, Ric actually smirking too. Nanami wiped the blood from his lip. "You were born as a part of this world, for this world. You were not made for some stupid reason. You do remember you are of the first 16 do you not?" Ric looked away before nodding.

"I know.." Nanami nodded, helping him to sit up.

"We need you on the other side Ric.." Raven said as him and Nanami stood together. Ric was staring off, nodding a little.

"I know.." He turned away, leaving them. "I, I just need time."

Nanami grabbed his wrist, the man looking at her.

"No. You've had enough time."

~

Nanami and Raven entered the house, the pair going to the bedroom. Nanami went to her bathroom, Nostalgia standing by the door. A bath was drawn and Nani stood waiting with a brush in hand. Nanami climbed into the bubbles, waving at Nani to just leave. She nodded, closing the door behind her.

"The other side...how much longer until we are all there...until this land can finally rest...how much more is it going to take..? Who else can go, and who else do I need? Augh I swear, this just might never end..."

FOREVER NEVERLAND

UntamedUnwanted
of <http://www.untamedunwanted.deviantart.com/>

Grace disliked Tinkerbell. She disliked her because she had wings and she could fly whereas Grace stayed on the ground, catching fireflies. The fireflies, in turn, made it easy because they knew she would let them go. She would stare at their radiant light in awe and try to understand how something so little could shine so very bright.

She tried to pretend the bread she had in the mornings was ice cream flavoured, and even imagined her little brother had never been taken from them but had been enthralled and forever lost in Neverland. When she tried to explain this to her mother, her mother would look away quietly, and sometimes, rise with a quiet shudder...and leave the room.

For a little girl who had the hope of the world resting quite easily on her head as a crown, she knew. She knew that one day, he would come for her and maybe, maybe they could be together again like they were in her dreams.

As she grew older, she slept on a bed of green, with a desk of wood and a massive window that made her love rooftops and the sky. She didn't want to meet Peter Pan. She wanted to *be* him, and lead a group of boys who were more lost that she could ever be. So lost that they were found.

Grace's mind was made up when she saw the missing boy posters all over milk cartons. She knew what she would be when she grew up. She would be Peter Pan.

(The irony of this never quite occurred to her until her twenty second birthday, when the boy she loved and knew to be less than perfect, became perfect by losing himself to her forever.)

MEA CULPA

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

Mea Culpa
- the fault is mine.

You're here again, my beloved. Staring down at the letters etched mechanically into white stone. Does the mere sight of my name wound you so? Were these letters what caused your face to twist into such anguish? The thought alone is a poisoned blade to my heart.

I'm sorry.

I'd go for you, I said. I told you I'd fight for you. That I'd fought to protect you. But maybe I was blinded like all the rest. Maybe... Maybe, even though you took the time and effort to caution me so, even though you risked facing wrath to warn me so... Maybe, I was blinded like all the rest.

I believed, you know? Believed in the glorified words they sprouted, believed that we were infallible. We were regaled with tales of victory and spoils, and of bringing peace while wielding the title of heroes. I believed in those words, and I believed in our cause. So I went. And I brought you with me.

We were gallant warriors, you and I. Though, we couldn't have been more different in our battles. I was an enemy of man, slaughtering those in my path and spilling fresh blood. You, on the other hand... You fought against Death itself, with loyal and dedicated fervour. I never have, and never would again, see anything as beautiful and brave, as the sight of you leaning over a makeshift bed, face scrunched with concentration, hair bundled into a messy bun, and sweat sliding down your face, while you worked desperately, and hard, to save another life.

I saw that. I saw the pain and exhaustion you felt every time another wounded man was brought in. I saw the slump in your shoulders when you thought no one was looking. And I regretted. I regretted dragging you into this with me. And I was afraid. Because the thought of so many deaths or fatalities hadn't even occurred to me. Then I realised. That for every man who had gone back a hero, thousands had died in their place.

Perhaps I was running away from reality. Perhaps I just couldn't stand

the melancholic fog that wrapped you in cold embrace. "We'll be fine," I promised, startling myself with how easily the sweet lies spilled from my lips, "We'll get through this together,"

I never went back to you again. I made my vows, and then it was time to fight, all too soon. The night before, I took the vial of face paint we had been given, and with trembling fingers, I smeared them over my chest into the vague shape of letters. Mea Culpa. The fault was mine. It was a reminder of my guilt, and a steeling of my heart. We would get through this. I had promised you that, and I had to atone. Atone for making you face the demons and ghouls of humanity firsthand. But as I went to bed, and sleep claimed me with her siren calls, I wondered if you'd ever forgive me regardless.

I know not how many days passed afterwards. Time blurred together, not stopping for a second, spilling away in a giant hourglass. I could see my life, my very self slipping away between the falling sands. Day after day, we went to battle, and I quelled the shaking of my legs, I suppressed my fear, and I fought. I fought until I could no longer recall anything else, until I didn't even know what I was fighting for, until my body and instinct went into battle like a machine, and every touch felt like a premonition of the end. Then I remembered the words I had painted over my beating heart -even if it had faded, covered by gore and grime- and my body continued to move.

In retrospect, perhaps I should have been proud, that I had survived past the first day. Perhaps I should have been glad, that I never had to go to where you were, while my comrades and fellows were carried in in droves, and less than half ever came back out. But the status quo was not to last. Nothing ever does. I knew that much, with how many compromises had been made already.

Would I live to see the end of this fighting? I didn't know. Then the answer came. It came in the form of a small black dot in the sky, that came crashing onto the Earth with heart-rending speed. It slammed into the dirt like a meteorite, and the world halted for a moment. It was almost comical, how everyone looked at it, some with eyes widening in shock and horror, and dreaded acknowledgement. Then the world was white.

Hey... Did I ever apologize? I'm sorry for coming back to the camp, beyond any hope of rescue. I had been lucky to survive. I had been further away from the weapon that ended the war. The weapon that ended so many lives. And I knew that it would end my life as well.

I couldn't feel my body. I couldn't move as I willed it. But I saw the steady stream of tears that trailed from your eyes even as you worked on a different soldier, and I felt a tingling sensation of warmth within my hand. I'm sorry for being too injured to save. I'm sorry for forcing you to choose between your feelings and duty.

I promised that we'd get through this together. That we'd both make it out together. I'm sorry it turned out to be the lie I always knew it was. You made the correct choice, my love. I was beyond hope. So please... Please stop. I never wanted to see you cry. Yet, as I raised my arm weakly, looking at the mutated stump in a sort of detached disgust, and you turned to see me, ever more of the clear liquid fell to the floor.

I didn't pass away in peace. I was thrust into Death's hold uncaringly, and its dreadful claws sank into my skin like a final sentence. I wasn't going to go to heaven. I was going to go to hell, in torment and agony, being dragged like a sack of flesh and bones every step of the way. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scream ever so loudly, or to bleed out all over the room. I didn't mean to show you this repulsive sight, nor have you feel as if the guilt would tear you to pieces.

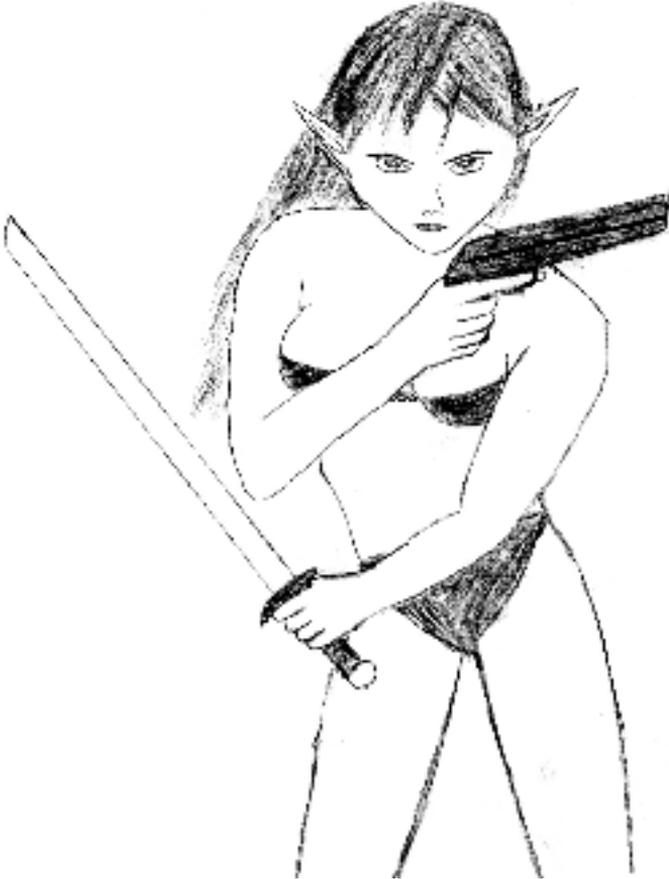
The war was over. The battles and fighting were over. I remember being unable to let go, as I clung on to you ever so desperately. I know you couldn't see me. I was, after all, but one of the many restless spirits wandering about aimlessly. But I stayed with you nonetheless.

I'm so, so sorry. It wasn't my intention to make you have to go through the rows of names and nondescript stones. It wasn't my intention, for you to have to spend days just to find my grave, among the hundreds of thousands of others. I'm sorry you had to feel obliged to visit my grave. I'm sorry for leaving yet another scar on your soul, like the many others which wound you. I broke my promise. I'm sorry.

Mea culpa. The fault is mine. As I see you kneel before the stone, and the tell-tale liquid welling up in stormy eyes again, my still heart thumps weakly in protest. After all, the blame rested solely on me. So please... Forgive yourself. And if you could find it within your scarred heart.. Then please.. Please forgive me.

I never meant to break all my promises. I never meant to reveal my words for the sweetened lies they were. I never meant to make you cry. Yet I did. But still.. I would always watch over you.

FAN FICTION



or: Leanna's Return

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ME2 HELLDIVER SAGA CHAPTER 38: POINT OF NO RETURN

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The Arkane Council observed Austin's hologram. Even they could not deny they were somewhat anxious about the next few hours. Who knew how this mission was going to turn it. Would it be victory, or a blood bath?

"Shepard. We wish we had more information for you. We don't like you heading through that Relay blind. But we have no choice." Said Spartan.

"You need not worry, Council. I'm not going alone. I've got my old squad and some of the best working with me. If we stick together, we'll make it." Said Austin positively.

"We knew your suit brought you back for a reason. We tend not to have favouritism for certain Helldivers, but we definitely make an exception for you. We've never seen a better leader." Said Tarnack.

"The first human Helldiver to take a ship through the Omega 4 Relay and survive. Despite the danger, it's a great opportunity." Said Avaritia, another female council member.

"Don't forget why I'm going through the Relay, Councillors. This isn't a field trip. We're going to destroy the Collectors! To stop their attacks on humanity." Said Austin defensively.

"Understood. But still impressive." Said another Councillor, Necrosis.

"We just wanted you to know, we appreciate the risk you're taking. Humanity couldn't ask for a better hero." Said Tarnack.

"Be careful, Shepard. Give the Collectors hell!" said Spartan.

Ahead was the glowing red Omega 4 Mass Relay. Its red colour and warning signs alone showed the danger it had. Despite this though, Austin remained calm. Spending the night with his new future wife had really got him well focused for the fight ahead.

He was on the bridge standing next to Joker. Alaara was also stood not too far behind him.

"Approaching Omega 4 Relay. Everybody stand by." Said Joker.

"Let's make it happen." Said Austin.

The holographic display lit up as Joker activated the IFF.

"And here we...go." Said Joker.

"Reaper IFF activated. Signal acknowledged." Said EDI.

"Major. The drive core just lit up like a Christmas Tree." Said Jacob.

"Drive Core electrical charge at critical levels." EDI warned.

"Rerouting!"

The Normandy sped at full speed towards the Relay. The familiar energy sound could be heard and then the ship was once again propelled forward.

"Brace for deceleration." said EDI after just a few seconds.

As soon as they did slow down however, hundreds of pieces of wrecked ship appeared in front of them. Joker was only just able to react in time.

"Oh shit!"

The Normandy just managed to miss all the major bits of the debris without a scratch. For now, they were in the clear.

"Too close." said Joker, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Way too close." Austin agreed.

The Helldiver looked out of the window into the vastness of the galactic core. Sure enough, it was as it had been described. Black holes and exploding suns. In addition to this, there were the wreckage's of hundreds of thousands of different ships. It was in a way a bit haunting. It was like looking at a massive graveyard of ships.

"These must be all the ships that tried to make it through the Omega 4 Relay. Some look ancient." said Joker.

"I have detected an energy signature near the edge of the accretion disc." said EDI.

Through some small gaps in the debris, they could make out something. It looked different to the wreckage, complete almost.

"Has to be the Collector Base. Take us in for a closer look. Nice and easy." said Austin.

The Normandy maintained a steady speed traveling through the debris. Only a few short minutes into it however, the alarms suddenly sounded.

"Careful, Jeff. We have company." EDI warned.

Austin looked out of the window to see what looked like several small sphere drones chasing them and firing beams at them. Must be some sort of drone defence for the Collectors.

"Taking evasive maneuvers." said Joker.

The Normandy started making all sorts of sharp turns to avoid these Oculus'. Joker then swung the Normandy around and headed straight at them.

"They're just pissing me off." he said, firing the Normandy's two guns in the process and managing to take out two of them. Dell's auto turret system was also being put to good effect. "EDI, take these bastards out!"

The ship shook violently as one of the beams hit the Normandy.

There was no explosion sound though.

"As long as the new plating holds." said Alaara.

"Want another round? Come on, girl. Let's give it to 'em." said Joker.

Once again, the Normandy took evasive manoeuvres and the Oculus' chased them. It was brief before another alert sounded.

"Alert! Hull breach on engineering!" said EDI.

"It's in the cargo hold!" said Joker as a hologram of the Normandy appeared with the cargo hold flashing red.

"We'll deal with it. You keep the rest of them off our tail. Alaara, you stay here." said Austin.

"Aye, aye Major."

The Oculus hadn't wasted any time, it seemed. The cargo hold was an absolute mess. Dell's workstation was practically destroyed, as was the simulator and the Hammerhead had come loss from its clamps. The dropship still looked okay though.

Dell and Sill had taken cover behind the cargo bays control panel. Dell had a Helldiver assault rifle (which he'd learned how to use in case of an emergency, especially since he made them) and Sill also had a small pistol.

"You two alright?" Austin asked as he joined them.

The Oculus was still hovering overhead, scanning for targets.

"Yeah. But that thing is making a mess of everything." Dell complained.

Dash hopped over the edge and took cover behind a nearby crate. The Oculus seemed to notice him and fired a beam in his direction. It missed, but it still took a lot of Dell's equipment which elected an angry shout from the Arkane Quartermaster.

"HEY! I NEEDED THAT!"

The Oculus once again fired another beam in their direction which they were just narrowly able to avoid. Austin immediately returned fire, but his Revenant didn't seem to do any significant damage.

"We're gonna need a bigger gun." said Sill.

The Oculus hovered around a bit before retreating back through the hole it had entered through earlier.

"We're sitting ducks out here. I have to try to lose them in the debris field." Said Joker over the comm.

The Normandy headed into the field of debris and slowed down slightly so that Joker had enough time to react. It was almost exactly the same as flying through an Asteroid field.

The chasing Oculus' didn't seem to be as fast with their reactions as Joker, and so they hit the debris. That then simply left the Normandy with the problem of getting out of the field safely.

"Our kinetic barriers are not designed to survive impact of a

degree that size, Jeff." EDI advised.

"Well, I guess it's a good thing we upgraded." Said Joker.
"Going in."

A sharp shake put everyone in the cargo hold of balance. Dell even fell right on his face.

"Hold on to something! Joker's a great pilot, but he has his crazy moments." Austin advised as he held onto a nearby railing.

"Come on. Find some room." Joker muttered as the Normandy scraped rather hard against a piece of debris

"Kinetic barriers at 40%." EDI warned.

"Reroute non critical power. This is gonna hurt."

Joker held his breath as the Normandy continued speeding at the glimpse of the clear. If they could just make it through, they'd be out of the critically dangerous part of the debris field.

One final bit and he just managed to squeeze them through with maybe another scrape.

The Normandy shook again from the scrape. Tali briefly looked up to see if the drive core was holding. Nothing happened, it was doing fine.

The Quarian couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. Her shield fortification upgrade it seemed was working well.

"Damage report..." said Joker.

"Kinetic barriers steady at 30%. No significant damage." Said EDI.

"Take the helm, EDI, and keep it slow. Let's see if we can avoid any more attention." SAID Joker, breathing a sigh of relief.

Suddenly there was a faint hissing sound from below.

"I have detected an enemy heading for the cargo hold." Said EDI. It seemed that one Oculus had managed to make it through.

"That thing again? This one's up to Shepard."

"That was a rough ride." Said Dell as he picked himself.

Right at that moment however, the Oculus reappeared through the hole again.

"TAKE COVER!" Austin yelled.

Everyone once again ducked behind something to avoid the incoming beam.

"Dell, I don't suppose you got anything we can use?!" said Liara.

"Well, one of you did bring a Collector Particle Beam back with you. That may pack enough punch." Said Dell as he tried to spot where the Collector weapon was among the mess. To his relief, it was within arm's reach and looked undamaged. Scooping the rifle up, the Arkane threw it to Austin and he caught it.

The Helldiver aimed at the Oculus and fired. Almost instantly, the beam seemed to do some extremely serious damage. First the central eye was vaporised and the beam seemed to carve straight

through the other side.

Everyone immediately made sure to duck down to avoid the blast as the Oculus overloaded and exploded. More pieces were sent flying by the blast. Although this seemed to annoy Dell even more, he was pleased at least that the Oculus had been destroyed.

"And stay broken!" he said.

"You better get back up here, Major." Austin heard Joker say through his comlink.

"We're about to clear the debris field." Said Alaara.

Austin quickly hurried back up to the bridge. The massive Collector Base could be seen through the cockpit windows.

"There it is. The Collector Base." Said Alaara.

"See if you can find a place to land without drawing attention." Said Austin.

Before Joker could do anything though, the radar beeped.

"Too late. Looks like they're sending out an old friend to greet us." Said Joker

The unmistakable shape of a Collector Ship detached from the main base and slowly turned itself until its laser was pointing in their direction. Joker immediately took evasive action, just managing to avoid the beam.

"Time to show our new teeth. Fire the main gun!" said Austin.

Garrus' new cannon upgrades flipped out of compartments on the Normandy's underside charged up and fired a bright blue beam at the Collector ship. The first shot alone damaged the hull badly and very nearly carved straight through.

"How do you like that, you sons of bitches?!" Joker cheered.

"Get in close and finish him off!" said Austin.

"Everybody hold on! Gonna be a wild ride!" said Joker.

The pilot once again dodged another beam and then swung around and went full throttle up to the Collector Ship. "Give 'em hell, girl!"

The cannons fired again and the beam cut straight through the Collector vessel in pretty much the exact same way that its beam had carved through the original Normandy two years ago.

"Some fine payback!" Austin thought.

"Look out!"

The Collector vessel exploded and the pulse disoriented the Normandy. Joker started panicking as he started to lose control of the ship.

"Mass effect field generators are offline! EDI, give me something!" he said, desperately trying to regain control.

"Generators unresponsive. All crew brace for impact." Said EDI.

The ship hit the Base's hull hard and skidded along the side

before finally stopping. The force of this caused everyone to lose their footing. After a few seconds though, they were able to get back up.

"Is everyone okay?" Austin asked.

"Think I broke a rib... or all of them." Joker groaned.

"Multiple core systems overloaded during the crash. Restoring operation will take time." Said EDI.

"And everything was going so smoothly till now." Alaara sighed.

"Don't lose heart. We'll defeat the Collectors, but I plan to live to tell about it!" said Austin confidently.

"I'm glad you're in charge. What's our next step?" Joker asked.

"Is the ship safe here? How long do we have until the Collectors find this landing zone?" Austin asked.

"I do not detect an internal security network. It is possible the Collectors did not expect anyone to reach the base." Said EDI.

"In that case, we better use that to our advantage. Joker, you and EDI get the ship back up. Alaara, tell everyone to assemble in the briefing room. It's time for us to plan our attack." Said Austin.

Everyone had assembled. Each one of them was either checking their weapons or armour. Thane and Griffin were even praying.

As Austin walked to the front of the table, he nodded to Liara. Alaara also followed behind him and stood on his other side next to Sandra.

"This isn't how we planned this mission. But this is where we're at. We can't worry about whether the Normandy can get us home. We came to stop the Collectors, and that means coming up with a plan to take out this station." He said, addressing everyone. "EDI, bring up your scans."

EDI's robotic avatar appeared first. It then activated its holographic omni tool and projected a holo image of the Collector Base.

"You should be able to overload their critical systems if you get to the main control console here." She said.

"That means going through the heart of the station. Right past this massive energy signature." Said Jacob.

"That's the central chamber. If our crew, or any of the colonists, are still alive, the Collectors are probably holding them in there." Said Austin.

"Looks like there are two main routes. Might be a good idea to split into two teams then regroup in the central chamber." Jacob recommended.

"That's no good. Both routes are blocked. See these doors? The only way in is to get someone to open them from the other side." Said Miranda, pointing to the doors in the hologram.

"A few well-placed explosives would do the job." Said Austin, looking in Griffin's direction.

"There is insufficient ordinance to cause enough damage, Shepard." Said EDI.

"She's right. Even I don't think we have enough to blow through those doors. Sorry." Said Griffin.

"Okay. Let me think a moment. This isn't a fortress, there's gotta be something." Said Austin.

There was a lengthy silence while Austin racked his brain for a new tactic and he scanned the hologram for anything to exploit. Then he spotted something.

"Wait, what about here? Maybe we can send one or two people in through this ventilation shaft?" he said, indicating the entry point on the hologram near to where the Normandy had crashed.

"That's practically a suicide mission. I volunteer." Said Jacob.

"I appreciate the thought, Jacob. But you couldn't shut down the security systems in time." Said Kasumi. "You need tech experts for this, Shep."

"It's your call, Major. Who do we send into the shaft?" Jacob asked.

Once again, Austin was silent for a while. This was an extremely careful choice he had to make now. If he picked the wrong person, it could cost them dearly, perhaps even compromise the entire mission.

He had four choices: Leena, Tali, Legion or Kasumi. Anyone of them would do, it was just a matter of deciding which one he felt was the best. He didn't want to take any chances at all, especially if his wrong choice could get them or someone else killed.

In the end, Austin narrowed his choice down to the two Quarians. Leena was much older than Tali, but she was often a better fighter whereas Tali often benefited from better Tech skills. Eventually, he got fed up with trying to choose and made a better decision.

"Tali, Leena, you're the best techs we have. I'm sending you both in." he said.

The two Quarians nodded to each other and then stood to attention. Leena even saluted.

"We won't let you down, Austin." Said Tali.

"The rest of us will break into two teams and fight down each passage. That should draw the Collectors away from what you're doing." Said Austin.

"I'll lead the second fire team. We'll meet you on the other side of the doors." Said Miranda.

"Not so fast, Cheerleader. Nobody wants to take orders from you." Said Jack disapprovingly.

"She's right. I don't want you leading the second team. Some of us still don't trust you." Alara agreed.

"This isn't a popularity contest. Lives are at stake." Said

Miranda. "Shepard, you need someone who can command loyalty through experience."

Once again, Austin was left with another choice. This time though, he didn't need to waste time debating who. Sure, he could pick Garrus, Miranda, Jacob or Alaara, but the choice was easy since he'd had to make it hundreds of times before. He'd never been wrong before, and Austin sure as hell knew that she would not let him down now.

"Alaara, you're in charge of the second team." He said.

"Yes sir!" said Alaara proudly.

"You sure about that, Shepard?" Miranda asked doubtfully.

Alaara was about to furiously object to the former Cerberus operative, but Austin spoke first.

"Whenever we've had missions where we've needed to split up, Alaara's always led the second team. Plus, she commanded Alpha Squad for two years during my absence. I assure you, if anyone's qualified for this, it's her." He said supportingly.

Alaara remained silent and simply nodded confidently in acknowledgement.

"You're... you're right actually. I withdraw my objection." Said Miranda. "Alaara's disciplined and skilled. Excellent choice."

With that all sorted, Austin turned to everyone. His old squad and this new team that he had gathered stood before him. They did well at hiding, but he could tell they were somewhat nervous.

They needed some motivation. Fortunately, he knew just what to say. During some of his sleep with Liara, he'd been heavily contemplating on some stirring motivational speeches to keep their spirits up. He was actually quite good at this sort of thing; he had Zartrack to thank for that. Just a look at the Arkane General was enough to inspire a Helldiver army.

Clearing his throat, the Major addressed his army.

"I don't know what we're going to find in there, but I won't lie to you. It's not going to be easy." He said. "The Collectors made this personal by taking our friends and our crew. Time to get them back. But if they have been harmed... oh, if they have been harmed, then there is not a place on land nor amongst the stars where they will be able to hide from us. If they have hurt our people, then we will use the Collectors to send a message to the Reapers. A message saying that we will not go quietly into the night, we will not vanish without a fight, and we shall never surrender! Time to take the fight to the Collectors in person, for we shall deal such a blow that will leave their spirits faint and crippled. We will strike the strength out of them. We will leave them broken and shattered. And when we come back from this, alive and unscathed, then they shall say that "Never have so many owed so much to so few." Today, we give the Collectors hell!"

At this, all of Alpha Squad seemed to cheer. Even some of the team joined in, especially Grunt who banged his fists together. The others simply smiled. Samara even gave an approving nod.

"Certainty of death, small chance of success... what are we waiting for?" said Kraan eagerly.

"Let's bring our people home!"

Austin, Liara, Garrus disembarked first with Tali, Leena and Alaara, along with the second fire team following close behind.

"We're inside the ventilation shaft, Shepard. It's hot in here, but it's clear as far as we can tell." Said Leena through the comlink.

"Second team, are you in position?" Austin asked.

"Affirmative, Shepard. We'll meet you on the other side of those doors." Said Alaara.

The first team made their way slowly through the base's tunnels, following the path to the door highlighted on their HUDs.

Their path was clear for a long time. Austin had thought they should have run into some Collectors by now. They entered another chamber which seemed to show the inside of the pipe. They could see Leena and Tali inside. They were moving well until they seemed to stop.

"We're stuck! Something's blocking the pipe." Leena groaned.

Some sort of gate seemed to be in their way and it was preventing them from progressing.

"Can you cut through?" Austin asked.

"That's a negative, Major. There's no control panel in here and the gate's too thick." Leena replied.

"Can you see a control panel or anything like that somewhere?" Tali asked.

"What about this?" Garrus asked.

Austin looked in the Turians direction to see him standing by what almost certainly looked like a control for something. With little choice, Austin activated it. To his relief, the gate seemed to raise itself and the vent seemed clear again.

"That got it. Moving on." said Leena.

"And not a moment too soon. We've got company!" said Austin.

Several Collector soldiers, as well as Harbinger, flew down to the ground and fired on them.

"They're not blocking the path, Shepard. We can still get through to doors if we get this right." said Garrus.

Austin looked out of cover briefly to check. Garrus was right. If they stuck in diamond formation, they'd be able to continue to the doors and continue assisting Leena and Tali if need be.

"Good idea, Garrus. Diamond formation, don't stop!" he said.

Everyone stuck close together and all moved at the same time. With more than one gun firing at the same time, it was much harder

for the Collectors to hit them. The Collectors continued to follow through the tunnels, but at least they were able to keep moving.

By the time they managed to reach the doors, more and more Collector reinforcements had joined the fray. Austin knew they couldn't take them all without the others.

He tried to get the door open, but it was still sealed tight.

"Anyone, come in." he said into his communicator.

From the other side of the doors, Alaara and the others were fighting off more Collectors while covering Tali and Leena while they sealed the door.

"Watch it! Seeker swarms!" she said.

The Asari then heard her Major's voice through her comlink.

"We're in position. We need this door open, now!" he said.

"You two, go! We'll cover you!" she said.

Both Leena and Tali hurried over to the door control panel and started hacking.

"Something's wrong. The doors stuck." Said Tali.

"Come on you bosh'tet, work!" Leena groaned.

The doors then opened. Everyone else quickly hurried in while Austin continued firing.

"Got it!"

"Here they come!" said Austin he kept firing with his Revenant. "Fall back!"

"Suppressing fire! Hold this line!" Alaara yelled as she and everyone else provided fire alongside Austin.

The next few seconds felt very long, but they held fast. Any Collector they got in their sights went down until the doors finally sealed themselves.

Everyone took a moment to catch their breath. Tali even slumped against the wall, panting and both shaking hands to congratulate each other.

"Everyone okay?" Austin finally asked.

"I think so." Said Tali.

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

"Shepard, you need to see this." Said Miranda.

They were in the central chamber. All around the room was hundreds of the pods they'd seen many times before, all connected to some large tubes.

Miranda looked at some of the nearby ones. There were people still in them.

"Looks like one of the missing colonists." She said.

The nearest pod contained a female colonist that had obviously been taken from a colony.

"There's more over here." Said Liara.

The rest of the pods all contained the crew. Jack almost instantly spotted one particular one

"Kelly!" she yelled as she hurried up to the pod containing the Yeoman.

Austin quickly scanned the pods using his suit. To his relief, they were all still alive. At that moment however, something started to appear on the colonist. She seemed to awake and started banging hard on the case trying to get out.

"My god! She's still alive." Said Austin as he tried to get the pod open.

The stuff on the colonist spread even more until it covered her completely. It was then that Austin noticed it wasn't stuff, it was flesh! She was being melted!

Austin only tried even harder but he couldn't get the pod open in time. He had to watch helplessly as the colonist was melted into grey liquid. It was horrible.

There was no way he would let that happen to the crew!

"Get them out of there! HURRY!" he yelled.

Everyone immediately ran up to a pod containing a crew member and either smashed or forced them open. Pretty soon, they had everyone out in time. Austin quickly spotted one more. Unsheathing Excalibur he jammed the blade into the pod's gap and pushed as hard as he could. The pod eventually split open and its occupant fell into his arms. It was Dr Chakwas!

"Karin! Karin, are you okay?" Austin asked desperately.

Chakwas seemed to groan slightly as Austin gently set her down on the ground. The rest of the crew seemed to be regaining consciousness as well. Kelly was even waking up in Jack's arms. Chakwas looked around a moment before she saw her old friend kneeling in front of her.

"Shepard? You... you came for us." She managed to say.

"No one gets left behind or forgotten, especially my crew." Said Austin as he gently helped the Doctor up.

Kelly also managed to do the same with a little help from Jack.

"Thank god you got here in time. A few more seconds and... I don't even wanna think about it." She said, still a bit shaken.

"If they laid a finger on you, I'll kill 'em." Said Jack as she hugged Kelly.

"Where are the other colonists?" Austin asked.

"They were... processed. Those swarms of little robots, they... melted their bodies into grey liquid and pumped it through these tubes." Said Chakwas sadly.

Everyone seemed slightly disheartened by this. Griffin even made a cross sign with his hand and muttered a small prayer.

"Why are they doing this? What do they want with our genetic

material?" Miranda asked.

"I don't know. I'm just glad you got here before it happened to us." Said Chakwas.

"So are we. But we still have a job to do." Said Alaara, smiling a bit. At least they'd managed to save the crew. It was better than nothing.

"We've done well so far. Let's hope we can finish the job." Said Liara.

Austin nodded in agreement.

"Gather round everyone. We need to plan our next move." He said.

Everyone did so and made sure they could see the spot in front of Austin.

"Sandra."

Sandra nodded and took a device from her belt. She then threw it gently onto the floor where it locked itself into place started projecting full 3D holographic projections of EDI, Joker and the Collector Base as well.

"Joker, can you get a fix on our position?" Austin asked as the holograms

"Roger that, Major. All those tubes lead into main control console right above you. The route is blocked, but there's another chamber that runs parallel of the one your in." Joker replied.

"I cannot recommend that. Thermal emission suggests the chamber is overrun with seeker swarms. Mordin's countermeasure cannot protect you against so many at once." Said EDI as the part of the Collector Base flashed red on the hologram.

"They must have a weakness of some sorts." Said Liara.

"What about biotics? Could we create a biotic field to keep them from getting near us?" Austin suggested.

"Yes. I think it may be possible. I wouldn't be able to protect everyone, but we might be able to get a small team through if they stayed close." Said Samara.

"I could do it too. In theory, any biotic could handle it." Said Miranda.

"Major, who do you want to maintain the field?" Alaara asked.

Again, Austin was spoilt for choice and he needed to be sure he picked a biotic who was strong enough to maintain the field.

Overall, he felt that the three Asari on this team would be the best choice as they were natural biotics and didn't require implants like other species did.

Liara was well developed with her biotics, despite her young age but Austin knew from her mind that she hadn't before made a field that strong before and he wasn't willing to risk it. Alaara was much older, but Liara was actually a bit more powerful than her because

Alaara was more trained in combat than her biotics.

Samara on the other hand had both advantages. She was older than both Liara and Alaara put together and she had more than enough experience due to her being a Justicar and nearly being 1000 years old. Overall, it seemed she would be the best choice.

"Samara and I will take a small team through the seeker swarms." He said. "The rest of you provide a diversion by going through the main passage. We'll open the doors from the other side and meet you there."

"Who should lead the diversion team?" Miranda asked.

Austin didn't even have to consider this time.

"Well, that's easy. Alaara, you're in charge again." He said.

"Yes sir! I'll make sure to keep them busy while you slip in the back." Said the Asari Captain.

"What about the rest of the crew, Shepard? They're in no shape to fight." Said Dash. "No offense."

"None taken." Said Kelly.

"Major, we have enough systems back online to do a pickup, but we need to land back from your position." Said Joker.

"We can't afford to go back, Shepard. Not now." Said Miranda.

"You won't make it without help. Someone will go with you." Said Austin. "Any volunteers? Just remember that if you do help the crew back, you won't be able to re-join us. If you wanna fight, stay silent."

"I will go, Shepard. Crew may need some of my medical expertise as well as Dr Chakwas." Said Mordin.

"Good idea, Mordin." Said Austin.

"Joker, need location of landing zone. Will meet you there." Said Mordin.

Before he and the rest of the crew left, Jack made sure to give a Kelly a tight hug.

"I'm coming back, Kelly." She said emotionally.

"You better. I'll be monitoring your frequency." Said Kelly.

"Thank you, for everything."

Jack finally let Kelly go and re-joined everyone else.

"Didn't know you went both ways, Jack. Not going soft on us, are you?" said Dash teasingly.

"Fuck you." Jack simply said.

"We've all got our assignments. Everyone move out!"

Austin had made sure that he took Liara with him for the long walk. Just in case there was the unlikely possibility that Samara's barrier might fail, she'd be able to at least make one that might still protect them, even if it wasn't as powerful.

In addition to this, he'd also brought Jack with him as well as Sarah. Super biotics and plenty of firepower were what they really

needed now.

Samara remained in the centre as she maintained the massive biotic dome that surrounded them all. It was quite an impressive sight. Austin also couldn't help but feel a bit safer now. It was a human trait, but he was sure the others felt the same way.

"Moving out. Try to stay close, Major." Said Samara.

Austin heard his radio briefly crackle into life but it was extremely static.

"Major, we're in positi..."

"Alaara? Come in, Alaara." Said Austin.

"Dammit! The swarms are interfering with radio contact."

Austin groaned. "You ready for this?"

"I've got your back, brother." said Sarah.

"Ready when you are, love." said Liara.

"Let's kick some Collector ass!" said Jack.

"Alright. Let's do it."

"Let's go, Major." Said Samara.

"Remember, stay in diamond formation and protect Samara."

Austin advised.

"Watch out, incoming!" Sarah yelled.

Everyone looked to see several Collectors flying down.

Harbinger was also with them.

"I can't fight back from this position. Taking cover. Let me know when you're ready to move." Said Samara.

Everyone dove for some cover just as the Collectors opened fire. Samara's barrier was only meant to keep the swarms away from them, so a fair amount of Collector fire made it through. Jack and Liara used their own biotics to go on the attack; Jack in-particular was making a wondrous mess of the Collectors, while Sarah and Austin used their assault rifles. Austin also made sure to keep Harbinger's attention on him and away from Samara. If she got hit at all, the barrier would fail and they'd all be dead.

After several long minutes of fighting, the cost was eventually clear.

"We're clear, Samara." said Austin.

"Let's go."

"Alaara, do you copy?" Austin said into his comm.

"Just getting you, Major." Alaara replied.

"Give me a sit-rep."

"We're holding out okay. These things really need to work on their tactics." Said Alaara.

"Got one!" Austin heard Dash say.

"Great kid. Don't get cocky!" said Zaeed.

The long walk continued on through the chamber. Many times they had to stop in order to clear the path for Samara, but they made

good progress.

Austin was starting to see the tubes again. They were getting close. As they continued however, the barrier started to move a bit slower. Austin's usual pace was now faster than it and he nearly stepped out of the barrier by accident.

"You alright, Samara? We're slowing a bit." He asked.

"Austin!"

Austin looked behind to see that Samara was really struggling. Having to maintain the barrier this long had weakened her and she was only just able to continue standing.

"I will hold on... as long as I can." She said weakly.

"We're almost there, Samara. Just keep going." Said Austin.

Samara continued moving as best she could. Pretty soon, the doors to the chamber were in sight.

"I can see the entrance. Need to get there soon." Said Samara.

The Justicar summoned up what strength she had left and her pace quickened into a light run. Everyone else quickly followed and sped up.

"Hold on. We're almost there." Said Austin, firing at more incoming Collectors.

"More of them are coming, Shepard! We've gotta get the fuck out of here!" said Jack as she threw a few

"Alright, let's move!" said Austin.

The team moved forward a bit more with Austin briefly pausing to fire on a Collector.

"Keep it up!" said Sarah as she also gunned down another Collector.

"Hurry, Shepard!" said Samara weakly.

Samara continued slowly moving, her determination and strong will driving her strength. But then, disaster.

Harbinger had possessed another Collector and that now meant that it could use biotics against them. Austin only noticed this too late as the possessed Collector threw a dark warp at them. Samara's barrier wasn't strong enough to block it and went straight through and hit her. Her concentration broke. The Justicar fell to her knees and the barrier failed.

"SAMARA!"

Austin hurried to the Justicar and helped her up.

The seeker swarms, now no longer held back by the barrier, regrouped into a single swarm and flew at their targets, who could only stare.

Something about this however seemed to stir something inside Liara. She almost felt lost and helpless, but at the same time this somehow gave her a new confidence that she'd never felt before. Something inside her seemed to be shouting words of encouragement

to her. She also felt odd, something about her biotics felt odd, as though... they begged to be used. As though they seemed to be begging her to throw up another barrier unlike any barrier she'd managed to conjure up before and protect her bond mate and future husband. If he died... the mere thought of it seemed to fuel her anger. Fortunately, Liara acted and turned her anger, into action and she yelled at the top of her voice.

"No. NO!"

To everyone's amazement, the young Asari threw up another biotic barrier, the most powerful one she had ever done. The seeker swarms bashed into it and flew around helplessly trying to find a way past or a way inside, but to no avail. This seemed to snap everyone back to reality, Austin in particular.

"Quickly, keep moving!" he yelled. "Inside now!"

No one else wasted time and hurried through the open doors. Liara summoned up all her strength and channelled the barrier into a massive biotic wave that swept everything in its path away.

Panting, Liara hurried through while Austin fired a few shots to cover her and the doors sealed.

"Fantastic work, Liara! I can't tell you how proud I am of you."

He said as he hugged Liara.

"That bit at the end... Goddess, I don't know how you managed it." Samara panted.

"Thank you. I've never done that before." Said Liara, also out of breath and nearly lost for words. "I fear that'll only be a one off though. I doubt I can do that again so easily."

"Regardless, you saved us, Liara." Said Sarah.

"Your powers are growing stronger, little one." Said Samara proudly.

The happy moment however was interrupted by Alaara's voice.

"Repeat! Shepard, do you copy?!"

"I read you! What's your position?" said Austin.

"We're pinned down at the door! Taking heavy fire!" Alaara replied.

"We're coming: just hold on!" said Austin as he and the others took up defensive positions while Samara activated the door controls. "Get this door open!"

The Collectors were coming thick and fast now. Alaara and the other couldn't keep this up forever or they'd be overrun.

To the Asari's relief however, the doors opened.

"Fall back! Everyone inside, now!" she yelled.

Everyone did so and they were soon all through. Griffin was the last one as he covered them with his minigun.

"Seal the door!"

Just at the very last second as the door sealed however, a stray

round from a Collector rifle made it through. It broke past Griffin's shields, managed to carve through his armour and hit him in the chest.

The demolition expert grunted as the shot hit him and he fell to the floor.

"Griffin!"

Everyone ran to the downed Helldiver. He wasn't moving.

"Oh no." said Austin.

To everyone's shock however Griffin suddenly jumped up with a shark intake of breath, causing everyone to jump back slightly in surprise.

"What just happened? Please tell me nobody kissed me." He panted.

"How did he survive that? He took it in the chest." Liara asked in surprise.

Austin fished inside the wound and pulled something out. Griffin's cross was bent and badly burned. It had stopped the round.

"Well I never." Austin chuckled.

"See? There is a God." Griffin smiled.

"Amen to that, Griff." Said Dash as he helped the demolition expert up.

"Alaara, you okay?" Austin asked as he noticed Alaara was slumped against the wall and panting heavily.

"Yeah. Just need to get my breath back." The Asari panted.

"You did well out there, Captain." Austin smiled as he patted the Asari on the shoulder.

"Thank you, sir." Alaara smiled under her helmet.

Sandra once again to the holo projector from her belt and threw it on the floor. The three projections once again appeared in front of them.

"Joker? Are at the rendezvous point?" Austin asked.

"I'm here, Major. Chakwas and the rest of the crew just showed up." Said Joker.

"Everyone's accounted for, Shepard. No casualties." Said EDI.

"Excellent. Now let's make it count. EDI, what's our next step?" Alaara asked, smiling at how well they managed to do so far.

"There should be some nearby platforms that will take you to the main control console. From there you can overload the system and destroy the base." Said EDI.

As the AI spoke, a highlighted path flashed on the map of the Collector base, indicating the path they'd have to take.

"Major? You got a problem. Hostiles massing just outside the door. Won't be long until they burst through." Joker warned.

Austin quickly got up on the platform. Everyone looked to him.

"We need time. We have to finish this before they get through." He said.

"Pick a team to go with you, and leave the others here to defend this position. We should be able to cover your back." Said Miranda.

Once again, the choice was easy. He knew exactly who he wanted to take for the final push.

"Okay. All of Alpha Squad, you're with me." He said.

All of the Helldivers acknowledged and climbed to join their leader. X-5 went to join too, but Austin stopped him.

"Not you, X-5. The others will need your firepower. Stay with them." He said.

"As you wish, Shepard." The robot nodded.

"We're ready when you are, Shepard." Said Alaara.

At that moment, Sarah suddenly jumped up as well.

"Sarah, what are you..."

"There's no way you're going into his without me. I'm not losing you again." Sarah's quickly said to her brother.

Austin didn't argue. To be honest, he'd actually hoped she'd come along for the final push as well.

"Anything to say before we do this?" Miranda asked

"You've done well, all of you. We came here to save our crew and we did it. For me, that alone is a victory. Now I say we do it again and we destroy this base. For us to do that, it's up to you to keep the Collectors from overwhelming us. I understand that some of you have a small sense of doubt, but you have something the Collectors don't have, and that's spirit. That can never be broken, it can never be defeated, and it mostly certainly cannot be killed." Said Austin motivationally. "The Collectors, the Reapers, they aren't a threat to us, they're a threat to everything, everyone. Those are the live we're fight for, that's the scale. Just remember that. We have to give everything, even if that means our lives. We will stop at nothing! We will fight for the lost! Make me proud, make yourselves proud."

"We'll do our best. Good luck, Shepard." Said Miranda.

"Whatever happens in the next few minutes, I know you'll fight and you'll win. Whatever happens... it has been my honour to lead you. Alongside Alpha Squad, I couldn't ask for a better team and I am honoured to have fought by your side. Now make yourselves heroes!"

"Well said, Major. Now let's go finish the job." Said Alaara.

The platform detached and started slowly floating away from the others.

"So this is it. The final assault." Said Ventra, making sure his bow was fully primed.

"Feels like old times, doesn't it?" said Leena.

"Yeah." Said Ventra. A thought then crossed his mind. "If this is the final assault, there's one thing I gonna make sure I do right."

To everyone's surprise, even Austin's, Ventra got down on one knee and produced a ring from a pouch in his utility belt.

"Oh my god!" Dash exclaimed.

"Leena vas Penthra, will you marry me?" Ventra asked.

"I... yes I will." Said Leena, almost lost for words.

Ventra got up and the two hugged each other.

"Fancy that. Now we've got two weddings to look forward to after this." Liara smiled.

"Two?" Sandra asked.

Liara retracted the armour around her hand and showed everyone her engagement ring. Everyone gasped and suddenly cheered with delight.

"By the Goddess!"

Sarah even hugged Liara while some of the male Helldiver thumped Shepard on the back.

"I never noticed you were wearing that. How long?" Alaara asked.

"I only proposed to her just last night." Said Austin.

"I don't believe it. Now I have a future sister in law." Sarah smiled.

"Guys, I hate to break this happy moment up, but we've got company." Said Dash.

Everyone looked in the direction he scout was pointing. Sure enough several more platforms were attaching to their massive one. From each one jumped a swarm of Collector Captains that Austin, Liara, Griffin and Tali had fought on the derelict Collector vessel not too long ago. This time though, there were many more of them to the point where Alpha Squad now found themselves facing a small army of these hybrids.

"Oh no. Not these guys again!" Austin groaned.

"This'll be a tough battle." Said Dash as he drew both his pistols.

"Come on. Overwhelming odds with little to no chance of success? How can we resist?" said Kraan.

"With me everyone?" Austin asked.

"To the end, Shepard." Said Alaara.

"Look and load people!"

Everyone went into battle stances and drew either their guns or melee weapons. It didn't matter either way since the Captains could fight them both ways.

"Crush them! In the name of Jeebus!" Dash cheered, trying to sound funny.

"It's Jesus, you idiot!" said Griffin crossly.

"That too."

"Give them hell, Alpha. Attack!"

Everyone charged and the Captains did too. Dash almost instantly did a kick on the first Captain he came into contact with.

The others quickly followed, slashing, firing, punching, pretty much any form of attack there was.

True the Captains outnumbered them, but the Helldivers had way more skill and experience than they did.

"Ventra! Two already!" Kraan cheered.

"I'm on seventeen!" said Ventra.

"WHAT?! I'll not have a Turian outscore me!" said Kraan as he went to chopping down even more Collector Captains with his two handed axe.

"Nineteen!" said Ventra as he shot two more.

Kraan and Ventra often did this as simple friendly competition. Whoever got the most kills won. In some ways it also improved their performance in combat as they became determined and more focused on killing targets.

Amongst the Captains, Harbinger had taken over one of them. The Reaper instantly threw a massive dark biotic at them. It missed, but it shook the platform up a lot and even destroyed some of the small walls that they had.

Most of the couples in Alpha appeared to be sticking together. Alaara and Sandra were certainly staying together. The Asari provided biotic attacks and barriers while Sandra fired with her assault rifle.

Austin and Liara had become separated by Harbinger's biotic blast, but that wouldn't keep them apart for long.

Ventra meanwhile was fighting fairly close to Leena, but not back to back. Because of the different weapons they used, it did make it complicated for them to fight together. Leena for example preferred the use of her tomahawk and knife while Ventra always used his bow. The couple never complained about this though. They'd even worked out a small strategy for it. Ventra was able to spot targets for Leena that might be sneaking up on her and she drew most of the attention away from him.

The Quarian jumped over one of the platforms walls and sunk her tomahawk into the head of a Captain as she landed on it. Another one came at her, but she delivered a swift kick to the face which broke its neck.

Austin meanwhile was carving down a Captain with ever swing. It had been a while since Excalibur had carved through this many enemies. Liara wasn't far off either while she put her biotics to use as well. She could see though that a lot of the Captains did seem to be concentrating on him, most likely under Harbinger's orders.

Immediately reacting, she used her biotics to propel herself into the air and jumped over a Captain that had just been firing at her. She landed and started running to help Austin. The Captain turned to shoot her, but the Asari's plasma cannon, which had been left on automatic, instantly whirled around and fired. It was because of this

that Liara hadn't worried about getting shot in the back.

Austin quickly went back to back with Liara and they now fought as one. Within seconds they started transmitting thought to each other through their telepathic link. Captain after Captain fell by their blades as they swung and parried and sliced. Both their plasma cannons were firing like mad as well. No doubt the targeting systems were having to work overtime because of so many enemies.

Garrus meanwhile was engaging with some Husks who had joined the fray. While he sniped each one from a distance however, he failed to notice that another one had snuck up behind him. It hit him hard and knocked him to the ground. Just as it prepared to deliver a fatal blow however, several pistol shots hit it until it fell over the edge.

Garrus looked to see that Dash had saved him.

"Thanks." Said the Turian as he got up.

Dash didn't say anything but simply nodded. He then twirled the pistol several times in a classic manner (like they often did in the movies) and then holstered it.

The Husks certainly added a bit more of a challenge to the fight, but it was nothing Alpha Squad couldn't handle.

Austin and Liara continued fighting back to back as more and more Collector Captains attempted to strike at them. Taking on one person with a sword was hard enough, two was nearly unbeatable. If one tried to backstab Austin, Liara would either be there to cover him or would send a mental warning to him so that he could thrust behind him.

Suddenly, a Scion charged out of nowhere and headed straight for them. The surprise of this didn't give them enough time to react and they ended up being separated. The Scion smashed Austin out of the way as it continued charging at Liara, who had no choice but to run.

Once the Asari was sure she was far enough however she turned and made a fast blind swing at the Scion's head. She failed to decapitate it, but she did cause an injury which left it temporarily blinded as her sword cut into its right eye. Unfortunately, it still managed to topple her and she lost grip on her sword.

As the Scion tried to regain its bearing's Liara quickly rolled back onto her feet and immediately looked for her sword. She spotted it lying near to where Dash was wrestling with another Husk that was trying to latch onto him.

Quickly using her biotics, she summoned her sword to her hand just as the Husk managed to topple Dash. It was at that same time that the Scion had regained its bearings and it noticed Dash on the floor who had managed to kill the Husk that had pinned him but he was still on the ground.

"Not again." He groaned.

"Stop whining you, big baby! You had to see that coming." Said Kraan as he helped Dash back up.

The Captains continued to come thick and fast. It was getting to the point where they were all driving Alpha Squad into the centre. Now the Helldivers were surrounded.

"We can't keep this up, Shepard! There's too many of them!" said Alaara.

"Everyone get down!" Griffin yelled.

No one even considered hesitating and instantly dropped to their knees. Griffin brought his large gauntlet back and then slammed it very hard into the ground.

The platform that Alpha Squad was on remained still, but the others that were attached to it were shaken greatly to the point that they ended up breaking apart and falling into the pit that the platforms hovered over. The Collector Captains were also caught in the blasts and they fell along with the wreckage. It was so unexpected for them that they didn't have enough time to use their wings to fly to safety.

All of the Helldivers took a few moments to get their breath back.

"How did you do that?" Dash asked in surprise.

"It's prototype that Dell made for me. Hadn't tested it until now." Said Griffin.

"Hmm, nice one, Griffin. You should lead with that next time." Said Austin.

"Yeah. Sorry, Boss. I can only use it once. It's kind of a one off.

"Well, at least the Captains are all dead." Said Alaara.

"Final count: 32." Said Ventra proudly as Kraan put his foot on top of a dead Collector, his axe embedded in its head.

"Hmm. Not bad, for a Turian." Said Kraan. "But I myself am sitting pretty on 33."

Ventra looked rather jealous with this. Rather surprisingly he then fired an arrow that embedded itself in the Collector Captain dangerously close to Kraan's foot.

"What the hell, Ventra?! You could've taken my foot off!" the Krogan shouted.

"33." Ventra smiled smugly.

"It was already dead, you idiot!" Kraan shouted.

"It was twitching." Said Ventra.

"It was twitching, because it's got my axe embedded in its nervous system!" said Kraan crossly. To prove his point, he moved the axe slightly. With each movement of the axe, the dead Collector Captain jarred violently.

Austin walked up to the control panel. The platform started

moving again as it made its way into the main chamber.

"This is it. All the tubes lead to this spot. EDI. What can you tell us? What are they doing?" Austin asked.

"The tubes are feeding into some kind of super-structure. It is emitting both organic and non-organic energy signatures. Given these readings, it must be massive." Said EDI. "Shepard, if my calculations are correct, the super structure... is a Reaper."

To everyone's horror, the AI was right. The super structure came into view and they saw the definite design that a Reaper had. But its shape was different, almost... human.

"Not just any Reaper..." said Austin. "A human Reaper."

"Precisely." Said EDI.

The huge reaper still only looked partially completed, but it was definitely human. It had the face, upper body and arms resembling a human. It had no legs though since its spine wasn't connected to anything.

Attached to it were several tubes injecting some sort of fluid into it.

"It appears the Collectors have processed tens of thousands of humans. Significantly more will be required to complete the Reaper." Said EDI.

"This thing is an inbred abomination! EDI, how do we destroy it?" said Austin.

"The large tubes injecting the fluid are a weak structural link. Destroying them should cause the supports to collapse, and the Reaper to fall." Said EDI.

"Right then. Alpha, split into two teams. Take two tubes each." Said Austin.

Alpha Squad split into two and took either side of the human Reaper.

"Ready... FIRE!"

Both squads emptied their guns at the tubes and they exploded. The currently inactive human Reaper became dislodged from the rest of its supports and it fell until it was out of sight. It was seriously unlikely that the massive machine could survive that, especially in its unfinished state.

"Shepard to ground team! Status report!" said Austin.

"It's Grunt! You're missing a hell of a fight, Shepard!"

"Head to the Normandy!" said Austin. "Joker, prep the engines. I'm about to overload this place and blow it sky high."

"Roger that, Major." Said Joker.

Austin pulled the reactor core out of the central platform and began setting it to overload and destroy the base.

"Uh, Major. I've got an incoming signal from the Arkane Council." Said Joker.

"This really isn't the best time for them to be calling us." Austin groaned. "Alright, patch them through."

Sandra once again threw the holo device to the floor and it projected the whole Arkane Council in front of Austin who stood up to address them.

"Shepard. You've done the impossible." Said Spartan.

"I have my team to thank for that. None of this would've been possible without them." Said Austin.

"Their actions will not be forgotten, and they will be greatly rewarded for all they've done." Said Tarnack.

"No offence, Councillors, but is that all you called us for?" said Kraan.

"No. We felt it best to tell you that you now have a choice to make." Said Avaritia.

"What do you mean?" Austin asked.

"We've been looking at schematics that EDI uploaded. From them, it seems that the base doesn't necessarily have to be destroyed." Said Necrosis.

"A timed radiation pulse could still kill the remaining Collectors. But it would leave the machinery and technology intact." Said Avaritia.

"What are you saying? You're saying that we should use this technology?! It liquefied people! Turned them into something horrible! Using this technology would be wrong!" said Austin, almost appalled that the Arkanes would even think of something like this.

"I agree. We'd be disrespecting the dead!" said Liara.

"We know that. Many of us agree with you." Said Tarnack.

"But you just said..."

"We have been attempting to decide amongst ourselves whether or not the base should be spared. Each time, the results have been the same. Half of us want it destroyed; the other wishes it to be spared." Said Spartan.

"In the end, we have decided that we cannot make this decision ourselves, and so we have decided to let it fall to you." Said Tarnack.

"Councillors, are you sure about this? I'm just a soldier who takes orders from you. Sometimes I don't always see beyond the immediate as you do." Austin asked.

"You're the one who has the ultimate choice, Shepard, because you're there right now. Even if we ordered you to preserve the base, you could still do otherwise. Better simply that we let things happen as they should." Said Councillor Krellick.

"Whatever secrets we might learn, it isn't worth the risk. For all we know this base could also have indoctrination technology. If so, we definitely cannot take that risk." Said Austin.

"It's your choice, Shepard. Just be sure that you make it for the

good of everyone as well as yourself. For once, I'm afraid you yourself will have to look beyond the immediate." Said Avaritia.

"I've made my decision. We'll fight and win without it. I won't let fear compromise who I am." Said Austin as he went back to setting the core to overload.

"Very well, Shepard. I guess all we can do now is simply wish you good luck in the final hours. You'll have a hero's welcome waiting for you when for you when you return to Arkadia." Said Spartan.

"Council."

"Major."

The holograms disappeared and Sandra pocketed the device.

"You made the right choice, Shepard. We'd be no better than Cerberus if we used this base." She said.

"Thanks. I just hope this is definitely the right thing." Said Austin.

"No regrets, love." Said Liara as she put her hand reassuringly on Austin's shoulder.

"Okay. Let's move. We've got ten minutes before the reactor overloads and blows this whole station apart." Said Austin as he slid the reactor back into the platform.

Just as he stood up however, the whole platform suddenly shook violently. SO much in fact that everyone lost their footing.

"What the hell was that?" said Sarah as she got up.

To everyone's shock, a massive arm appeared and latched onto one of the platform. Following it was the terrifying form of the human reaper that was now fully conscious and operational.

"Oh Goddess!" said Liara.

"God help us." Said Griffin.

"Hold your ground!" Austin yelled. "If the Alliance and the Helldiver fleets can take down Sovereign, then we can kill this thing too!"

Everyone cheered and started firing on the massive Reaper.

The human Reaper swiped at the Helldivers many times, but managed to miss due to how small they were in comparison to its huge size. It also seemed to have some sort of beam in its mouth that would charge up before firing.

As the Reaper brought its arm down onto one of the platforms, Austin leapt onto it so that when it moved again, he was now on top of the Reaper and had a clear shot at its face the entire time.

The Human Reaper gave a metallic roar at the constant gunfire it was being bombarded with and tried to shake the Helldiver off. Austin ran further up the Reaper's arm until he reached the head. Having lost sight of him, the human Reaper once again turned to the rest of Alpha Squad. As Austin clung to the Reaper's head, he started scanning for a weak point. If the Reaper had any, it had to be on the

head somewhere. It wasn't easy holding on since the Reaper kept moving a lot, but Austin Helldiver armour enabled him to keep a tight grip.

After a few moments, his suit identified a weak point on part of the head, and it could be penetrated with the right weapon. Austin activated his omni blade and plunged it into the metal as he started cutting. To his relief the human Reaper didn't seem to feel any pain from this, at least not yet. Austin continued cutting until the gap was large enough. Reaching in with his hand and using all of his enhanced strength, he ripped a large metal plate off until it exposed some sort of organic substance. Whatever it was, it obviously had to be crucial if it was protected.

Without even hesitating, Austin drew Excalibur from his back and plunged it in all the way up to the hilt. The Human Reaper screamed in pain, so much so that its right arm smashed away a whole platform before it then reached for its head to try and garb Austin. The Helldiver quickly withdrew his sword, jumped off the Reaper's head and ran back down the way he came.

Before Austin could reach the end of the arm however, the human Reaper spotted him. Using its free hand, it quickly grabbed him and threw him off. Austin was only just able to grab onto the edge of the furthest platform before he fell off.

Griffin and Liara quickly noticed and helped the Major up.

"You okay?" Liara asked.

"Yeah. I'm good." said Austin. "That's things not going down easily."

"You either hurt it, or just pissed it off." said Griffin.

"And we're starting to run low on ammo. We're obviously hurting it, but we're not causing enough damage. We need something that packs a bit more punch." said Liara.

The three of them quickly went back into cover to avoid another swipe from the human Reaper. The Austin remembered something. Something that he reckoned would finish this abomination for good.

"Leena, you still got that Nuke Launcher?!" he yelled over all the noise.

"Yeah. Why?" Leena asked.

Austin simply looked at Leena for a moment before the Quarian understood.

"Good thinking." she said.

She quickly took the Nuke Launcher that she'd first tested on Haestrom from her back and threw it to Austin.

The Helldiver found it difficult to get a good shot since the Reaper was moving so much. If it would just stay still long enough.

"Hold still, you son of a bitch." he muttered.

Somehow, for some unknown reason, that seemed to work. The

Human Reaper remained still as it seemed to focus on him.

"Sheeeeeepaaaaaard." it just managed to say as it opened its mouth and charged up its beam again. That however was just the opening that Austin needed.

"You're terminated, fucker!"

He pulled the trigger and a massive nuke shot forward, straight into the Human Reaper's mouth. The massive machine was taken aback by this as it seemed to swallow it. There was a brief pause and then its eyes and heart core exploded and burst into flames. The Human Reaper flailed about violently as it died. As it did however, it fell on all the platforms, causing them to become dislodged and start falling. All of Alpha was luckily on the same one but it was shaking about violently, so much so that no one could stand upright and one of them nearly fell off.

Austin just in time managed to slide down and catch Liara's hand before she fell over the edge. As he pulled her up, another explosion from the Human Reaper tipped the platform and it plummeted even faster.

"HOLD ONTO SOMETHING!" Austin yelled.

The platform smashed against the walls violently for several painfully long seconds before it then seemed to crash into something hard and stopped. Austin could hear a lot of groans from everyone which at least told him they were alive.

"GET YOUR FOOT OUT OF MY BACK!" he heard Kraan yell.

Austin picked himself up and made sure Liara was okay. As far as he could tell, no one was hurt.

"Well, that could've been worse." Dash chuckled.

This was prematurely said however, as the second the last word left his mouth; the human Reaper's massive head suddenly fell on the platform. It had become detached from the body, but it still forced the platform down which made it even harder for some of the others to crawl out of the wreckage.

"YOU'VE GOT TO BE JOKING!" said Sarah.

"I'm gonna feel that in the morning." said Austin as he rubbed the back of his neck.

At that moment, the radio suddenly crackled into life and Joker's voice could be heard.

"Do you copy? Major? Come on, Shepard, don't leave me hanging. Do you copy?"

Austin quickly reached for his wrist and activated it.

"We're here, Joker. Did the ground team make it?" he said.

"Yeah. Everyone's on board. We're just waiting for you." said Joker.

Alpha didn't need to be told twice to head back to the

Normandy as something else had now found them.

"Seekers!" Sandra yelled.

"Run!"

Austin fired a few cover shots from his pistol as everyone sprinted as fast as they could. He quickly ran to. As they did, Harbinger's voice boomed throughout the base.

"Human, you've changed nothing. Your species has the attention of those infinitely your greater. That which you know as Reapers are your salvation through destruction."

Austin simply ignored it and kept on running. He let his determination to get out of this alive fuel him, his determination to finally have a peaceful moment where he could hold Liara and they could both look forward to their wedding. The Collectors had taken him away from her once; they would not do it again!

The Normandy hovered into view, its cargo bay doors open and with everyone firing at the Collectors as Alpha jumped to safety. Only Austin was left now. As he kept running, a large piece of debris suddenly fell and smashed away a large chunk of the edge. He'd have to jump.

Just before Austin could start running faster though, he felt a sudden pain in his back and he fell to the floor. A Collector round had hit him.

"Agh!"

"AUSTIN!" Liara yelled.

The Asari couldn't do anything but look and just hope that Austin made.

"Come on! You can make it! Jump!" Alaara yelled.

Austin struggled against the pain to get back up. He was unsure if he could make it. The pain would slow him down and the jump looked extremely far. But then he suddenly heard a voice in his head.

"Get up, Austin! We're not leaving without you!" he heard Liara say.

This seemed to be all Austin needed. Using all his might, he picked himself up and sprinted at top speed towards the edge, and jumped.

For a brief moment, everyone held their breath as they watched Austin. It almost looked as though he wouldn't make it, but he just managed to catch onto the edge. Liara didn't even hesitate and she hauled Austin up. Just as Austin felt his feet touch metal however, another shot suddenly hit him, this time in the chest, and it felt a lot more painful.

"Dammit!"

"Seal the door, now!" Alaara yelled.

The Normandy began to rise up as it begun its escape. The cargo bay doors sealed themselves and all view of the Collectors and

the base disappeared from sight. Austin could hear Joker and EDI's voices over the loudspeakers as he was hurried to the medical bay.

"Detonation in 10, 9, 8..."

"Yeah, I got the gist of it, EDI! Hold on!" said Joker.

That was the last Austin heard as he felt the Normandy speed up and he lost consciousness.

The Collector General fumbled at the base's control panels in vain. It knew it was doomed, and Harbinger (who was possessing it) knew that as well.

"You have failed. We will find another way." the Reaper boomed.

A blast staggered the general and it held onto the main display for support. It looked up to see the hologram of Harbinger's true Reaper form returning to hibernation mode.

"Releasing control."

The General looked around, confused. This was all different from the last thing it remembered. How long had this happened? All these questions flooded its mind.

Before it could get any answers though, it slowly looked behind it to see the incoming blast.

Everything went dark, and then there was nothing.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Liara asked, doing her best to hide her tears.

Austin was lying on one of the beds in the medbay. Normally his suit would go into lockdown when he passed out, but because they were on a Helldiver ship they had the technology to deactivate so they could tend to his wounds. Both Dr Chakwas and Mordin were examining the holes in his armour where the round had entered.

"I think so. At most, they're just flesh wounds." said Dr Chakwas.

Despite that the doctor was still partly in shock after her abduction, her determination to save her friend overwhelmed that.

"Yes. Should recover fairly quickly. Helldivers tough. Injected with special serums to help improve healing. Makes them tougher, stronger. Should recover fine." said Mordin.

At that moment, Austin suddenly groaned and slowly moved his head.

"Austin!"

Liara quickly held his hand and looked into his eyes. They'd removed his helmet as well to make sure he was still breathing.

"Did we make it?" Austin asked, smiling at the sight of Liara's face.

"Yeah. We made it, love." said Liara, a tear of happiness

escaping her eye and making its way down her cheek.

"How are you feeling, Shepard?" Dr Chakwas asked.

"Pretty good. I've felt better though, I won't lie about that."

Austin groaned as he sat up. Liara made sure he did it slowly so as not to stress himself. "Give it to me straight. How bad?"

"It's not as bad as it could have been actually. Your suit took the worst of it so the rounds didn't go deep enough to cause any significant damage. You should be fine." Liara replied.

Austin nodded and gently lowered himself down from the bed until his feet touched the floor.

"Don't strain yourself, love." Said Liara concernedly.

"It's okay. I'm fine." Said Austin reassuringly.

"Recommend plenty of rest, Shepard. Wounds should have plenty of time to heal." Said Mordin.

"Noted, Professor." Austin smiled. He then turned to Chakwas. "What about you, Karin?"

"I'm still a little shaken after all that. But I'll be fine." Said Chakwas. "You and Joker came for me. I've never had truer friends."

Austin went up to the Doctor and hugged her. She hugged him back.

"I owe you my life, Shepard." She said.

"Use my first name just once, and we'll call it even." Austin chuckled.

"I'll have to work on that, Major." Chakwas smiled.

"Where's the rest of the team?" Austin asked.

"Alaara told them to simply wait in the cargo hold." Liara replied.

"Right. Before we tell them to rest, there's something I need to sort out with them." Said Austin.

True enough, all of the team, along with Alpha Squad, were gathered in the cargo hold. Most of them were either chatting happily with one another over their victory and some of the couples were even kissing each other.

As soon as they saw their leader again, they cheered.

"Never thought they'd put you down, Major!" said Alaara.

"Knew you'd get through it, Battlemaster!" Grunt cheered as he banged his fists together.

After a few minutes of accepting congratulations from everyone, Austin urged them to quiet down. Once he was sure they were all listening, he finally spoke.

"Thank you all for that." He said gratefully. "I just wanted to say that I'm proud of each and every one of you. We destroyed the Collectors and we walked out alive with no casualties. I think I speak for everyone here when I say that we didn't just give the Collectors hell, we proved wrong that this wasn't a suicide mission."

Everyone clapped and cheered again. Once again, Austin waited until they'd quieted down before he spoke again.

"Now, I am aware that some of you may eventually be leaving after that this. Some of you have duties that you must still attend to and things like that, while others have something new planned. I understand this perfectly and do not blame you for having to leave. I would however like to ask that you do come back at some point. We have a special occasion to celebrate, and your all invited." He said.

"And what might that be?" Jacob asked.

Austin turned to Liara and she once again showed her engagement ring.

Once again, everyone clapped and cheered. Sarah and Alpha Squad, who were already aware, just simply smiled.

"Congratulations, Shepard." Said Jacob.

"So yes. As you now know, eventually there'll be a wedding. It'd certainly make it worthwhile if you were all able to attend."

"Regardless, we've won a great victory today. And though this is still far from over, although the Reapers are still on the horizon, now is a time for us to enjoy the victory we've fought for and earned. All of you get plenty of rest, that's an order!" Austin smiled.

Most of the team disappeared to head to their usual spots on the Normandy. Jack in particular slung Kelly over her shoulder before carrying her off. Austin could only hope they didn't make too much noise.

Only Alpha Squad was left now. It was then however that Austin suddenly noticed that Dell and Sill were working on something that looked very familiar. It was X-5. He'd been extremely badly damaged to the point that he looked beyond repair.

"Oh no. What happened?" Austin asked.

He took a lot of the fire covering our escape. It was brave of him. But at the same he's now been this badly damaged." Said Sill.

"Can you fix him?" Liara asked.

"I think so. The damage is extreme, but I think he can be salvaged. We may have to give him some redesigns though. Many of his old parts are beyond repair. Something that's also a cause for concern is that his head got partially blown up. I don't know yet whether his main chip is intact or damage. I just worry if it might change him at all."

"If anyone can fix him, it's you, Dell." Said Austin as he patted the Arkane on the back. "Keep me posted on your progress. If you need anything at all, tell me and I'll make sure we get it."

Dell nodded and went back to working on the damaged robot with his daughter.

"At least when he wakes up we'll be able to tell him we won." Sill smiled.

“That we will, my daughter. That we will.” Said Dell.

Liara stood next to Austin and held his hand as she noticed his concerned expression.

“He’ll be fine, Austin. Besides, you should be enjoying the victory.” She said.

“Yeah. I suppose so.” Austin smiled.

What happened next took Liara completely by surprise. Austin suddenly pulled her into such a deep kiss that she lost her footing. Fortunately of course, the Helldiver was there to catch her.

When they finally did separate, Liara was afraid she might swoon.

“Was saving that for you when we won.” Austin smiled.

“Well, since you say that...” Liara panted.

Austin noticed her wink at him and he instantly got the message.

“True. We were gentle last night. I say we make the most of this victory.” He smiled.

“I love you.” Said Liara.

“I love you too.” Said Austin.

Once again to her surprise, Austin picked Liara up in his arms and carried her bridal style to the elevator and pressed the button for their quarters.

Though it had been a rough ride, they had triumphed. The Collectors were defeated and now the Reapers lacked some very loyal servants. Although their work was still far from done, it was definitely a victory to rejoice over.

Deep in dark space, several glowing eyes lit up, illuminating the blackness. Harbinger’s true Reaper form had exited hibernation mode. Then more and more lights followed behind it as thousands more Reapers awakened after almost 50,000 years of long sleep. Very slowly, they began their long journey towards the Milky Way.

Even without direct routes to the galaxy, they were patient machines. They’d waited 50,000 years for this and even more before that. They could gladly wait a little longer for the next cycle to begin.

True Shepard had destroyed the Collectors, but the Reapers had many other servants. Not to mention that they still had yet to reveal something else. Hibernating with them also was another species. Like the Reapers themselves, these ones were immortal and so they had been around since the very beginning. The Reapers still had yet to reveal their deadliest servants: The ones who lead their armies in war, the ones that were said to be neither organic nor machine.

The battle of the Collectors was over, but the war for the galaxy would soon begin...

SOMETHING MAGIC IS BREWING

CH I

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

Jessica Cranberry closed her eyes tightly. Night was approaching. Not knowing exactly how she had exactly ended up living in a cave, she pulled up a torn blanket she'd had had her whole life, well as long as she could remember.

As the night passed on, a strong gust of wind started to blow leaves and twigs around. Jess, trying to ignore all the rustles of the leaves, felt something blow across her face. It wasn't a leaf, it was too big and paper like. She opened her eyes to see an envelope blowing around just above her. She caught it, sat up, and read the address.

Expecting the letter to have been to someone that wasn't her, she read it allowed.

"Miss Jessica Cranberry, the cave in the snowy mountains." She read. Shrugging, she opened and read:

Dear Miss Cranberry,
You have been expected at Hogwarts school for witchcraft and wizardry. You're going to need to get your uniform and school supplies in Diagon Alley. You will need to go to the London train station and board the train in station 9 3/4. See you soon!

From,
Minerva McGonagal

Jess stared at the letter. A witch?! This can't be true... Jess read the letter over and over again.

"What's Diagon Alley...?" She asked herself. "And how am I supposed to get there?!"

"I could take you there." A boy came out of the bushes.

"Who are you!? Hey! Were you stalking me!?" Jess scowled at the boy. He had blond hair, that was sort of long-ish.

"I wasn't stalking, only watching..." He replied.

"That's stalking," Jess glared at him. "and I asked who you were."

"I'm Draco Malfoy. Slytherin house." Draco replied.

"What house...?!"

"Slytherin. It's one of the four houses at Hogwarts." Draco said.

"How can I trust you to take me to Diagon Alley if you were stalking me...?!" Jess asked.

"That, I cannot tell you, you can decide if you want to trust me or not." Draco replied.

"Fine..." Jess sighed, wondering if this was a good idea or not.

"Mind if I stay here tonight?" Draco asked.

Jess stammered. "Um... I guess..." She didn't know if this was a good idea either.

Draco sat down on the other side of the room. "Night." He said grimly.

Jess didn't reply, nor look at him at all. There was something about him she just didn't trust.

Jess woke early that morning, to find Draco was already awake.

"Ready to go?" He asked.

Without looking at him, Jess replied with "Yes..."

Draco walked out of the cave, with Jess following. She stared at the ground, just following Draco's feet.

After a long time of walking, Jess followed Draco into a pub called The Leaky Cauldron. Jess didn't really pay attention after that. She just followed Draco's feet until she seemed to be out of The Leaky

Cauldron and into Diagon Alley.

"Now you can go and find your things." Draco said.

"Okay..." Jess quickly scurried away. She was glad to be away from Draco. He made her feel uncomfortable. "Let's see here..." She read her list of things she needed.

"Done..." Jess said. "Wait... Except for my wand..." Jess walked into a place called Ollivanders.

"Hello." Said a man Jess supposed was Mr. Ollivander.

"Hi..." Jess replied. "I'm here to get my wand..."

"Ah, of course." Mr. Ollivander replied. "Here. Try this one" He handed her a wand to try out. "Wave it."

Jess waved the wand, and suddenly a vase fell over and broke. "Oh... I'm so sorry..."

"It's fine. That happens a lot." Mr. Ollivander replied. "Here, try this" He handed Jess another wand.

Jess waved it, though it went soaring out of her hand and hit Mr. Ollivander in the face. "Oh no!! I am very sorry!!!"

"That happens sometimes too. It's okay. Here... Try this one." Mr. Ollivander handed Jess, yet another wand.

Jess waved it, then something came out of it. It glowed. "Whoa..."

"Perfect! 12 1/2 inches, apple wood, dragon core, and it's Surprisingly Swishy." Mr. Ollivander said. "That will be 12 Galleons." Jess handed him the Galleons, then exited the shop.

"I hope I don't see-" Draco ran into Jess.

"Oh, hello, Jess." He said. "Did I ever tell you about my father? He works for the Ministry of Magic." Standing behind Draco was his

father.

"Hello. Lucius Malfoy." Draco's father said to Jess.

"Um... Hello..." Jess replied. "Um... I need to go somewhere..." Jess ran away, not taking the time for Draco or his father to reply.

Jess ran into The Leaky Cauldron, and walked right over to the man behind the counter.

"Hi... I need a room for tonight..." Jess said.

"Alright, I'll show you where you can stay." The man said, walking up the stairs. "Here," He opened a door for Jess.

"Thank you..." Jess walked inside, with her uniform, books, wand, cauldron, and left over Galleons inside a trunk she had bought. It also contained some regular clothes she bought.

CAT'S EYE KRYPTONIAN

Chapter 1 - Cat's Eye Corruption

Rilshov

Selina had been planning the heist for weeks. The Gotham museum was hosting a display of ancient Egyptian artifacts that contained one thing Catwoman couldn't resist, the beautiful yellow Cat's Eye Diamond. Displayed as just an ancient curiosity, albeit one worth more than a million dollars, Selena knew it was more than that and once she had it she would be able to study the gem's rumoured mystical powers.

She'd had it in her clutches before but some superhero had always just managed to stop her escaping with it. This time would be different, she'd planted a bomb in the museum set to explode just as she escaped that would make it look like the diamond was destroyed and cover any trace of her theft. Countless millions of dollars worth of antiquities would be destroyed but she'd have her prize. She'd laced the bomb with components that would hurt and slow down any hero who tried to stop her. Yellow shards of glass for Green Lantern, laughing gas to slow Batman down, and even a small piece of Kryptonite she'd managed to steal from Star Labs the week before in case Superman was in the area.

Her entry into the museum had been completely stealthy and she hung suspended by a cable in front of the display cabinet. She flicked out her diamond studded claws and traced a circle around the glass, opening a hole in the cabinet. Reaching in she plucked the diamond from its stand and dropped it into a small pouch at her waist.

As she was reaching for the button to hoist her upwards towards escape and guard on a random patrol rounded the corner and into view.

"Hey, stop! Thief!" he shouted, reaching for the alarm button. Catwoman shot a dart out of her wrist into the guard's neck but it was too late, the alarm sounded.

"Dammit. I'm out of here." she said to herself, pressing the ascend button on the cable she was suspended from. She was whipped upwards towards the open skylight and was almost out when a blue and red blur streaked into the museum.

Supergirl had been on her way home from visiting her friend Barbara Gordon, otherwise known as Oracle, when she'd heard the alarm go off. Her first instinct was to superspeed to the source to investigate.

When she came to a stop she saw a sleek leather clad figure shooting up a rope away from an unconscious guard and an empty display case. A quick X-Ray scan of the thief showed a large diamond in a small pouch at her waist.

With a quick flash of her heat vision the pouch was cut and the diamond falling towards her waiting hands.

Catwoman saw the diamond fall. "Damn you Supergirl. If I can't have it no-one can" she hissed and pressed a small button on her belt.

Supergirl saw the explosion coming but didn't react. She was invulnerable and a simple explosive wouldn't have an effect on her so she focussed on the falling diamond. It landed in her palm just as the blast hit her, but something was wrong. She screamed in pain as the Kryptonite in the explosion pierced her skin and then her world faded to black.

Catwoman watched the Kryptonian beauty fall to the floor and smiled. "Night night Girl of Steel, that will teach you to interrupt me." she hissed as she pulled herself through the open skylight away to freedom.

Supergirl's eyes slowly opened, adjusting to the light. A blurry figure loomed over her.

"She's awake!" he said. Her vision slowly focussed and she looked around. She was in a laboratory. 2 doctors were stood over her.

"Careful Supergirl. I'm Doctor Carl Jefferies and this is Doctor Rachel Beckett. You are in Star Labs. It seems the explosion you were exposed to contained a significant amount of Kryptonite. You were severely hurt by the blast but we have stabilised you."

She slowly sat up, feeling weaker than she ever had on earth.

"Why am I so weak? I should have healed by now." she said.

"It seems a large number of microscopic Kryptonite particles have become embedded in your body. It's not life threatening but it is draining your strength significantly. Your other powers should still be ok but you will have the strength of a normal, healthy human. We are more concerned about the object embedded in your chest."

Supergirl looked down and saw a glittering from her cleavage. The Cat's Eye Diamond was embedded into her flesh between her breasts. The flesh had closed around most of it, leaving a small glittering circle in her chest.

"It seems your body healed itself around the diamond before your powers had fully disappeared and any attempt to remove it would likely be fatal. We can try and remove it but it may be dangerous." he explained.

"What? I don't want this thing in my chest!" she poked it with her fingernail and the gem glittered slightly, the light reflecting in her eyes as her attitude shifted. "Soo, pretty... and it's mine" she mumbled

under her breath as she stared into the gem, it's light flashing in her eyes, penetrating her mind. Thoughts ran through her head. "I've always been under my cousins shadow, maybe losing my super strength is a good thing, now I can change my name, become something else, not just a wimpy version of him, maybe even a new costume, something totally opposite to HIM, something darker."

The area of skin around the gem paled slightly as it glittered, thin black veins spreading out over Kara's skin.

"Supergirl, we'd like to keep you here for observation if possible. We don't know much about Kryptonian physiology so we're unsure what effect this will have on you."

"No. I'm not a lab cat, er, I mean rat." hissed the young Kryptonian, standing. The gown she was dressed in fell to the floor but Supergirl wasn't concerned, her body was perfect and why shouldn't she show it off? "I might have lost my strength but I'm still Supergirl and nobody tells me what to do" she snapped, the gem glittering again as she spoke. She grabbed her uniform and pulled it on, the feeling of the tight but soft material against her skin making her nipples harden. The damage in the material had been repaired by the Kryptonian technology embedded in her outfit.

"Oh, so much sensation. I never realised my Kryptonian physiology meant my skin was so desensitised before. This is like nothing I have ever felt! I might have to get something that covers my whole body if this is what it feels like!" Kara thought. She rubbed her hand over her chest, feeling the gem through the material.

Supergirl tapped her JLA communicator. "Oracle here, what can I do for you Kara?" came the voice.

"Oracle, could you beam me up to the Watchtower?" "No point letting anyone know I'm powerless" thought Supergirl, "those goody-goodies would probably kick me out once they had no use for me".

"Sure thing Kara, one teleport coming right up." said Oracle.

Supergirl shimmered and then vanished from sight leaving the slightly concerned doctors alone.

Shimmering into view on the Watchtower's teleport pad Kara stroked the diamond, hidden under the bright yellow S on her chest, savouring the smooth hard feel of the diamond against her fingers. Unseen, the gem glittered as her fingers swept across it and Kara's fingernails started to slowly darken and grow, sharpening into points.

Kara made her way to her quarters to examine herself. Looking in the mirror she saw her nails for the first time. "Oh my god, what's happening to me?" She held her hand up in front of her face, examining the claws on the end of her fingers. "It almost looks like the claw of a Kryptonian cat!"

Cats on Krypton had been vicious feral creatures with a lust for

blood and claws that could cut metal. Reaching out to the wall she traced a claw down the metallic wall, leaving a deep groove where her diamond hard claw had scraped. Kara started to panic but the gem glittered again, catching her eyes in the mirror and she calmed down.

“I might have lost my Kryptonian powers but I’m not totally useless, I could tear a man apart with these claws!” she thought to herself wickedly. As the devilish thought ran through her head she held up her fingers again and watched as the claws lengthened and shortened at her command. “Magnificent!” she purred and the black corruption spread further from the gem, reaching up to her neck. She stroked the pale, smooth skin, tracing her finger along the black veins carrying the corruption through her body.

“I’ll need to cover this up before anyone notices, otherwise they will try to take my gem away from me. I can’t lose it, i’ll be powerless. I can’t be powerless. I must have the power. I want it. I need it.” she hissed at her reflection, turned and walked out of her room.

As she walked the corridor Kara heard voices approaching and turned to see Wonder Woman and Green Lantern walking her way. She quickly hid her hands behind her back.

“Hey Kara, rough day? You’re looking a little pale.” asked Green Lantern.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle, and I think I’m starting to like how it’s turning out.” replied Supergirl, smiling wickedly at him. Taking her reply as a come on Hal Jordan blushed and carried on walking. Supergirl watched them go but her gaze was more focussed on Wonder Woman’s tight behind and long powerful legs. What would it be like to have those legs wrapped around her, or bent before her in submission?

Kara made her way to the costume generator, a grand machine based on a mix of Kryptonian and Amazon technology capable of creating any design of outfit necessary. Supergirl had used it for off world missions and undercover work on earth and now she was ready to make herself a new outfit.

“If people are going to recognize my strength without comparing me to Superman I need to be as far away from my old look as possible” she thought. “Maybe something wicked looking. Zatanna always got away with a bad girl costume, so why shouldn’t I wear something evil?” The word evil rolled comfortably off her tongue and sent a little shiver of pleasure down her spine. She programmed in her design and stepped into the chamber.

The inside of the chamber was mirrored so Kara took the opportunity to study the gem in more detail. She slit her costume right through the S using her diamond sharp claw, destroying the Kryptonian symbol

that had been her identifier and releasing the diamond into sight.. She focussed on the sparkling object embedded in her body and zoomed in using her super vision. The gem filled her whole view and the sparkling gem brighter, almost blinding her. Her eyes blurred and she blinked as sharp pains ran from her eyes back into the rest of her head.

As her vision cleared she gasped at her reflection. Her eyes had changed! Looking back at her from the mirror was a pair of bright yellow cat's eyes, pupils slit vertically. As she gasped what had been her heat vision kicked in and twin yellow beams shot from her eyes, hitting the mirror and bouncing back at her, hitting her in the mouth. Kara felt her mouth glow as a small pair of fangs grew from her incisors, yellow venom dripping from them. She flexed her jaw in fascination, the changes no longer scaring her, she was welcoming them, revelling in the transformation she was undergoing.

“What am I becoming? What is this wonderful gem doing for me? How can I have morrrrrr?” she purred as the chamber finally started to generate the costume.

Completely enraptured with the power of the gem Kara focussed her super vision on it in a tight beam on the reflection of the gem in the mirror, allowing the rays to bounce back and smother her whole body. She felt the power of the gem envelop her and the corruption spread throughout her entire being. The paleness spread all over her body and the black veins covered her. Kara's hair darkened to a pitch black and then red shoots spread, the colour of blood. She reached up and felt her breasts swelling, basking in the wonderful sensation. Her legs grew longer and firmer. She was becoming a perfect specimen of a woman. Flawless in every way.

The beams washed over her mind, further twisting her thoughts. Wicked images flowed over her mind as her flesh finally closed around the gem, absorbing it into her very being. She saw herself sat on a throne, served by her former friends, all under her power. She saw herself being fucked by anyone she desired, men and women. She saw herself killing her enemies, anyone who stood in her way, and she loved it all. The heroine was gone, gem's the corruption complete, she was at one with the gem, in complete control of it's powers. The Cat's Eye Diamond had found a new vessel to be it's Queen and her Kryptonian body had allowed the new being that Kara had become to be something new, something that had never existed before. It had never been part of it's queen before, only ever influencing by being worn. The limit's of Kara's new powers were unknown to either her or the gem.

Twin beams shot out from the machine, disintegrating her old costume and encasing her in her new outfit. She was spun around by

the device as her body was covered. As the machine finished she assessed the final results.

On her feet were a pair of thigh high black leather boots with wicked looking six inch stiletto heels. At her thighs they merged with a black leather bodice that rose up to cup her magnificent breasts. A black and red cape formed, lined by luxuriant grey fur on her shoulders, matching the fur that lined her black leather gloves covering her claws. The final touch was a choker around her neck, black leather to match the rest of her outfit. She was almost unrecognisable from her previous self.

The black veins covering her body suddenly started to pulse and glow green. Kara felt her strength returning as the Kryptonite in her body was expelled by the power of the gem. Kara threw back her head and let out an evil hiss. “Yesssssssss. I am beautiful, powerful. This has to be shared. All will serve me. My power shall be limitless.” Finally the veins faded, the weakening Kryptonite expelled. Kara’s full Kryptonian powers were returned to her, twisted by the Cat’s Eye Diamond.

Before she left the chamber Kara focussed her eyes on the lenses of the beams that had created her new outfit. Yellow light shot from her eyes and enveloped the lenses. Once she had finished the lenses glowed yellow, looking like small copies of the Cat’s Eye Diamond. She smiled to herself. The next user of the chamber would be subjected to a transformation of more than their clothes.

POETRY

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John Mahler's Quotes of the Day

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

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

IT'S CALLED LOVE

Dathuralove

Imagine that the person of your dreams, now, is next to you.

Imagine her eyes. Smile at her.

Imagine her voice that whispers "I want you with me until the end."

Imagine you feel his hands that skim your cheeks.

Imagine you feel the warmth of her body. Her scent.

Imagine her soft lips embrace yours gently.

If you close your eyes you'll feel the heart beat more and something in the stomach.

No, you're not sick ... indeed it. You have contracted a disease that cannot be cured.

The only remedy is to embrace the origin of this, and don't hope that with time it will go away, because it will come back.

Don't look for her name in the books, don't waste time on internet.

Your disease is common as much as it is unique.

It takes everyone sooner or later, but in a different way.

It's called Love.

SELF MADE

Kela Lewis-Morin

Research and re-emerge when you have found the answer.
Correct and perfect your craft and become your own master.

Refine your design until it cannot be further enhanced.
Instead of waiting, why not try creating your own chance?

Have the nerve to capture what you so rightly deserve.
Duly take heed but never concede to what you have heard.

Manually harness the tenacity to exceed your limited capacity.
Recognize that progress can either happen instantly or gradually.

Stay humble but don't let it crumble when things start looking up.
Because those in a position of power are also known to be corrupt.

Remain independent; refrain from complying and relying on others.
But understand that those conceited people also needed loving mothers.

Polish and accomplish your dreams and visualise them into this reality.
Remember that failing is nothing but one of life's constructive formalities.

So be confident go and see the things you have always wanted to see.
Allow yourself time to become the person you have always wanted to be.

We live in an age where everyone who's anyone has dreams of making it.
You are the only person stopping yourself from going out there and taking it.

SNOWFLAKES

Tricia K.

Hello,

My name is Tricia, and I am an aspiring novelist. I also happen to be heavily immersed in poetry as well as music performance. I live and breathe for the arts and spend as much time as I can trying to improve my work in the high hopes of eventually publishing a bestseller. My goal is to give people the pleasure of reading to escape the realities of life as many authors have done before me.

Every one is different,
yet every one is the same,
They all have beautiful crystal-like patterns
each unique in its own way.

As they fly by, Their simplicity deceives
The naked eye and all it perceives.
One cannot truly marvel them at a glance,
Just as one can't admire a painting from a look askance.

Each one is different but the same,
And one must look closer
To see the beauty that lies further down
In an organized disarray.

The true beauty lies in the patterns
so intricate and unique to each,
Look closely, before it melts away
For these people won't stay long, just like Snowflakes.

UNTITLED

Mangekyo-User85
of <http://www.mangekyo-user85.deviantart.com/>

He died on a Tuesday
And nobody even knew
Until Thursday
When they found his body
And a sloppily written note
That said he couldn't stand it
The pain and words and hell
They found him hanging from the rafters
A noose about his neck
And they buried him on Sunday
And held a service at the church
And his boyfriend was in tears
And his father never showed
 He was probably drinking
 and cursing his fucking faggot son
And everyone from school showed up
They all said they knew him
And that he'd been their best friend
 And what a fucking tragedy
 that he'd taken his own life
But no one was really sad
Except his few real friends
 because they didn't really know him
 and they hardly even cared
And Monday school was silent
And his boyfriend didn't show
All the teachers offered help
 And they said that they could talk
And they never saw the fucking irony
 in counseling his killers

NEW DAY

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

Wake up to a new day.
My depression has faded away.
My life seems brand new.
Don't know what first to do.
I can't believe how I feel.
I didn't know how quick I'd heal.
Take a look around me.
Decide how everything should be.
You have the power to do,
Anything that you want to.

BETRAYAL

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

Is that the mouth that spew out the lies?
Is that the cause of your demise?
The lowest point will always be the end,
When you're alone and have no one left to bend.

Cut a bond so I have less,
You're exactly like all the rest,
Betrayal: A murky game,
Showing you have no shame.

Trying to take what Is mine,
You're a mirror, And I don't have the time,
For all you say and do,
You prove yourself not to have a "You".

TERMINALLY KILLED

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

How am I supposed to react?
Your words cutting me into shards
Your blank stare
Awaiting me to tell you it'll be alright
I just can't find the words
To express how I feel
That you're leaving me too soon
That you won't return
Maybe by the time
Of the next moon
If I can't cope
It'll hurt you more
I don't think I could handle
The inevitable downpour
I'm crying now
I can't help myself
My blurred vision
Obscuring your vow
That you'll wait as long as you can
You couldn't bear to leave me
Your last moments ruined
They say quality not quantity
But you're giving this up
So you can say goodbye.