

Fanatical Publishing's

Weekly Review

Issue #73

August 4, 2013

AND NOW, a word from the publisher:

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

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

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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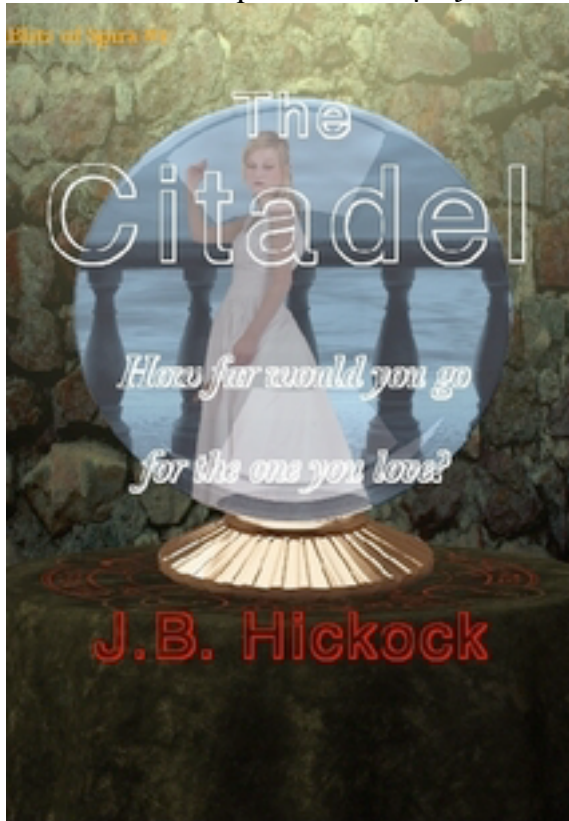
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ORIGINAL LITERATURE

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 The Citadel:

<http://www.lulu.com/shop/jb-hickock/blitz-of-spira-i-the-citadel/ebook/product-21114683.html>



On a world not our own, in a place far from here, there stands The Citadel: home of the dregs and outcasts of an empire.

From the distant land of Breton Miafen came to the citadel seeking the man she loved. She comes with two sailors, and hires Philai, the gravedigger, to rescue her man. But gold is not the whole price; she must offer a great deal more to save her man.

WHAT WAS I FIGHTING FOR?

LGROSARIO
of <http://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: THE VOID

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

Nanami sat at her throne, her white dresses pooling on the floor around her. She lazily flipped through the pages of the profile book, recounting the events of the last few days.

~

"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." She said sternly yet comfortingly. "If you don't save yourself now you may lose the chance." Ric looked away slowly, blue eyes gazing into the rising sun.

"I was a father...a husband. That isn't who I am anymore though... With the light, no pain. I won't be the same numb I am now, rather, relief. Peace.." He hung his head, wiping the blood from his lip and the tears from his eyes. Nanami let go of his wrist, looking at his chest. Ric looked, a dim light glowing from his heart. "Wha-what's happening?" He asked, holding his hands up and taking a half-step back. Nanami smiled reassuringly, cupping his cheek. His light blue

eyes looked at hers, finding comfort.

"I'll see you on the other side." She smiled, taking her hand away from his face.

Ric looked up, his arms still open as the light grew brighter and brighter. It moved from his chest to his arms and stomach, down his legs. It was a white, pure light. His gaze was locked onto the sun, seeing it for all it was. It was no longer too bright for him, it seemed to call him, cradle him. Nanami took a step back, the light in Ric becoming blinding. With a final flash he was gone, finally joining the others on the other side.

Raven sighed softly, Nanami looking away from the sun and to her.

"What is it?" she asked, Raven turning back towards the mansion.

"Will we get to go there one day? Devan and I, Nani and Nostalgia?" She asked as she clasped her hands together, her white wings pulling closer to her back. Nanami thought for a moment before answering.

"One day we will.. You and Devan meet the lowest level together right now, so you could. Though I appreciate the two of you staying to help me.." She said as she smiled at Raven. "Until everyone we can save is on the other side, I won't be strong enough to join them. Nani and Nostalgia...I'm sure they could take a place there, not beside us, but perhaps as the programmers in the background, like they were originally meant for the Void."

The pair eventually arrived at the gates to the mansion yard. Nanami stopped, looking into it. There stood Cindy and Caine, and their sons Creft and Vicor. They stood in a circle, lights beaming from them all. One flash and the small family was gone. Nanami smiled softly, opening the gate and going inside where she found a bath waiting for her.

~

With a soft sigh Nanami turned the page again, finding the terrible three before her. They were a trio of brothers, the eldest Vann, the second Valentine, and the youngest Vincent. Their live feeds showed them in Cheetah form, wading through the grasslands. Her brow furrowed in confusion.

"Raven," she called, the priestess entering the room moments later. "The terrible 3, where do their allegiances lie?" She asked, thumbing through their information. Raven seemed puzzled for only a moment before speaking, unsure herself.

"Vann carries a pain much like Ric held, the loss of Gabe and their daughter was very hard for him. Valentine I am unsure of, while

he had assignments, he was still always following the abusive older brother he loved. If Vincent even qualifies to go, he will most likely be won over with a small push." Raven answered, tilting her head slightly. "You wish to seek them?" Nanami nodded in reply, setting the book down.

"Can they be called for an audience?" she asked. Raven paused, once again unsure. Nanami waved her hand. "It's fine, they shouldn't be too hard to find. Send Devan this time, I think he can handle it.." Raven bowed her head and turned to leave, Nanami retreating back to her never ending thoughts.

Devan hung over the balcony, wings wrapped tight and a book in his hands.

"Knock knock." Raven called from below. Devan closed his book, reaching up and grabbing the beam he hung from. His wings shuddered open and he placed the book atop the beam before hopping down.

"Yes Ma'am?" he asked with a sly grin plastered on his face. Raven smiled lightly, turning to the railing.

"Time for your first recruit."

After explaining the basics, Devan had taken to the skies. It was just past dusk, and his black wings blended with the starry night sky. Off in the grasslands he spotted movement, dipping low and closer for a better look. Grasping a hold of a tree he perched, tilting his head to the left and looking closer. The grass just below him rustled, and from it Vann shifted, standing and locking his glowing golden eyes onto the bat.

"You shouldn't have come here, this is our territory, Batboy." He snarled, fangs protruding from his lips. Devan glared, the other two brothers popping up from the grass around the base of the tree.

"Aw come on, let's be civilized for once, eh?" Devan smirked, hopping down to the ground in front of Vann. As he stood up he blinked. "You're taller than I remember." He laughed. Vann towered two heads higher, his amber golden eyes staring at Devan like a meal from under his shaggy black bangs.

"What do you want Devan?" Vincent asked, crossing his arms. The younger brother was much more effeminate than Vann and rightly so. Vann was his creator, who had made him so as to remove any weakness left from himself. It could also possibly prevent Vincent from joining the other side, as Raven had explained. Devan looked back to him, his hip length black hair swaying in the breeze, and bright eyes locked onto him tight.

"I'm recruiting. I was sent specifically for you three." he

answered, gaze moving to Valentine. The middle brother had shoulder length black hair, and matching amber gold eyes to his two companions. Vincent was scary in the way you would be a mom, Vann an enraged father. Valentine was not intimidating at all. Unless of course, you were to put yourself between him and Vann in a fight. Devan looked back up to the eldest, standing his ground.

"For the light? Is she getting desperate or is she stupid?" Vann asked sarcastically, crossing his arms. Devan squinted his eyes, unsure if he spoke of Raven or their queen.

"The Queen simply wishes to know if you can be saved, if your willing to be saved. It is general knowledge that your best friend is up there. I suppose that means Austin is better than you?" he asked, poking for a tender spot. Vann scoffed.

"I don't care about your politics. Valentine and I were Zekkes right hand men. I've politically been higher than Austin, as it were. Now unless you have anything worth my time to listen to, I suggest you scram." Vann growled as he took a step closer. His two counterparts closing in as well.

~

Nanami lay the leather bound profile book down on her desk before lifting her dresses and taking the seat. Picking up her pen she pulled out the notebook that contained her scribbles, quickly taking to the paper.

"This world was originally intended only as an illusion. Before it was born there existed only The Void. It was never ending darkness in every direction, and nothing within it existed. Save for one person, a young girl. She was innocent, a mere child. What had started out as pure and innocent life, the light, had become poisoned. The darkness was born and it became the Void. In it the girl wandered, alone and lost. Soon she discovered a power within her to create something in the emptiness around her. So over the void she painted an illusion. A beautiful world where she could have everything she wanted, but it needed inhabitants. She created a girl, young as her, for a playmate. Sadly her playmate only found in this world that she was alone. The girl had died, and the Void had claimed her for it's own. The illusion she created was untouchable though, and the Void could not harm it. So the playmate went on existing, unaware."

Nanami sighed, leaning back in her chair some. Carefully opening the profile book, she flipped to a page, looking at Vanns live feed.

~

Devan stood his ground strong, soon coming nose to nose with the eldest brother. Vann snarled under his breath.

"When Grievus died we saw what happened!" he roared. "Clouds of black, just tore into his home, suddenly he was just gone! You cannot hide from the void!" he said as he turned, motioning to the world around them. "Outside of this that is all there is, never ending void!" he turned back to Devan, poking his chest. "It doesn't matter if you run, or hide. If it wants you, it will find you." Devan remained locked onto his gaze.

"On the Other Side it can't. There is only light there. And everything that burdens you will be gone." Vann blinked, dropping his hand.

~

"Eventually the play mate learned how to create as well, and soon there were many people with her. She first created Mike, who in turn created Ryan and Jake. Jake later found the Void, and tried to join it. The Void did not want him though, and instead mocked them. Four new people created from the darkness joined the world. They were Serenity, Austin, Bella and Carter. Eventually the group of 8 felt they needed more balance among them, and so they each created someone of the opposite sex. The playmate, Dawn, created Nathan. Mike made Jen. Ryan; Raven. Jake; Cora. Serenity supposedly created a boy named Brax. In truth he was Austins and Bellas son. Serenity took the boy though, and blended him with the crowd of newcomers. Austin made Sam. Bella; Ric. Lastly, Carter created Desire. Almost everyone in this world eventually became known by what group of creation they belonged to. The first four, first 8, and first 16 were in the first era. The second era arrived when out of the void came a man named Rege Raay. He waged war on the group and with him brought an army of 30 some people. They included but are surely not limited to his 7 children and their mother, Eris. Four boys; Lyle, Paxal, Uryu and Yashakiri. As well as three girls; Ostara, Vixie, and Fern. With him as well was a family of 5. The oldest brother Damien and two sets of twins. Santiago and Hash, and Cindy and Caine."

~

The three brothers had all stopped in their tracks. It was the first time they had been told of the inner peace the other side offered, along with the safety from the darkness. Vann exchanged looks with his brothers before looking at Devan again.

"How does it offer that? How are we even supposed to get there?" he asked. Devan carefully recalled what Raven had explained to him.

"If...if you are still here, still alive, then that means that there is

something inside you that has the willpower to survive. That something is your heart." Vann immediately scoffed, looking away from the bat demon. Devan grabbed his arm, making him look back. "In your heart you hold onto Gabriel and your daughter. And you!" Devan turned to Vincent who instantly bore daggers into him. "Do not dare tell me no." Tears in his eyes Vincent turned his head away. Vann stepped up to him again, gripping his shoulder.

"So we carry pain. Everyone does." Devan shook his head, looking up at him.

"No, Austin doesn't, and even Ric let go." He leaned in, onyx eyes fixating into Vann's amber golden gaze. "Let go, and all of your pain will fade away." Devan almost whispered, Vann's bright eyes shifting slightly. A low dim light began glowing from his chest, the man stepping back and looking at it. Valentine began to glow as well, the two brothers looking at each other and then to Vincent. There was no light. Vann took a step towards him, fear in his voice for most likely the first time in his existence.

"Vincent you must let go of them.." The youngest brother bit his lip tight, tears welling up in his eyes as he slowly shook his head, his whole body trembling.

The starry night sky filled with black clouds before their very eyes, lightning cracking above them. The giant lake below the cliffs churned like it's very core had been shaken, the waters themselves slowly coming to life.

Vann stared in horror at the direction of the cliffs, looking to Vincent. "VINCENT LET GO!" he screamed, Valentine moving towards him. The youngest brother stepped back, shaking his head violently.

The winds rushed the plains, clouds of pure black water shooting out of the lake and into the sky, rising above the cliffs.

"VINCENT!" Valentine screamed, but the youngest brother closed his eyes tight, stepping away as Valentine came closer still.

"NOO!!!" he cried, looking at Devan. "My Vonali....I'M NOT LIKE YOU..." he hung his head, sobs racking his body.

The clouds of black began shifting, all at once piercing through the air and towards the four men. Vann began towards Vincent, Devan stopping him.

"You can't touch it!" he shouted over the roar of the winds. Vincent looked over as the clouds of Void came closer and closer.

"I would never let go if I could choose to hold on.."

Devan, Vann and Valentine helplessly watched as Vincent took off running. The clouds of Void shot through the air, finally grasping what it sought. The darkness surrounded Vincent, the man falling to his knees inside it and holding his face.

"Lucifer..Vonali..."

As fast as it all happened, the Void was gone and the empty, starry night sky had returned above them. Devan looked up at Vann, then to Valentine. The dim lights still glowed from their chests, the two brothers exchanging stares. Devan put his hand to Vanns shoulder, looking up at him once more.

"I beg of you...you made him to remove the weakness' from yourself. You have to let go Vann." Valentine stepped up beside them, Devan turning his gaze. "Victor, I know that it has never been easy for you, but you have always had your brother. You always will. On the other side, the pain Vincent carried and refused to let go does not exist."

Vann took Valentines hand, giving him a reassuring, yet sad smile. "I'm sorry." Valentines searched his older brothers' eyes, finding only truth. Tears slowly welled up, the light in their hearts glowing brighter and brighter. Vann took his baby brother into his arms, hugging him tightly, and with a final flash, they were on the other side.

Devan trembled before falling to his knees, clutching his head. His breathing became rapid before he took in a single deep breath.

"FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!!!"

"A man named Ashton had arrived from the void just before Rege Raay. The void had sent him as a messenger to the first 16. The message to prepare themselves for war. Ashton however did not relay it. Rege Raay came and they took the first 16 prisoners, doing things of ungodly nature to them. Somewhere behind the scenes of all this, the playmate Dawn had fled, the darkness in her heart that was put there by the girl was destroying her. At the end of the war Rege Raay attempted to murder everyone on both of the sides using a poison he had created. Only 2 escaped. Austin, who had helped Dawn to flee, and Raven. Ever since her very creation Raven had been a demon. When Rege Raay attempted to inject the poison it sent her body into overdrive and she tore right out of the building. The twin wolf demons Cindy and Caine were sent after Austin. During a glorious chase in which Rege Raay succeeded, Austin had found that Ravens body had finally shut down."

Nanami put her pen down, leaning back once more as Raven entered the room.

"My queen?" she asked. Nanami looked back down at the paper, assuming Raven was curious about the story.

"I cannot be sure the Void will not win this war. I want to have a detailed account of our history so that the future may know of us once we are all gone."

CARRE ROUGE

CassEnglish

There is a woman in our town. No one knows her name. No one knows where she's from. No one knows where she lives. All they know is that she runs the bakery at the end of Mary Anne lane. The woman is beautiful. She has eyes as green as the forests of Ireland, hair as red as a wild fire and lips pink like the blush in your cheeks. When I was a little girl my mother and I walked past her bakery. I remember the smells of the sweetest bread and pastries mixed in with the smell of flower blossoms. Men were queued up ready to buy anything just so they could talk to her. I couldn't blame them. I wanted to hear her voice too. I heard it sounded like the small bells of Nostradamus as soft and sweet as a song. She could make the sting of rejection feel like a flower petal landing on your palm.

I wanted to meet her but my mother was green with envy. She hated the mysterious women. She hated that her pasties were no match for the woman's. She hated that the woman was admired by all the men in Paris. Most of all she hated when I said I wanted to be like the women instead of her.

"Why would you want to be like that whore?" my mother asked me on my thirteenth birthday. I didn't know how to answer her without getting a meter ruler wacked across my knuckles like she had done many times before to 'discipline' me. I tried to swallow but there was nothing to swallow. My mouth was as dry as a desert and my tongue felt like sandpaper. I wish my father was here to help me but he was fighting in the war.

"Well?" my mother snapped her voice as sharp as a razor. I flinched away and stuttered what I really thought for the first time in my life "S-she's k-kind mother. I-I've never seen her d-do anything bad. I-I want her b-beauty. S-she's not just b-beautiful one t-the outside m-mother but with-within too"

This made my mother mad.

I remember I hid from her that night. I ran out of the house and down to the bakery at the end of Mary Anne lane. I don't know why I ran that way. It was like my feet had a mind of their own. My mother's angry yells followed my footsteps. I burst through the door and with a thud I landed on the wooden floor. The woman was behind the counter with her red hair pulled up in a messy pony tail by a blood red scarf and her apron was covered in flour. I didn't understand how someone could look as beautiful as her covered in flour. It made her

tanned skin look more perfect.

She looked at me in surprise then rushed to my aid. I was stunned. I couldn't move. I didn't know that I had broken my wrist in the fall until her long gentle fingers caress my exposed skin for injuries.

"Are you okay young one?" she asked. The rumours were true. Her voice was exactly how I imagined it to be.

I nodded but winced when she put pressure on my already swelling wrist. Her chuckle filled the empty room then my mother burst through the door "I knew you'd come here you ungrateful child!" she roared like a beast.

The women helped me to my feet and stood in front of me. This beautiful woman was protecting me from the beast that had been scarring my flesh with rulers, stones, her own nails and fists.

"Is this your daughter?" the women asked. My mother scowled and clenched her fists "Of course she is you bitch now move out of my way!" she spat. The woman looked down as fear engulfed me. I felt like I was in one of my nightmares. I was scared for the woman. I knew how much my mother could hurt me. I didn't want her to hurt this woman. The woman gave me a reassuring smile and turned to my mother "Please leave this property immediately" I had never heard anyone use such a large amount of confidence in their voice towards the beast. My mother never looked so stunned in her life but the fear that was in her eyes left as quickly as it came "She disobeyed me so she must suffer the consequence! Give her to me!" my mother yelled.

The woman- no the angel spread her wings and protected me. She made my mother leave. She made the beast go away, the very thing that hunted my reality.

"What's your name my dear?" she asked me while she locked the door. "E-Esmeralda" I answered shyly. She smiled and warmth spread through my heart like the red scarf in her hair had wrapped itself around it. "That's a beautiful name. My name is Carre Rouge. Would you like me to take care of you until your father comes home?"

I gasped Carre Rouge. Her name was as beautiful as her. My angel finally had a name.

"He's in the war." I whispered. She nodded and her eyebrows knitted together "I see... Esmeralda I have an extra bed in my apartment upstairs. I would really love the company. Will you please stay with me?" I nodded and she took me in.

Carre treated me like her little sister. Over the years she taught me how to bake, cook and paint the most beautiful master pieces which she used to decorate her bakery. She encouraged my will to paint. Until I graduated this year she drove me to and from school each and every day. She kept my monster mother away and paid me for working in her bakery. I loved my life. I loved the bakery and I

loved her as much as a little sister could ever love her older sister. She was my guardian angel.

When my father came home he left my awful mother for my angel. My father the warrior from the war had found his true love. My sister had turned into my mother.

The only reminders of my old life with the beast were the scars she left on my skin. Even those were beginning to fade like footsteps on a beach.

When I was nineteen years old my angel grew sick. At first my warrior didn't notice and neither did I. She had been putting a brave face on for us but one morning I noticed her skin had turned pale, white like snow and her lips were turning grey like the clouds. Her wild fire hair was streaked with silver and her eyes reminded me of a forest being cut down and burned. My angel, my beautiful flower was wilting.

My father and I did everything we could. We worked extra hours at the bakery so she could rest. We used our money to buy the best medicine money could buy but she was still wilting away.

On December 25th she passed away under the watchful eyes of her warrior and her daughter. I had to do something in her honour. I had to do something to make people remember that she wasn't just a pretty face, that she wasn't just a mysterious bakery owner. I knew her, my father knew her. She had a heart as pure as gold. Her last words to me were "Paint little one. Paint and continue your passion and please remember me."

I knew what I had to do. I painted. I painted every chance I had. I painted in the bakery where she found me and saved me. I painted in the park where she showed me how to feed the birds and care for nature. I painted under the Eifel Tower where she showed me the most precious form of love was found: between two people. Man and women, man and man or women and women.

While I set up my canvas one day under the tower a boy from a foreign country sat beside me on the wall and watched me paint. He smiled and said "What's it called?" I didn't understand him at first but I was taught Basic English in school so after some thought I answered "It's called Carre Rouge."

The man smiled and translated "The Red Scarf."

I nodded and looked at my painting. It was an Angel with eyes as green as the forests of Ireland, hair as red as a wild fire and lips as pink as the blush in your cheeks. The Angel had one arm wrapped around a man in an army uniform and a girl, a girl with hair as blond as sunrays, eyes as blue as the carabin sea and lips as red as a rose. The Angel, the Warrior and the Daughter were surrounded by a red scarf. The man smiled "It looks finished. Are you going to sell it?"

I shook my head "No, it's too precious to sell."

The man's eyebrows knitted together in thought then he spoke in French "This woman, the angel, was important to you?"

A tear escaped my eye and rolled down my cheek. My throat clamped shut like a vice and I nodded.

The man held out his tanned hand to me and said "Please tell me your story over dinner. I'm a writer and I came to Paris looking for a story of love. Allow be the honour of writing your story."

I stared at the man. He had hair as red as a rose, eyes golden like the sun and lips as pink as the blush in your cheek. He was handsome. The most handsome man I had ever seen in my life. Had my angel returned to me?

I swiped a tear from my cheek and nodded.

Aodh Conall and I fell in the type of love that you only read about in books. We were married under the Eifel Tower and had a little girl who we named Carre Rouge Conall. The Red Scarf.

FAN FICTION



or: Leanna's Return

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

ME₂ HELLDIVER SAGA

CHAPTER 40: FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW

Veyron722skyhook
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It felt more empty than usual on the Normandy now that a lot of the team had left. Still, there were enough faces still here to stop it from feeling very lonely.

To be fair, of course, no one was actually on the Normandy at all. In fact, the Normandy was in pieces.

Once again docked at Arkadia, the ship was being given a huge new refit with some of the newest technology and even more upgrades than before.

At the moment, everyone was simply enjoying a nice long break of shore leave on Arkadia while the Normandy was being refitted. Even Joker didn't mind having off duty time off the ship.

Austin was also using this time to search through some possible candidates to replace Kelly's position on the Normandy.

They didn't necessarily need to have the same skills as her. In fact, they really just needed the right qualifications for serving on the Normandy in general. Austin felt also that they didn't really need another physiologist if he was honest.

So far, the Major had gone through 69 academy graduates and he hadn't made a final choice yet. He still hadn't the right person that he felt would be the right person for serving on the Normandy. A lot of them seemed more skilled in the field than on a ship.

That all changed however when Austin saw the 70th. Her profile looked quite good. Loads of good qualifications, a degree in College, and she was a combat specialist. Not bad frankly. In fact, this was by far the best one he'd seen out of the list of 70 he'd been given. He dared say in fact that this woman seemed perfect for the job.

Scrolling down the datapad, he clicked the button and made all the arrangements for her to be transferred to the Normandy. It would be maybe another month, two at most, until she arrived, but that was not a problem. With the Collectors destroyed they had nothing but time right now.

Currently all of the Helldiver crew had been gathered in Dell's workshop under his request.

"Early birthday presents for you all. Since returning to Arkadia, Sill and I have been working and some huge new upgrades for you all.

Some of them have even been designed for you specifically in mind." the Arkane announced.

He indicated over to his workstation which was practically overflowing with hundreds of new upgrades.

Everyone seemed quite excited by this and they started looking at some of the new designs and upgrades Dell had built.

Dash in particular seemed the most excited about this. So much so, he couldn't contain it.

"Hell yeah! It's upgrade time!"

Dell suddenly noticed that Austin was somewhere different. He had a control panel in his hand and he was stood in front of a holographic projection of his suit.

"Shepard, what are you doing?" he asked.

"Giving my armour a redesign." Austin replied.

It was now that Dell saw that parts of the hologram armour had been removed and some had been replaced with some new parts.

"Really? You've been the same way for more than 10 years. Why change it now?" Sandra asked.

"A lot's changed. Besides, I also got given a special cape which denotes my Knighthood. I'd like to start wearing it with my armour. Plus, admittedly, my current look does seem a bit... obsolete and I think I should have something that better shows my rank as a Major." said Austin. It was now that everyone noticed that Austin did indeed have a shoulder cape draped over his arm and that a hologram of the same cape was attached to the back of the armour "Here's what I've done so far."

Dell examined the hologram in more detail. So far, Austin had added more plate armour to his new look which gave him much tougher and more muscular tone.

"Actually, that's not bad. The extra musculature also leaves some space for some of the new upgrades. This'll work well." he said.

"Thanks, Dell." said Austin. "It can definitely be built with what we have, right?"

"Please, I packed enough upgrades and new armour parts for Griffin, and he's twice your size. Redesigning you will be easy." said Dell.

At that moment, Sarah entered. A large container was also hovering behind her as it followed.

"Austin, while you're working on that, I recently got a hold of something you can maybe incorporate into your new look." she said.

Now interested in seeing what Sarah had in the container, both Austin and Dell walked up to it. The N7 marine opened it to reveal another set of armour. More specifically, it was a set of armour called The Blood Dragon armour.

Though it was sci-fi in look, it had a somewhat medieval feel to it

as well due to the armour's styling.

"Wow! Sarah, this is... where'd you get this?" Austin asked in surprise.

"Some of my friends in the N7 program acquired it from a raid on a Cerberus base. They were debating what to do with it when I found out. I made the necessary calls to get a hold of it and thought you might like it." Sarah smiled.

"You shouldn't have, Sister." Austin smiled as he hugged her.

"Better still, it's got a Dragon on it. Yeah, I can definitely use bits of this for my armour." said Austin.

True enough, the large blood red tattoo of a Dragon was on the front left hand side of the armour and extended all the way to the back.

"Will it be compatible though?" Sarah asked. There was of course the worry that Austin couldn't use two together since they were both two different sets of armour.

"Helldiver armour is designed with maximum customization in mind and it's also built to be compatible with armour like this." said Austin.

Dell also examined the armour closely. He also scanned it with his omni tool. From his reaction, the results seemed to be pretty positive.

"Hmm, definitely compatible. But, the metal might not be as strong as Helldiver armour." he said.

"Don't you a special chemical for that, though? Converts weaker metal into Helldiver armour, or is that just a myth?" Sarah asked.

"Even if I can't use the parts, they can easily be copied." said Austin.

"No need. She's right about the chemical, it'll work for this. Trust me." said Dell.

"Well, if you're sure." said Austin.

As he did, he pressed a couple of buttons on the control panel he was holding. A holographic copy of the armour was projected above the armour so it was ready for Austin to start adding the bits he wanted to his own armour.

"You can't use all of it though." Dell advised.

"Don't worry, Dell. I wasn't planning to. I'm only gonna use bits of it. Specifically, the chest bit, especially the Dragon Symbol, that's definitely going on." said Austin.

Sure enough, the hologram of the chest piece separated from the main armour and joined onto the hologram of Austin's Helldiver armour.

"Isn't that were you're N7 logo is though?" Sarah asked.

"Doesn't matter now though, does it? Shepard's not in the Alliance anymore." said Alara, who was still trying out loads of new

upgrades with the others.

"Officially, yes. Unofficially though, I am still in the N7 program. That's why I've still been wearing my N7 colours. I wouldn't be allowed to wear them if I wasn't still in the program." Austin explained.

"That's nice to hear." Said Sarah.

"Anyway, the logo's not a problem. I'll just move it so that it's on the right side of my chest. That way it doesn't overlap the Blood Dragon." Austin continued.

Sure enough, the N7 logo on the hologram's chest moved so that was now on the right side and well clear of the blood Dragon.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, the shoulder and forearm parts I'll use as well. I like their medieval look. Think I'll also use the back. I'd like to use the helmet as well if possible." said Austin.

The shoulder and forearm parts, along with the back part joined onto the armour. The helmet however simply remained separated. Austin would need to dismantle that and adjust the pieces first.

"Yeah, that can work. You'll need to be specific where the pieces go on your helmet though." said Dell.

"I'll handle that bit." said Austin.

"What about the legs?" Sill asked.

"Hmm, they're not quite as armoured as I'd like. I like the hip bits though. I think I'll use them. Other than that though, I think that's it."

Finally, the hologram hip parts joined Austin's armour. All he had to do now was take the Blood Dragon helmet apart and make the holographic model that would tell the computer where bits of that helmet went exactly on his triangular Helldiver helmet. After that, he simply had to finalize the design.

"Well, you get set to work designing the final look using the holo Armour builder. Meanwhile, I'll check the others." said Dell.

Ventra meanwhile had found a new shoulder mounted plasma cannon that was shaped very much like a crossbow, but without the string.

"Gotta say, I love this." said the Turian.

"Had a feeling you might. It was designed with you I mind. Sadly we couldn't make it an actually crossbow. It would fire fine, but we couldn't get it too reload automatically. Always had to be done by hand. So we settled for it being a plasma cannon resembling crossbow." said Dell.

Kraan meanwhile, had now found a new weapon which was both a blend of a massive axe similar to his, and a minigun.

"Nice." the Krogan smiled.

"That's a good look for you, Kraan." said Griffin.

"Got anything sporty?" Dash asked.
"Might do. I need someone to try this one out anyway."
After a few minutes, Dell had finished installing, what he'd said, would be a new stealth system into Dash.

"Ready?" he asked.
"I was born ready. Fire it up!" said Dash.
There was a slight humming sound as the upgrade powered up.
"Okay, it's on. Do you feel any different?" Dell asked.
"No. Am I invisible? Huh, am I? Can you see me?" Dash said, rather quickly.

"Calm down." Said Dell. "No. I can still see you. Try jumping."
Dash immediately jumped up into the air. Still nothing unexpected happened.

"Jump!"
"I jumped. Did that work, Dell? I can do it again. Please, let me do it again. Want me to jump again? I'll do it right now. I won't even stop. Letmejump! Letmejump! Letmejump! Why aren't you answering me when I talk with my mouth?!" said Dash, now really fast. Even he never talked this fast before.

"Hmm, walk over there." Said Dell. "I have a theory. This is either super healing, or super-"

He was interrupted though when Dash started walking but it suddenly tuned into a run and he sped right off at practically 60 mph, and whooping at the top of his voice.

"Wooooohooooo!"

"-speed." Dell finished. "Hmmm, so that's where it went."

Dash practically ran five circles around the entire workshop.

"Slow down! Slow down! SLOW DOWN, DASH!" Dell yelled. But he'd said it too late.

"YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEHAAAAA-
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO OOOOWW!"

Dash ran straight at a nearby wall and unable to slow down, smacked right into it with a loud clang.

"Imbecile." Dell muttered.

"Ow! Whoa, Dell. Hey, did you see that? Did you see? I saw it. I saw it. Totally. Did you see? I hit that wall. Man, that was fast. It was super-fast. I'm so fast...God, so fast! Why's it so hot in here?!" said Dash quickly.

"Dash, calm down!" said Dell, much more sternly this time.

"I'm calm. I'm totally calm. You be calm! Why would you say to be calm when I'm already calm?! Isn't it obvious that I'm calm?! That doesn't make any sense! You should make some sense! Why's it so hot in here?!" said Dash.

"What's with all the racket?" Austin asked. He was finding it hard to concentrate with Dash's constant talking.

"Hey, Shepard! Dell is doing some experiments, and I'm helping him, Shepard. Right now we doing where everyone talks super slow and the lights are bright and I get to smell clouds and man is it so hot in here!" said Dash.

"I thought I was installing a new cloaking tech on him. Turns out I accidentally installed my prototype speed booster." Dell explained.

"Dumb question, but is it meant to speed him up mentally as well as physically?" Austin asked.

"Like I said, not tested yet. Must be a malfunction." Said Dell.

"Well just turn it off."

"I can't. Not while he's awake. It's speeding up his brain as well as his body. If I turn it off while he's still awake it might cause brain damage." Said Dell.

"In Dash's case, that wouldn't be anything new." Said Kraan.

"I heard..." Dash went to say, but he then suddenly stopped and just fell to the ground.

"What just happened?" Austin asked.

"Well, I put on timer on it as a safety mechanism just in case it might go faulty. Looks like the timer ended and it's put him to sleep. Should give me enough time to remove the booster so I can finish it." Said Dell.

At that moment, the pad in Austin's hand lit up.

"Finished?" Dell asked.

"Yep. All finalised, I've checked everything thoroughly... it's pretty much ready to be assembled." Austin replied as he walked up to chamber that would start assembling his new suit inside now that the holo design had finished compiling everything together like it was a jigsaw puzzle.

With nothing more to say, Dell simply nodded.

Austin activated the panel and several robot arms appeared out of the floor. They began taking Austin's current Helldiver armour and the Blood Dragon armour apart piece by piece as the new assembly began.

"ETA to completion: 10 minutes."

"While your new armour's being built, I've got something that's meant for everyone. I just need a proper test." said Dell.

The Arkane held up what looked like a tiny chip of some kind.

"A tiny microchip?" Sandra asked.

"It's an implant." Dell corrected.

"I suppose it couldn't hurt to try." Said Sandra. "What does it do?"

"Well, let me inject this into you and you'll find out." said Dell as he held up a large injection gun.

"Wait, inject?" Sandra asked.

Before she could get an answer though, Dell took her wrist in his hand and fired the gun into it. She felt a bit of sting from it. It was nothing too painful, but it did sting a lot.

"Ouch."

"Don't be such a baby." said Dell. He then pointed to Sandra's armour which was currently neatly unassembled on the floor.

"Alright, you see your armour over there?"

"Yeah..."

"Summon it to you?"

"What?"

"Go on. Just concentrate very hard and imagine it assembling around you without the use of a machine." said Dell.

Sandra simply shrugged and began focusing. To her utter surprise, one of the gauntlets from her armour suddenly hovered in the air and zoomed towards her, immediately sliding onto the correct place on her arm.

"Whoa!" Austin exclaimed.

"But's that's not possible. I'm not a biotic. Was that the implant?" Sandra asked in surprise.

"Gotta say, Dell, you may have outdone yourself this time. How'd you make this possible?" Austin asked.

"I experimented around with several biotic amps. Eventually, I found a way of making a slightly different version. In this case, you can now summon and control every piece of your armour using your brain." Dell explained.

"So these aren't biotic amps?" Sandra asked.

"No. Besides, it only applies to your armour. You can't control or move anything else." said Dell.

"Does it apply to weapons and armour attachments as well?" Austin asked.

"The implant takes note of any attachment, weapon, or anything else attached or bonded to your armour. You simply think it, and it does it."

"And you made one for each of us?"

"Since the test has been so successful, I plan on making them for all Helldivers. I just felt you'd be the best ones to use it for field tests. Seems perfect for a squad of Helldiver's like you." Dell smiled, quite proud of his work.

At that moment, the suit assembly finished the final part of Austin's armour. Rather than being assembled outside of him whole like Helldiver armours used to be, it was now in a neatly arranged unassembled pile. To the untrained eye, it simply looked like a large, oddly coloured briefcase.

"Well in that case, let me try it with my new look." said Austin.

"By my guest, Shepard."

Austin stretched his arm forward and concentrated as best he could. At first, nothing seemed to happen.

"Those who are biotics will find it much easier. Soldiers like you though, it may take some getting used to." said Dell.

"We don't have to think about the position of each bit individually do we? That's gonna be very tricky if we have to get it exactly right." said Austin, still trying to concentrate. The unassembled armour moved a tiny bit, but so far no individual part did anything.

"Don't worry about that. The implant has a small cybernetic brain that knows where each individual bit has to go. You simply tell the suit to assemble with your mind, and it handles the rest." Dell explained.

That seemed to make it bit easier for Austin. First the right gauntlet attached to him, and then the large unassembled pile broke apart into loads of parts, each of which flew at Austin and attached to exactly the right spots on his suit mesh. Within just a few seconds. His brand new look was fully assembled.

Everyone looked in awe at their leader's new look. He looked amazing.

Austin had replaced his original armour style with a more tougher and muscular one. In fact, the only thing that did seem to remain from his original armour was the wrists and hands and the N7 colour scheme which had been painted onto the right shoulder of the Blood Dragon armour which of course replaced the original.

Easily noticeable of course was Austin's new cape which hung from his right shoulder down to where the cape stopped at his waist, the back corners of his shoulder also had some large extra plating on them. At first, they looked oddly like vents, but it was easy to see now that they were obviously just styled like that.

The helmet of course retained the exact same familiar triangular shape that all Helldivers had to keep the same. Austin however had done an excellent job of attaching the dissembled part of the Blood Dragon armour helmet in certain places. The circular parts that had the speech lights on them had been attached on either side of the helmet just as they had been on their original version and also the glowing red visor that made up the eye of the Blood Dragon armour had been cleverly placed over the front so that it looked like Austin's helmet now had an actually glowing eye.

Then of course, there was the Blood Dragon logo. True enough, it adorned Austin's left side going over the right shoulder all the way to the back. It really did give him a somewhat intimidating warlord look. And then last but not least of course, Excalibur and all of Austin's other weapons had attached to his back.

"Well, how do I look?" Austin asked.

It seemed his armour had a new voice changer as he almost sounded nothing like himself. His voice was deeper and somewhat more metallic.

"Whoa!"

"Looking good, Bro! Looking very good." said Sarah approvingly.

"Shepard 2.0... absolutely badass." said Dash, giving two thumbs off.

"Really does suit you actually. The cape also adds to it. You really look like a high ranking Major now."

The cape itself also had a symbol on it as well. The symbol was that of a silver figure wearing a Greek helmet with a sci-fi look.

As Austin looked around inside his helmet, he found that the HUD looked different as well. It had an even more advanced look than before.

"We got a system upgrade too I see." he said.

"Thought you might like it with your new look. I've given this HUD to everyone of course, but you're the first." said Dell. "There's nothing to new at the moment. It just has a slightly newer look and faster processing power. Bit more efficiency and performance as well.

To really complete the new look, Austin drew Excalibur and activated his omni blade. As he tried however, the omni tool came on, but not the actual blade.

"What's wrong with this thing?" said Austin as he tried to get it working.

"Oh sorry. Forgot about that. Hang on, I'll fix It." said Dell.

Dell fiddled around with Austin's omni tool for a quick minute, before he finished.

"There, that should do it. Try it now."

Austin once again activated his omni tool. This time, the blade came on.

Instead of the usual omni blade sound however, it came on with the sound of a Lightsaber from Star Wars. The blade was also much longer now. In fact, it was so long that the lower part of it actually went across his wrist.

"You upgraded this too?" Austin asked as he gave the new omni blade a few swings.

"I thought you might like a new weapon with double use. Because this new omni blade is so big now, it can also be use defensively as well as for attack." said Dell.

"Oh, so I can use it as a shield as well? That's quite handy actually." said Austin, impressed at Dell's thinking with this.

"Not as clumsy or random as a blaster, as they often say." said Dell.

As Austin deactivated the blade, his omni tool suddenly beeped, this time with a message.

"Seems I might even have an opportunity to field test my new armour as well. The Arkane Council just gave me a new mission." said Austin.

"This soon?" Alaara asked.

"Well, it's not really a mission per say. They found a lead on the Shadow Broker and they'd like me to give it to Xun." said Austin.

He noticed Liara's attention suddenly snap to him instantly at the mention of the Shadow Broker. He hadn't forgotten why she wanted the Shadow Broker dead as much as Xun did.

"Think I know why we've been given it now. I think they've just finished the Normandy's refit now." said Dell.

"Liara, Dash, suit up. You're coming with me for this one." he said.

Liara simply nodded while everyone else took this as a message to start picking the upgrades they wanted as they would only be staying a short time.

"Get ready for a major remodel, fellas! We're back in hardware mode!" Dash cheered.

Everyone, including Joker, made their way to the docking bay. They'd expected that the changes wouldn't be huge. They were very wrong.

The Normandy they saw was very different from the SR2. It was even larger than before. Three times bigger than the original Normandy and twice as large as the 2nd. Although this new Normandy was still the SR2, it had received so many changes and upgrades that was practically a brand new ship altogether hence why it had been christened the SR3.

The SR3 of course still had the exact same style as the SR2, but the main thrusters had been changes lightly so that they were now at angles which gave the SR3 a slightly more Stealth like look to it.

Taking a full tour of the ship could wait until they got back from Illium. Delivering the data on the Shadow Broker to Xun was top priority, especially when it concerned the Shadow Broker.

It was quite a surprise for the three Helldivers when they walked into Xun's office. Due to Austin's new armour design, she didn't recognize them.

"Who are you, Soldier? What are you doing on Illium?" she asked.

"Xun? It's me. Shepard." Said Austin, rather surprised that a close friend of his wouldn't recognize him.

"Shepard?! Oh god, I'm so sorry! I hadn't realised you'd changed your look." said Xun in surprise.

"Should've let you know in advance. My bad." said Austin.

Xun got up from her seat and embraced her friend warmly.

Austin of course hugged her back.

"It's so good to see you again, my old friend. I heard about your victory against the Collectors. Well done! I also understand you're a Knight now. Congratulations." said Xun.

"Thanks, Xun. It's good to see you as well." Austin smiled.

Xun sat back down at her desk and Austin also took a seat.

"Not that I'm complaining, but it seems odd you'd come back here. Has something come up?" the information broker asked.

"You could say that. The Arkane Council gave me some data on where to find the Shadow Broker. Interested?" said Austin.

"Absolutely! Let's see what you've got."

Austin handed Xun the data and she accessed it. The data began projecting loads of different images simultaneously. Xun studied it very closely.

"Hmm, it looks like a leaked message between Shadow Broker operatives. Hints very heavily to the location, and..."

Another image appeared, this time it seemed to be of a Drell.

"Goddess! It's about Feron. He's still alive!" said Liara in delight.

"You're friend? The one who helped recover my body from the Shadow Broker?" Austin asked.

"The same. He sacrificed himself to save Me." said Liara.

"I'm quite surprised. I'd never found anything suggesting he was alive." Said Xun.

"After two years, I hadn't even dreamed..." said Liara, struggling to continue her sentence.

"Sounds like you and Feron were close. Nothing I should know about?" Austin asked teasingly.

"Austin, stop it." Liara chuckled. "No. Feron and I were just friends. Nothing more. Besides, for two years I made it crystal clear that I was, as you humans say... taken."

"You're engaged also, I see. Congratulations." Xun smiled, noting Liara's ring.

"Thank you, Xun." Liara smiled. "It's strange though. Feron betrayed me more than once. He was double-dealing for Cerberus, for the Shadow Broker... But in the end, he sacrificed himself for me. I owe him."

"Any friend of yours is a friend of mine, love. We'll get him back. What's the next step?" Austin asked.

"Xun?" Liara asked.

"I don't know yet. We need to prepare, to think." said Xun.

"I'm going home. Use my terminal if you need any local Intel."

"You okay?" Austin asked as Xun once again got up from her desk.

"For two years, Liara and I have been plotting revenge. But now we have the chance to make it a rescue operation." said Xun.

"Let us help, Xun. Liara wants this just as much. Why don't we come by your apartment later?" Austin suggested.

"Good idea. Hopefully by then, I'll have a plan. Zàijìàn, Shepard." said Xun.

The Chinese Helldiver left, leaving just the three of them.

"Thank you, Austin. You've no idea how much this means to me." Liara smiled, retracting her helmet.

"I've seen many times what you had to go through to rescue me, Liara. Guess this is my way of returning the favour." said Austin, also retracting his helmet since he knew where this was going.

"I love you so much."

"I love you too."

Dash simply rolled his eyes as the engaged couple kissed.

"Get a room, you two." he sighed.

Finding Xun's apartment hadn't been hard, but it looked like getting in would be. There were police skycars parked outside and Austin could already see a police line blocking the exit. Inside the apartment were several officers scanning the place. There were bullet holes in the window and the place was a bit of a mess. Something had happened here.

"What's going on?" Austin asked.

"This area is sealed off. Please..." but the leader officer stopped abruptly when she saw that the three of them were Helldivers. "Oh! A Helldiver. I hadn't realised they'd sent you."

"Why is this area sealed off?" Austin repeated.

"Someone tried to kill your friend, Major Shepard." said a voice.

An Asari had appeared at the top of the stairs. She was dressed in some sort of blue armour which had a white symbol on the left shoulder. Something about that symbol looked extremely familiar to Austin, but he just couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Thank you, officer. Your people are dismissed." she said.

"Wait, you can't just do that!" the officer objected.

"Already done."

All the officers rather reluctantly left. The armoured Asari then made her way down the stairs and introduced herself.

"Where have I seen that symbol before? It looks so familiar." Austin kept asking in his mind. It was nagging him like crazy.

"Tela Vasir. Special Tactics and Recon."

Now Austin remembered. Now though, he was starting to wish that he hadn't as it brought a bitter amount of anger in him.

"Spectre?"

"Heard you weren't reinstated. Too bad – you did good work." said Vasir. "So I assume you had business with your friend this

evening, Major?"

"Yes. But I don't see how that's any concern of yours, Spectre. This is Helldiver business. You're not supposed to be here." said Austin bitterly.

Despite that she'd not been a Helldiver as long as Austin had; even Liara was familiar with the relationship between Helldivers and Spectres. They didn't hate each other, but they certainly didn't trust one another.

Helldivers disliked the idea of someone having unlimited power with no accountability. It made them too unpredictable and it also went against the Helldiver code. Though the Helldivers had many of the same courtesies that Spectres had, they had rules to go by. This prevented them from abusing their power and falling to their pride and greed.

Plus, Alpha Squad, and Austin especially, had more reason than most to dislike Spectres. They'd had to work with a few in their time. They knew not all Spectres were bad, but all the ones that they'd been forced to work with had been nothing but bossy, arrogant and selfish. The last one they'd had to work with had finally crossed a line when he ordered them to pursue their target, which involved leaving many innocent civilians to die. That went against one of the unbreakable prime rules of the Helldivers. Aside from the nobility and responsible use of power, one of those rules was to never let an innocent life die, even if it meant abandoning the mission. (Very similar to a part of the Justicar code)

Alpha naturally had refused to follow the Spectre's orders and had saved many lives that day. The Spectre had attempted to have them all court martialled and discharged for disobeying him, but the Arkane's and Helldiver command had supported their side. They'd been so furious in fact that they had chosen to delay letting the Salarians join the Helldivers since the Spectre's performance made them feel that the species was too arrogant and therefore not yet ready to join them. Even to this day, the Salarians were still not allowed to join their ranks as a result of this.

The Citadel Council naturally had been furious. Of course, they knew better than to argue with the Arkanes and so instead they had revoked the Spectre's status for his poor judgement. Both sides had also come to the agreement that Helldivers and Spectres would never work together again.

Also, Austin being forced to briefly join the Spectres against his will, and Saren's betrayal had only added to Austin's particular dislike for them in general. He knew of course not all of them were like that. Nihilus for example had been okay.

At the moment however, he was less than pleased to see a Spectre here.

"I'm well within my rights to inspect an attempted murder, Shepard. As a former, Spectre, surely you understand?" Vasir objected.

"No. I don't. You've obviously forgotten that Helldivers and Spectres do not mix. We're not allies." said Austin.

"We can argue about this all you like, Shepard. We don't have to be allies, but I'm not leaving until I solve this attempted murder." said Vasir sternly.

"You Spectres are all the same. Selfish, playing lose with the law and sticking your nose where it doesn't belong." said Austin. "But I can see you're not gonna leave, no matter what I say. I won't waste my breath. My friend was hunting a lead on a rival Information Broker."

"The Shadow Broker? Dangerous enemy to have." said Vasir.

"I didn't say..."

"It's not hard to guess. Xun's second only to the Shadow Broker, so it's no surprise that she'd want to take him down."

"Did she leave anything indicating where she was going?" Austin asked.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be sifting through her crap." Vasir replied

"What did you find on Xun's terminal?"

"Not much. She wiped her drive before she left. She knew you were coming though. She must've left something."

"Possibly." said Austin.

"You knew her better than I do. Where would she have hidden her backups?" Vasir asked.

"I should look around." said Austin.

Vasir simply nodded and went to searching through the papers that been scattered all over the place.

Xun's apartment was very much like her home on Arkadia. It had the exact same style and colours. Xun was very much into embracing her Chinese lifestyle and was not afraid of showing it. All around the apartment were several Chinese lights, bright red Chinese silk which decorated the entire apartment, and among many other parts of Chinese culture. Several Chinese statues, particularly two Gold Chinese Dragons, and even a few paintings.

It did make Austin wish they could be here under different circumstances. The whole place actually looked very nice.

Austin walked up to the gunshot holes in the window.

"The rifle used to do that wasn't standard issue. Her shielding technology deflected the shots, but they still managed to penetrate the glass." said Vasir, stating the obvious.

"I'm not blind in this thing, you bitch!" Austin thought.

A few display cases also held some valuable antiques. Most of them were from ancient Chinese times, but there was one that stood out of place completely. Liara in particular looked at it with

astonishment.

"Is that...?"

"Part of my old armour." Austin finished for her.

Inside the case was large bit of Helldiver forearm armour. Austin instantly recognised it part of his set. Obviously it had been replace when Dell fixed him up when he returned to duty and now his new look had a different piece entirely. Still, it was surprising to see the missing piece here.

"I never did recover that piece. I always wondered what happened to It." said Liara, looking at the old piece of N7 from Austin that she'd added to her own armour in honour of him when he'd died. Naturally of course, Austin saw no need to have the original piece back and had let her keep it.

"Looks like someone didn't like you much, either." Vasir commented.

"Not sure what planet that is." said Liara as she and the others observed a large painting.

"It's Earth. More specifically, Ancient China." said Austin.

"I had no idea Xun was that nostalgic." said Dash.

Having searched all of the bottom part of the apartment as best they could, they no checked upstairs.

All that was really up on this level was just a large bed, an armour stand (which naturally was empty, a weapon's stand where Xun kept her Katana (also empty) and a small bedside table which had a few pictures on it.

Austin noticed one particular big one and picked it up. In the picture was all of Alpha Squad with Xun also among them.

"I... that's a picture of the time she shared her last mission with Alpha. I knew we were good friends, but I never knew she cared that much." said Austin.

Xun's friendship with Alpha hadn't been plan sailing all the time. The information broker was occasionally very unpredictable. Very often, she'd done things unannounced and completely spontaneous. It had annoyed her teammates quite a bit sometimes.

"She told me herself that she'd never had truer friends." Said Liara.

The picture then suddenly changed when Austin's finger touched the actual picture rather than just the frame.

"It changed when I touched it."

"Must be keyed to your ID. What does it show now?" Liara asked.

"Another picture of China. Xun did leave a message." said Austin.

"There are a few Chinese looking objects around the apartment." said Dash.

"Let's see what we can find."

Xun had always been rather wealthy due to her vast information network and the fact that she also worked for the Arkanes. They paid handsomely for her services, which in turn led to her full cooperation with them. From many of the artefacts in the room, Xun had obviously used a lot of the money to give herself ideally luxurious living conditions.

"Wow! That must be worth a fortune." said Dash as he looked at one of the two Dragon Statues.

"If I were you, I wouldn't touch it then." said Austin.

"Strange that she'd take a display sword." said Liara as she observed the empty weapon rack.

"That sword was the one she always used. From what she told me, that Katanas is ancestral, used by many generations of her family. There's no way she'd risk losing it."

Austin then walked up to the other Dragon statue. He was sure he could see something very small glinting inside its mouth. Sure enough, as he reached in, he felt something and pulled it out.

"Backup disk." said Dash.

"Shh!"

"You still don't trust her?" Liara asked.

"Spectres aren't allowed to become involved in Helldiver business at all. The Citadel Council themselves agreed to that. Vasir shouldn't be here at all. I don't think the Council knows about this." Austin whispered. "Keep quiet. Let me do the talking."

Dash and Liara simply nodded while Austin scanned the contents of the backup disk just to see if there was anything that Vasir would be better off not seeing.

"Vasir, we've got something." he said when he'd finally finished.

"Backup disk. Let's try it on her terminal." said the Asari.

Inserting the backup disk into the terminal made the screen show a recording of a call Xun had made to a Salarian not long ago.

"It looks like she recorded a call." said Vasir.

"What have you got for me, Sekat?" Xun's voice asked.

"It was tricky, but you paid for the best. I can narrow it down to a cluster, maybe even a system. Gotta say, though, Xun – you're making me a little nervous. How big is the trouble that could come out of this?" Sekat asked.

"Relax, Sekat. I'll see you in a couple of hours."

The call ended, leaving Vasir somewhat confused.

"She didn't give away any location information. Not quite as helpful as it could've been." she said.

"Hmm, I might know where Sekat is. He had a certain uniform that might help." said Austin as he and the others turned to leave.

"Hey! Don't think you're just leaving me!" Vasir objected.

"You found out who's responsible. Your investigation's over. It's best you stay out of our activities, Vasir. We'll handle the rest." said Austin defiantly.

"Fine! If you insist." said Vasir crossly.

"Dash, your obsession with speed, and I'm saying this a friend... concerns me." said Austin as they got out of the skycar which Dash had just been driving a bit faster than meant to be. In front of them stood the Dracon trade centre.

"You sure this is the place?" Liara asked.

"Yeah. He did actually say in the message, I just edited it out. I still don't think Vasir was there by coincidence." said Austin.

Right at that moment, the building suddenly exploded.

"XUN'S IN THERE!"

Another explosion followed this time larger. So large in fact that it swept all three Helldivers off their feet.

"Goddess." said Liara as she got up and saw the scale of the destruction.

"Come on! We've gotta get in there!" said Austin urgently.

Little chance that there'd be any more survivors. Any that had survived the blast had already assembled outside the building. Anyone else was dead.

After a while of making their way through the building, they finally reached what they were told was Sekat's office. Either him or Xun had to be there somewhere. Just as they were about to enter however, they heard to shots being fired from the other side of the door.

When they entered, they found the dead body of a Salarian and a merc of some kind. Most surprising of all though, was a familiar face.

"Damn it. If I'd been a few seconds faster, I could've stopped them." said Vasir as she holstered her gun.

"You?! What are you doing here? Are you following us?!" Austin demanded.

"The explosion could be seen half way across the city. As a Spectre, it's my job to investigate." said Vasir.

"For once, I can't argue with that." said Austin as he and everyone else holstered their guns too. "Is this Sekat?"

"Must have been." Vasir replied.

Austin checked the Salarian's body for the data. Nothing.

"Damn! No sign of that data Xun talked about. Looks like a dead end." he cursed.

"Speaking of which, did you find your friend's body?" Vasir.

"You mean this body?" a voice asked.

Everyone turned to Xun's fully armoured figure uncloak right in

front of them, and with her gun aimed straight at Vasir.

"Xun. You nearly had us worried there." said Austin.

"I'm more concerned right now about why you're in the company of the one that tried to kill Me." said Xun accusingly.

"You've had a rough day, so I'll let that slide. Why don't you put that gun?" said Vasir.

"Don't take me for a fool, Spectre! I saw you! I doubled back after I left. I watched you break into my apartment." said Xun.

"I knew there was something odd about you. You work for the Shadow Broker!" said Austin. Immediately, he, Liara and Dash all drew their weapons. "You didn't know where Xun went because she hid the message. You needed me to find it for you."

"Nothing personal, Shepard. Just needed a little help tracking down Xun." Said Vasir.

"She must've followed you after you left my apartment. Once she had my location, she signalled the Shadow Broker's forces. They bombed the building to take me out. She found Sekat, took his data, and killed him." said Xun.

"I'm guessing she's still got the disk on her." said Liara.

"Good guess. Not that you'll ever see what's on It." said Vasir. As she spoke, she held up the disk in her left hand. Everyone failed to notice however that her left hand was glowing with biotics. The glass window that she had her back facing too suddenly cracked. "YOU PURE BLOOD BITCH!"

The window smashed completely and Vasir threw the shards right at them. That had obviously been done in desperation though as the shards just simply shattered upon contact with the Helldiver's armour.

Realising that hadn't worked, Vasir made a run for the window. Xun however ran too and caught up with her. She tackled the Asari Spectre and they both smashed through the other window.

Vasir used her biotics to slow down their decent as they fell. The two wrestled furiously before Vasir overpowered Xun and kicked her to the floor, the force of the impact temporarily disorienting her due to her armour being less thicker than normal soldiers. Just as she was about to finish the Helldiver off however, Austin then jumped down as well.

Naturally of course, Austin had no need to slow his decent and he simply smashed into the ground as he landed. Vasir immediately broke into a run for the exit. Austin activated his shoulder cannon and tried to fire at Vasir's feet in an attempt to trip her up. He had to be careful not to kill her since he'd risk destroying the data if the plasma vaporised her. He fired two shots, but they both missed.

"Hold still you little..."

He fired another shot which hit the wall above the doorway

causing it to give way, fall and block the exit. Vasir was now cornered.

"Nowhere to run, Vasir. You're only exit's blocked and we outnumber you 4 to 1." said Austin as Liara helped Xun up.

"Think you better count again, Shepard!" said Vasir.

The Asari Spectre suddenly took a detonator from behind her back and pressed it. There was an explosion, and a hole appeared in the wall above her. Several more mercs jumped out of it. These however, weren't mercs with guns, they had melee weapons, more specifically Ninja ones.

"Say hello to the Shadow Broker's private army, Major. KILL THEM!"

The Ninja mercs charged at the four Helldivers. The group fired a few shots at the Ninjas before they Austin, Liara and Xun switched to their swords.

Austin and Liara in particular put their mind link to good use against these ninjas, especially seeing as they used martial arts in the fighting styles as well, something neither of them had an easy task defending against.

Dash continued sticking to his pistols and simply shooting these Broker ninjas at distance. If any did get close, he could use his new speed booster (which Dell had finally fixed and decided it was ready to be used) to dodge their attacks.

Xun meanwhile was practically on a killing spree. Her extreme Katana and Kung Fu training, which she had learned and practiced ever since she was a little girl, was practically being use overtime. She cut, she dodged, she kicked, she blocked, and the ninjas were practically finding it impossible to hit her. She was too fast for them.

Two ninjas attempted to take her from both sides, but that didn't work either. She delivered a fast, swift kick the first one's neck, which succeed in disarming him at least while he struggled to breath, and the other she kicked in the chest which also disarmed him. With one quick slash from her Katana, she cut them both down with one slice.

Vasir meanwhile had remained back and was simply observing the battle. She had to admit though that Xun was really starting to piss her off, especially seeing as how she was cutting or kicking down the mercs like they were no challenge to her.

Vasir drew her pistol and aimed at Xun. She fired assuming that the bullet would kill her. To the Spectre's utter astonishment however; Xun's free left hand whipped out her metallic Chinese fan and blocked deflected the round easily, all while his concentration had been focussed solely on finishing off another Ninja merc.

Her focus now turned slowly to Vasir. She didn't say anything, but her body language clearly said "Did you really think it would be that easy?"

As the Helldiver slowly made her way towards the Asari however, she failed to notice a stray grenade roll towards the rubble blocking the exit. The explosion from it sent both opponents off their feet, but at the same time cleared the rubble.

Vasir didn't even hesitate at the chance and ran.

"Oh no you don't!" Xun yelled as she took off after the Spectre.

"Xun, wait!" Austin yelled.

Ducking under a swipe from the last ninja, he used his sword handle to punch the ninja in the face, and then run him through.

"Come on!"

Everyone immediately took off after Xun and Vasir.

They reached outside where they'd first entered the trade centre. Both Vasir and Xun were taking cover behind spate skycars as they fired each other. Unlike many Helldivers, Xun used firearms very little and relied more on her martial arts and sword training. Also, because her armour was so light, she could move very fast.

Seeing the other Helldivers heading her way, Vasir knew she had to retreat. Activating her omni tool, she summoned her own skycar to her and jumped in.

"G?is?" Xun swore.

"Come on! We can still catch her." said Dash as he hopped into the skycar, followed by everyone else.

"You sure about this, Shepard?" Xun asked concernedly when she saw Dash would be driving.

"If anyone can keep up with a speeding skycar, it's him." said Austin. Still, the Helldiver put the seat belt on just to be safe.

"Yeah, but are you sure he can drive this thing?" Xun asked.

"They taught us these things in basic training. It's just like riding a bike." said Dash. "Please make sure you're seats and tray tables are in their upright and locked position."

The skycar took off and quickly gave chase.

"What's a bike?" Liara asked.

"She's getting away!"

Dash literally had his foot down as they sped through Ilium's skyways. Even at these hours, traffic was somewhat heavy. Even Vasir looked like she was only just able to avoid crashing into other cars.

"A head on collision at this speed..." said Xun nervously. While she was fine and calm in combat, flying and high speed car chases made her a bit nervous.

"Yeah. I hear those can be bad for you." said Austin.

"Hang a right! No, wait, left!" Said Xun urgently.

"I'm on her." Said Dash, a bit annoyed by the constant nagging he was getting.

They followed Vasir into a tunnel. The traffic seemed fine, but that was until Vasir caused a small crash which then lead to something even bigger crashing.

"Truck." Xun warned.

"I know." Said Dash.

"TRUCK!" she yelled.

"I know."

As the truck crashed and skidded, Dash quickly pulled up to avoid it. It only just narrowly missed them though, which caused Xun to nearly scream, rather to her embarrassment.

"Yaaah!

"There we go."

"You're enjoying this this?" said Liara. She too wasn't enjoying this any more than Xun.

Vasir continued to weave about the oncoming cars before she eventually dived right down. Dash was quick to follow. Everyone held on tight so as not to fall on the windscreen as they felt gravity pulling at them. Dash however was loving this.

Vasir eventually pulled up to avoid another truck that was slowly moving along. Dash however kept going down at full speed.

"Pull up, Dash. Pull up!" Austin said nervously as the truck got closer and closer.

Dash simply laughed in enjoyment before he finally pulled up right at the last minute.

"You know I don't like it when you do that!" Xun panted in shock.

"Sorry, Xun. I forgot you don't like flying." Dash chuckled.

"I don't mind flying, but what you're doing is suicide!" Xun yelled as Dash continued seeding like mad through all the traffic. Liara had gone very quiet after the dive bomb. She looked almost petrified and just about ready to faint.

Vasir managed to gain a bit more distance between them and headed through another tunnel. Dash went to follow, but Xun quickly stopped him.

"No. Keep going." said Xun quickly.

Dash simply obeyed and continued heading straight on.

"Where are we going? She went that way?" Austin argued.

"Shepard, if we keep this chase going on any longer, Vasir is gonna end up deep fried. Without that data, we lose our chance of finding the Shadow Broker." said Xun. "Don't worry, this is a shortcut."

"Good." Austin nodded.

"I think..."

Vasir sped past several other cars in the tunnel, as she

continued to watch her rear view mirror. As she exited the tunnel, she found no sign of her pursuers. Smiling smugly, the Spectre relaxed and settled back into her seat. The Shadow Broker would indeed be pleased.

Xun's shortcut sadly had not worked and they had lost Vasir completely.

"Well we've lost her." Austin groaned in frustration.

"I'm deeply sorry, Shepard." Xun replied sarcastically.

"That was some shortcut, Xun. Vasir went completely the other way!" Austin complained "Once again you've..."

But before he could finish, Xun suddenly opened the doors and leapt out of the car.

"If you'll excuse me..." she said.

Everyone looked down as they watched the information broker plummet down head first.

"I hate it when she does that." said Austin.

Xun fell for a few seconds before she managed to coordinate herself just right and she landed on Vasir's skycar.

Noticing the Chinese Helldiver hanging onto her roof, Vasir braked hard in an attempt to shake Xun off. The force of the car slowing down so fast was enough to force Xun onto the front of the skycar and onto the windscreen, but she didn't fall off.

Xun immediately reached for her pistol and fired at the glass several times. Vasir quickly responded to this by ramming her skycar very hard against another one. The force of the crash caused Xun to slip slightly and lose her grip on the pistol, which fell far out of the information broker's reach.

Vasir then partly opened the skycar's doors and fired her own pistol at Xun. The Helldiver quickly slid over to the other side of the windscreen where the door couldn't open and therefore Vasir couldn't fire at her.

Vasir was quick to respond to this however and she immediately accelerated at top speed and also dived slightly, causing Xun to slide onto the roof again. This time though, the Chinese Helldiver was able to get a better grip and she was therefore able to use her free hand to draw her Katana from her back and plunge it through the roof, making a hole large enough for her arm to fit through.

Vasir struggled as Xun latched onto her gun arm and it flayed around violently. Vasir attempted to shoot Xun, but she only ended up shooting the car's controls.

The skycar started flying out of control and descending rapidly. Noticing that there would be a crash any second, Xun leapt from the car. She landed safely among several other parked cars while Vasir

crashed into a hotel.

Dash, noticing the crash, set down in the car park and everyone got out.

"I've had better skycar rides." said Liara, a little dizzily.

When they found the crashed car, Vasir was gone. However, they noticed a trail of blood from the wreckage.

"Looks like she got hurt during the crash." said Liara.

"She's tough. I'll give her that much." said Austin.

"She's a Spectre." said Xun.

The trail led through one of the hotels bedroom which had a large holo-screen which projected an image of several Asari dancers.

"What kind of hotel is this?" Xun asked, slightly bewildered that she hadn't heard of this place before.

"Azure. It's a hotel with an... exotic edge. Azure slang for a part of the Asari body in certain parts of Illium." Said Liara.

Austin couldn't help but smile at Liara mentioning that. He wondered if Xun was familiar with the term. To his surprise, she wasn't and he had to do his best to contain his laughter.

"Where?" Xun asked.

"In the lower reaches, near the bottom." Liara replied.

"I meant where on the Asari body." Said Xun.

"So did I." said Liara, doing her best to hide her laughter when Xun's head suddenly turned sharply in her direction in shock, and for a brief second looked lower.

Even Austin and Dash had to do their best not to burst out laughing.

"For an information broker, I'm shocked that you don't know that." Said Austin.

"Well, unlike you, Shepard, I haven't had sex with several Asari." Said Xun. "Not to mention bedding two squad mates."

"You know about that, huh?" Austin asked.

"Wait, you had sex with Alaara and Sandra?!" Dash asked in surprise.

"We'll talk about it later." Said Austin.

Since Liara was already familiar about that, having seen his thoughts during a meld, Austin didn't need to worry about explaining it to her. Alpha Squad however was a different matter, and Austin very much doubted that Dash would be able to keep his mouth shut about this.

"Our second in command?! I always knew you were a ladies man, Shepard, but damn!" said Dash.

"I said we'll talk about it later!" said Austin, more sternly this time.

The blood trail continued on before they finally caught sight of Vasir limping through Azure's restaurant.

"Vasir! It's over." Liara yelled.

Vasir simply groaned before she turned to one of the waitresses.

"Hey, hey you. Come here. What's your name?"

The Asari spectre used her biotics to fling the women into her arms and pointed her gun at her attackers.

"M-Mariana." said the women frighteningly.

"Mariana, you want to live, don't you? Tell those Helldivers you want to live." said Vasir.

"Let her go, Vasir!" Austin demanded.

"You're not in position to order me around, Shepard! All you had to do was walk away. Now it gets ugly." said Vasir, pointing her gun at Mariana's head.

"Please. I have a son." she begged.

"A son? I hope he gets to see you again. I've heard losing a parent is just horrific for children Scars them for life." said Vasir coldly.

"I'm going to end you, Vasir." Said the Asari angrily. That comment had obviously been aimed right at her.

"It's okay, Liara. We'll handle this... how we always do." said Austin.

"You want Mariana's little boy to grow up with a mommy, Shepard? That's not you. Besides, I know you're gonna let me go. You Helldiver code and training forbids you from letting an innocent civilian or hostage die. You're gonna have to remember you're training, Soldier." said Vasir evilly, confident that she'd now won.

"Hiding behind a hostage. No stomach for a real fight. Just like a Spectre." Austin taunted.

"Drop your thermal clips, Shepard! Power cells, too. I won't say it again!" Vasir yelled.

"Is that it?"

"What?!"

"Vasir, I sacrificed thousands of human lives to save the Destiny Ascension, I unleashed the Rachni on the galaxy. For your sake, I hope your only plan of escape doesn't hinge on my hesitating to shoot a damn hostage." said Austin.

"You're bluffing!" Vasir yelled as she once again pointed her gun at them.

"You're right. I am."

"What?"

Only too late did Vasir notice Xun uncloak right behind her and disarm her gun arm.

"Go! Quickly!" she yelled.

Marian ran as the two opponents fought hand to hand with each other. Xun had her Kung Fu skills, but Vasir had her Spectre training which made her a match enough for the Helldiver. Vasir attempted a

biotic swing at Xun, but she dodged under it and then delivered a kick to Vasir so hard that it threw her right into one of the fountains.

Before anyone had a chance to recover however, Vasir burst out of the water, her biotics flailing in anger.

"You'll pay for that, you bitch!" she yelled.

Vasir shot forward, taking Xun with her up to higher levels and they crashed through one of the windows.

"Xun!"

The two continued wrestling with each other as they crashed through the glass and into one of the hotel rooms. Both opponents pulled out their guns and attempted to shoot each other, but at the same time they grabbed each other's wrists, causing each shot to miss. Eventually, they both skidded to a halt, Vasir and top and with both guns aimed at each other's heads.

"You're empty." Vasir growled.

"So are you." said Xun.

Not believing her, Vasir pulled the trigger on her rifle. It simply clicked.

Xun quickly back flipped, kicking Vasir off her who also landed on her feet. Both opponents threw away their useless guns and simply glared at one another for a while. Xun clearly knew where this was going and simply put her hands together. Despite the circumstances, she still respected Kung Fu traditions, even if Vasir didn't.

The very second she finished bowing; Vasir swung a kick at her. Xun however instantly parried it with her arm. Her posture straightened back up and she then lunged her own attack.

Vasir instantly brought her arm up to defend the strike and then quickly swung her other at Xun. Despite the Helldiver not knocking the punch however, it did little damage due to her metal exterior.

Both opponents exchanged strikes. Whichever one struck first, the other always seemed to block or parry.

Vasir attempted a kick at Xun, but the Helldiver blocked her knee and then delivered a swift punch to her chest plate, followed by a kick as well that sent her back against a pillar.

The Asari spectre narrowly avoided Xun's two punches as they both smashed through the stone. Vasir used this to her advantage and was able to kick Xun several times, forcing her back.

Xun however was able to regain her balance and she was able to dodge the next kick and was able to deliver her own. The sharp kick caught Vasir right in the jaw, forcing her back against her pillar, her nose bleeding and also a bit of blood trickling from her mouth.

The Asari Spectre simply wiped the blood off, but she glared angrily at Xun.

"I'm gonna enjoy watching you die... Miss Ren."

Vasir lunged again. This time, the Asari let her rage and anger fuel her strikes and she even threw her biotics into the mix which now made it much harder for Xun to block every blow.

A sudden blow from Vasir's arm caught Xun's leg which made her lose her balance slightly. The Asari then used her biotics to add even more force to her right arm as she punched Xun hard in the chest, which sent her flying and caused her to smash into the wall hard.

Small parts of debris from the wall as Xun hit it hard and she landed on the floor. The Chinese Helldiver was quick to react though as Vasir made her way over to her. Using both her arms to swing herself up, Xun used both her legs to kick the Asari Spectre away before then swinging herself back up onto her feet.

Xun made another lunge at Vasir, but she grabbed the Helldiver's wrist before a hit could be scored. Xun struggled before she was eventually able to shake her arm free of Vasir's grip. Using this to her advantage, the Helldiver followed this with several fast punches. As she swung for another one however, Vasir was able to block it with her wrist and then pin it under her arm.

Xun tried an attack with her other arm, but Vasir did the same thing. With both arms pinned, Vasir activated her biotics and slammed a warp into Xun which sent her flying.

The blow had taken its toll that time. Xun felt her whole chest ache like hell and she even tasted a bit of blood in her mouth.

The Chinese Helldiver however refused to give in. She slowly got back up on her feet and took several deep breaths. She then reached for her belt and detached her metal before then going into a battle ready stance and beckoning Vasir over with her hand.

The Asari once again charged. This time though it was much trickier for her since she now had to avoid punches and the slices from the fan. Once touch got open up a wound since the fan was so sharp.

A sudden wrong move from Vasir allowed Xun to slash the Asari across the chest which caused her to stagger back in pain, clutching her bleeding wound.

Seizing the opportunity, Xun slid under the Asari's legs swirled round, giving her a sharp kick which sent her flying back out the window.

She landed hard on the ground, the fall causing even more damage to her wounds, and she now had glass shards in her which made her bleed even more.

"Agh! Damn it!"

Xun walked up to Vasir and took the disk from her at last.

"I'll take that, thank you." she said. "Sekat's personal datapad. This has what we need to find the Shadow Broker."

"You're dead! The Shadow Broker has been in power for decades. He's stronger than anything you've faced!" said Vasir weakly, coughing on her own blood.

"That why you sold out the Council to work for him? Like a coward?!" Austin retorted.

"You think I betrayed the Council? Like Saren? Go to hell!" Vasir said weakly.

"You first." said Austin coldly.

Vasir was about to speak again, but the life left her before she could. Her eyes went blank and her head fell to one side as she died.

"No one betrays a Helldiver and lives. Would've thought you were warned about that." said Austin pitifully.

"Eliminate T'soni and Ren and retrieve the data. Civilian casualties not a concern."

"That hùn zhàng!" said Xun angrily as the Shadow Broker's message to Vasir ended.

Liara, not understanding a word of Chinese was left confused by what Xun had just said,

"What?"

"Bastard." Xun translated.

"Oh."

"Vasir's dead." said Austin as he re-joined everyone.

"You made sure of that, I see." said Xun observantly, noticing the blue blood on Austin's sword.

"Still as observant as ever." Austin smiled as he sheathed the sword back on his back.

"Nothing observant about it. You're easy." said Xun, causing Austin to simply smile and shake his head.

"So what now?" he asked.

"I'm forwarding the data through to your ship. We can be at the Shadow Broker's base in a few hours." said Xun.

"He'll know about Vasir before long. If he decides to kill Feron..." said Liara nervously.

"We'll get Feron out of there, Liara. I promise." Austin interjected, trying to sound reassuring.

"I know. Sorry. It's just nerves." said Liara, trying to hide her expression from Austin.

"Liara, don't shut me out. I'm here for you." she heard Austin say in her mind.

"I know, and I'm sorry. I'm just can't bear the thought of Feron being killed. I thought he was dead, now he's alive..." Liara replied.

"We won't give him time to even touch Feron." Said Xun confidently. "We'll need the Normandy's stealth system to get us in close undetected."

"What's the plan when we get there?" Austin asked.

"Get in, get Feron, and get out. I don't intend on us having to kill everyone, but if they insist on getting in our way, they'll force our hand." said Xun.

"That's it?"

"That's it.

"Sounds like a plan then."

Since they had a few hours now, Austin immediately felt that touring the new SR3 was in order. Being twice the size of the SR2, it was bound to not only have even more rooms than before, but also lots more stuff.

The cockpit and the CIC of course as Austin had noticed were mostly unchanged. EDI it seemed had got a massive new upgrade. She still retained her robotic avatar, but the whole ship was now equipped with an advanced holographic projection system which allowed EDI to project herself anywhere, and at human size. Now she could actually interact with the crew like she was really there. Joker in particular had taken quite a liking to that new feature. Ever since he and EDI had saved the SR2 from the Collectors, they started to get along much better now. Joker even referred to EDI as "she" and "her" now rather than originally calling her "it"

The science lab, the debriefing and the armoury that used to be on the CIC deck had now been moved and were on a different floor, except the debriefing room which was still on the same floor, but simply been changed slightly. In their place, the Arkanes had built a war room. Austin had at first been confused on this move, but he had been told that like the SR1, the SR3 had once again being co-developed by the Turians. In fact, many other races had contributed to this new ship as well. The Asari, the Quarians, all those that were in the Helldivers had co-developed and contributed in their own small way to building this new ship.

The war room itself was a large holographic table which was capable of projecting any image of a battlefield, space fight, a ship, anything really. The entrance to both it and the debriefing room, which was just outside the war room, was also guarded by a weapons detector which in turn had two gate guards standing over it. Due to the fact this war room would no doubt be used in the upcoming war with the Reapers, they could not allow spies to see and know their every move.

Another room joined to the War room was used for communication. The concept of the table in the debriefing room sliding into the floor had been abandoned and that was now all handled in this new room which was equipped with holographic projectors. This was mostly used of course for more than one person.

If just one person was talking to them, the projectors that EDI used for her avatar could also be used for people contacting them. Austin would pretty much be able to talk with anyone in any part of the ship now. Plus, the holograms were so realistic now, and complete with colour, that it actually looked as though they were they in the room with them.

As mentioned before, the CIC had been completely unchanged apart from the galaxy map being slightly upgraded. Instead of Austin looking down on it like a map, it now actually surrounded him, like he was actually in space. It was a pretty nice feature. Despite being a Helldiver ship, the sr3 had obviously been designed to be as advanced, and also comfortable, as possible.

The crew deck had now been heavily redesigned. Now the crew had their own personal quarters each, which meant a lot of rooms. The quarters that been used by Miranda, both observation decks, and the med bay had been left as they were. The med bay of course had been refitted with even more advanced technology, and had a few extra beds, but it was still as everyone remembered. EDI's AI core had been deemed to be unsuitable to be attached to the medbay and had now been moved down to the engineering deck.

The forward battery had also been moved to the engineering deck. Its place on the crew deck had been filled by what everyone agreed was the SR3's most impressive feature.

From the outside of the SR3, the edges of the observations decks could be seen sticking out slightly. That was just part of the massive circle. That area was big enough in fact to house two levels. Level 1 of course had both observation decks which were joined to the main dining area, which was even larger than the last one, and it also contained a kitchen. The second level contained a full gymnasium for the crew and the Helldivers to use. (Saved them having to use the cargo hold like last time) The simulator from last had also been included. This time it had been properly integrated into the ship and it was now no longer taking up space in the cargo bay. The gym even had a large indoor swimming pool along with a few other activities for relaxing, small spa and a steam room were included.

The engineering deck had also been redesigned slightly. The drive core of course had remained where it was. No though, it wasn't the only one. From what Dell and Sill had told Austin, the SR3 was so big, so powerful, and equipped with so much advanced technology that it needed two drive cores. As a result of course, that meant that not only did the SR3 have more power, it could even fly faster than ever before.

There was a third drive core as well, but this was an emergency backup one only. Dell had also clearly stated that the SR3 was built and optimised to work perfectly with two cores. If the backup was left

on, there was risk it could overload the systems. Just to be safe though, a safety system had been included that turned the backup core on when it detected one of the primary two was switched off, and also turned the backup off when both cores were active.

As stated before, the forward battery had been moved down to this level so the techs had easier access to it. Garrus also didn't mind since it at least meant he and Tali could chat with one another. The friendship between the two had really grown during all this. The science lab from deck 2 had been moved down to this level. It had also been made bigger than before since both Dell and Sill now occupied it and Dell had moved all his research inventions and workstation into here. Once again, it saved the cargo hold being unnecessarily crowded. Not to mention that the lab's window also had a very nice view of the cargo hold down below.

As for the cargo hold itself, it was certainly much bigger due to the SR3's massive size. As a result, they now had two dropships rather than one. The Hammerhead of course also occupied a spot. In fact, the cargo hold was so large that Dell even believed it was possible to fight a Helldiver gunship in there.

Overall, the Arkanes had really outdone themselves this team, with some help. Joker himself had even said that the Normandy had never been better and that the SR3 very nearly made the SR1 look like a tiny fighter.

Austin was currently stood alongside Joker on the bridge as they made their way towards the planet Hagalaz. It was a system far out in the outer rim. Certainly a pretty good place to hide since very little people ventured this far out, and was certainly not an easy place to find by accident. The Shadow Broker had chosen his base well.

"Approaching Hagalaz. Time to test the new stealth system. Don't see though how Dell thinks he's topped it. People will still see us if we get close enough for a visual. Especially how this thing is now nearly as big as a heavy cruiser." said Joker.

Because of the new advanced tech the cockpit had, Joker now had to wear a visor over his eyes. It didn't look silly of course. Joker even thought it looked quite cool.

"You might be surprised, Joker. Let's vanish." said Austin.

"Engaging stealth system."

From out the windows, Joker could see some of the SR3'S hull. TO his surprise, as the emotions were hidden, the Normandy itself seemed to vanish with them.

The pilot simply sighed. Once again, he'd been proven wrong.

"Hmm, so now we can hide from even windows." he said.

"That ship cloak's the first of its kind. Just the prototype and it already seems to be working well." said EDI.

It felt weird for Austin to actually see EDI like she was right

there. Her hologram was sat in the co-pilot's chair next to Joker.

"Xun and Liara have been notified, Shepard. They await you in the cargo bay." she said.

"Hagalaz. The oceans boil during the day, then snap-freeze ten minutes after sundown." said Xun.

Since the doors had to be closed, they couldn't see anything outside, but they had a visual of outside. The massive storm outside was instantly visible. Amongst it, was a massive ship that was actually flying, safely and without any sign of turbulence through the storm itself.

"The Shadow Broker lives in this?" Kasumi asked.

Since the Thief was old friends with Xun, Austin had decided to bring her alongside Xun and Liara.

"His ship follows the sunset. Completely undetectable in the storm, unless you know where to look." said Xun.

"How do we get inside?" Liara asked.

"The shuttle bay is locked down. We'll need to land on the ship and hunt for a hatch." said Xun. "But we can't stay outside for long. There's a constant lightning storm where the hot and cold air collide."

The dropships door slid open, and everyone hopped onto the hull and began their long walk along the ship. It was like having the walk along the hull of the SR2 since the broker's ship was so large. The SR3 of course was way bigger, but still...

Surprisingly, they weren't met with any resistance as they walked along the ship. Apart from some maintenance drones that seemed to mistake them for debris from the storm, they didn't encounter any mercs. It was the same when they go inside as well. Either the Broker didn't yet know they were here, or he had something planned for them that they had yet to encounter.

The next door opened. The room looked like some sort of interrogation room. Sure enough, Liara quickly found who they'd come for.

"Feron!"

The Drell was strapped into some kind of chair surrounded by holo displays.

"Liara?"

"Hold on! We're getting you out of here!" said Liara as she ran over to the console.

"No!" said Feron urgently. But it was too late.

Feron screamed as he was shocked by a large amount of electricity.

"Feron!"

"What the hell is the Broker trying to do to you?" Austin asked.

"The equipment is sensitive to tampering. This chair plugs into

the Broker's info network. You have to shut off the power. Pull me out now, and my brain cooks." Said Feron.

"Do you know where we can cut the power?" Xun asked.

"It won't be easy. You'll have to go to central operations." Said Feron.

"We're all getting out of here! Can you tell us where to go?" Austin asked.

"Central operations is down the hall. You know the Shadow Broker's waiting for you, right?"

"I'm counting on it." Said Austin.

"We'll be back for you, Feron!" said Liara.

"I'll try not to go anywhere."

"I want all teams to outpost C." said the Shadow Broker over the speakers.

Xun suddenly felt something poke against the back of her head. Before she could react, a Shadow Broker merc suddenly uncloaked right behind her.

"Drop your weapons or I'll blow her head off!" the merc yelled before anyone else could do anything.

For a moment, it looked as though they were about to be taken prisoner. But then Xun said something in Chinese.

"N? bù jìn shàng w? de chu?nzhuó." She said.

The merc was left confused by this and his rifle lowered ever so slightly.

"What?"

"You're stepping on my dress." Xun translated.

"Uh-oh." Austin thought.

Before the merc could reply at all, Xun suddenly brought the back of her fist straight into his face which caused him to stagger backwards and step off Xun's battle dress. Now free of the risk of accidentally tripping, Xun slid under the merc. As he turned round, the Chinese Helldiver threw two tiny little device from her belt and threw them at the merc's legs.

Each device went either side of one leg and shocked them both, causing him to fall.

More mercs flooded into the corridor. Xun moved so fast however that they barely had time to draw their weapons.

Faster than Austin, Xun and Liara had ever seen anyone move, Xun practically took down the whole of the Shadow Broker's private army with just her kung Fu skills and one use of her rope dart.

"Wow. Never seen that before." Said Kasumi, her mouth still hanging open.

"Important advice. Never step on Xun's battle-dress." Liara smirked.

They continued on through the base until they finally reached

the door to where the Shadow Broker was.

The door opened.

They found themselves inside a massive room. Stood before them, was a desk behind which, sat the Shadow Broker himself.

Austin had had no idea what to expect, and even now he still had no idea what the Shadow Broker was. Although he was sat in the shadows, his figure could be easily seen. He was massive, bigger even than a Krogan. Little could be seen of his head, but what was visible were what looked like horns. Whatever the Broker was, it was unlike any race Austin had ever seen before.

The Broker deactivated the many holo interfaces in front of them so that the group had his full attention.

"Here for the Drell? Reckless, even for you, Major." he said.

Even without the communications, which obviously did change his voice a little, the Shadow Broker still sounded menacing.

"Speak for yourself. That bombing on Illium wasn't exactly subtle." said Austin.

"Extreme, but necessary." said the Broker.

"No it wasn't! Neither was caging Feron for two years!" Liara retorted.

"Professor T'soni. Your interference caused all this. Feron betrayed me when he handed you Shepard's body. The Drell is simply paying the price." said the Broker, calmly.

Despite the circumstances, the broker seemed completely calm. He didn't even seem to care that all his mercs were dead and he was one against 4, even if he did match all of them in size.

"Someone was bound to come after you for working with the Collectors." said Austin.

"It was a mutually beneficial partnership. Fortunately, the Normandy's IFF will let me salvage the remains of the Collector's base." said the Broker.

"Be smart. Let Feron walk out with us." said Austin.

"You won't be walking out at all." said the Broker. Although his mouth could not be seen, Austin guessed that the Broker was smiling evilly.

"You're quite confident for someone with nowhere left to hide." Said Xun.

"You travel with fascinating companions, Zhi Shang Ren. I'm obliged you brought along Ms Goto. Even blank grayboxes are worth several fortunes." said the Broker.

"You're not putting a hand on anyone!" Liara objected defensively.

"It's pointless to challenge me, Asari. I know you're every secret, while you fumble in the dark." said the Broker calmly.

"Is that right?" said Liara. "You're a Yahg, a pre-spaceflight

species quarantined to their homeworld for massacring the Council's first contact teams. This base is older than your planet's discovery, which probably means you killed the original Shadow Broker sixty years ago, then took over."

"I'm guessing you were taken from your world by a trophy hunter who wanted a slave... or a pet. How am I doing?" said Xun.

For some reason, that seemed to get to the Broker, and he stood up from his desk. Everyone looked in astonishment as the Broker drew himself up to his full height of over 4 metres and his body left the Shadows.

"?, w? de shàngdì" Xun gasped.

In all his life, Austin had never seen anything like this. He would have to ask Liara about these so called "Yahg" and why he had never heard of them.

Most of the Broker's body was dressed in a dark blue suit, but what was visible of his skin was dark red. His head had even more eyes than a Batarian and his mouth took an odd triangular shape which was somewhat unnerving.

As the Broker stood up, he suddenly smashed his desk with his fist and hurled one of the pieces at them. Austin was narrowly able to jump out of the way, pushing Liara with him. Xun was able to leap over the wreckage. Only Kasumi didn't react in time, and the piece of desk knocked her out.

Everyone drew their guns as the Shadow Broker roared at them before then drawing his own M-76 Revenant.

"His is bigger than yours." Xun joked.

"Not now, Xun!" Austin groaned as they all went into cover to avoid incoming fire. All they had to do was wait until the gunfire ceased and the Broker had to reload. Austin himself knew that while the Revenant was unbelievably powerful, it did take longer to reload than other assault rifles. He was able to do it quicker thanks to Dell making a few modifications. The Broker's on the other hand was untampered and so Austin was counting on the slow reload affecting the Yahg.

Sur enough, the firing soon stopped and the Broker quickly started fumbling with his belt and working as fast as he could to get another thermal clip inside.

"Cursed weapon! Always out of ammo!" he cursed.

Everyone immediately popped out of cover and emptied their round into the Broker. The bullets hit their target, but to their surprise, the Broker did not go down. The Yahg grunted and groaned as the rounds became embedded in his flesh, but this seemed to cause him very little pain.

Knowing though that he was vulnerable, the Broker suddenly threw up a sliver shield over himself. Liara fired several more shots

directly as his face, but this time they simply bounced off like rounds often did on Helldiver armour.

"The shield's kinetically sensitive. Energy and projectiles are bouncing off." said the Asari.

"Then we do this the old fashioned way." said Austin, drawing his sword. Xun and Liara were quick to do the same.

Austin ran up to the Shadow Broker and punched him hard in the face which caused the shield to deactivate. Using the butt of his large rifle, the Broker swung at the three Helldivers to try and block any opening they might have. Xun however was able to run under one of the Broker's attacks and was able to make a cut in his leg. This however seemed to only anger the Broker and he swung at his main information rival. Xun was once again though able to dodge the attack and she leapt onto the Broker's back. Seizing the chance, she sank her sword into the Broker's back.

The Yahg roared in anger and grabbed Xun, pulling her Katana out in the process. Not taking the chance of Xun cutting his arm, the Broker threw the Helldiver off him and turned his attention back to Austin and Liara.

Attacking at the same time, the couple both ran at the Broker and jumped at his head. The Yahg however quickly brought up his left arm and brought up an omni shield which he used to smack both Austin and Liara away.

"You're big... but I've still fought bigger." Austin panted as he and the other two slowly got back up.

The Broker raised his shield as well, ready for another round.

Austin charged and his sword clashed with the Broker's shield. Both opponents pushed against each other as one tried to overpower the other.

Liara soon followed with her biotic ready, but the Shadow Broker then suddenly gave a huge push which flung Austin into her and disrupted her attack.

It was then that Liara noticed the massive tank of silver corrosive fluid on the ceiling above the Broker. A thought suddenly hit her.

"If you can get him to bring up that shield again, I've got an idea." she said.

Reading his future wife's mind, Austin quickly caught on.

With his Revenant finally reloaded, the Broker resumed fire, this time with his shield raised in front to protect himself.

It was now much harder to hit the Broker, even when he stopped firing to reload.

Using a new tactic, Xun and Liara occupied the Broker's attention while Austin snuck up behind him. Quickly feeling the bullets imbedding themselves in his back, the Broker once again threw up his shield. Once again though, Austin ran up and punched

the Shadow Broker hard. The Yahg roared and charged Austin just as the Helldiver rolled out of the way.

"L-"

But before he could finish, the Shadow Broker suddenly swiped him with the shield. The Yahg had obviously counted on that happening again and had learned from his last mistake.

He then whirled around and fired at the pillar which Liara had been standing next to. It toppled before Liara could try anything and it fell on Xun's leg, pinning her.

Confident that he'd finally achieved victory, the Broker slowly made his way over to the downed Chinese Helldiver.

"You thought you could defeat me?!" he gloated "What are you gonna do now, Miss Ren?!"

"Dà cuò." Xun thought smugly.

The Broker had lent in to gloat, and he'd gotten too close to Xun. Anyone who knew Xun well knew that if they got too close to the Chinese Helldiver, they were within the danger zone and therefore risked an injury.

With an almost lightning fast reaction, Xun took out her metal fan and sliced one of the Shadow Broker's eyes, temporarily blinding him as he screamed in agony.

As the Yahg suddenly turned round, he found Austin had also got up and he had Excalibur drawn. Before the Broker could react in time, Austin slashed his stomach wide open, which elicited another scream of pain.

The Broker fell to his knees clutching his open wound in his stomach as it leaked blood. He knew now he'd lost.

"That'll do it." He sighed as he looked into the red glowing eye visor of the Helldiver he'd tried to sell to the Collectors 2 years ago.

"Liara, now!" Austin yelled.

The Shadow Broker looked in the direction Austin had yelled to see Liara, with her biotics fully charged. The Yahg looked dup as the glass on the tank started to crack. Liara then pulled hard and the glass shattered.

The corrosive liquid fell onto the Broker which caused his barriers to overload and explode, killing him in the process. The force of the explosion sent Austin, Liara, and Xun flying. The pillar that had been pinning Xun's leg was also flung off by the explosion.

Austin landed on his back whereas Liara landed on top of him. With the danger over, they simply smiled at one another.

"Finally, I end up on top." Said Liara smugly through their bond.

"Gravity on this ship must be off." Austin replied jokingly.

"Am I interrupting anything?" Xun asked, smiling and with her arms crossed as she stood over them. "Come on. Get up."

As everyone got up, Kasumi also seemed to finally regain consciousness. While Xun checked on her old friend, Liara noticed the hundreds of contacts that were attempting to re-establish communication with the Shadow Broker. For a moment, her head sunk, then it came back up and her eyes opened. She knew what she had to do. She knew it was either this or lose everyone. Liara was about to step up to the console, when an arm suddenly stopped her.

Xun instead stepped up to the console and pressed a few buttons on her omni tool. There was a small hiss as the locks on her helmet disengaged. Steam shot out of several valves and the helmet retracted, revealing Xun's face for the first time in a while. No one could see her at the moment though since she had her back to everyone. What could be seen though was her jet back hair which was neatly organised in a chopstick hairstyle.

The Chinese Helldiver then brought up a holo panel and began speaking. As she did, her voice echoed throughout the ship, only it sounded like the Shadow Broker rather than her. She was using a voice changer. Clever.

"This is the Shadow Broker. We experienced a power fluctuation while upgrading hardware. It disrupted communication momentarily." She said.

Feron then suddenly burst into the room, his gun pointing at Xun. When he saw that it wasn't the Shadow Broker however, he froze, almost in shock.

"However, we are now back online. Resume standard procedures. I want a status report on all operations within the next solar day. Shadow Broker out." said Xun.

All of the Broker's contacts fell silent.

"Goddess of oceans... it's you. You... how?" said Feron, trying to find words.

"Everyone who's ever seen him in person is dead. Well, everyone except you four." Said Xun, finally turning and allowing everyone to see her face.

Xun had the traditional look that any Chinese woman would have. Despite what many thought, Xun was actually younger than they believed. Many thought she was somewhere in her late 40's. In truth however, she was only a few years older than Austin and she looked even younger than that. If people didn't know better, some might say she was still in her late 20's.

Xun of course wore no makeup. She had a tattoo of a Chinese Dragon, but that was only visible on her back. If one looked closely enough, they could see a small bit of it on her neck, but it was hard to spot.

"... You're the new Shadow Broker." Said Feron.

"You sure about this, Xun? It's one thing to take down the

Shadow Broker, but it's another to take his place." said Austin with concern.

"It's either this, or lose everything. My information network is the second largest in the galaxy. Now with this, we, the Arkanes, the Helldivers and our allies will know more than we've ever known before. This may even give us a huge advantage in the coming war." Said Xun, her dark brown eyes glowing from the brightness of the tank which still had a bit of liquid in it.

"She... she's right. With the Shadow Broker's information network, she can give us... she can..." said Liara, trying her best to find her voice, but there was no denying how it was cracking and she sounded on the point of tears.

"We'll, uh, check the power systems." Said Feron, quickly getting the message and leaving with Kasumi.

Xun also simply nodded to Austin and disappeared as she activated her cloak to give him and Liara some space.

Liara briefly turned her back on Austin to hide her crying, but he touched her shoulder and forced her to face him.

"It's over. It's finally... for two years..." said Liara.

Austin put his arms around his future wife and hugged her close to him. Both their helmets retracted.

"It's all right, my love. It's all right." He said gently.

"I just... I don't know what to..." Liara stuttered.

"Come 'ere." Austin interrupted.

Love overtook the both of them and they kissed. After a very long and passionate one, they finally parted. Liara seemed to brighten up a bit after that and managed to regain her composure.

"Okay... okay..." she said, still struggling a bit to find something to say.

"Okay." Austin finished for her.

"Goddess, I love you so much, Austin. I'm never going to get tired of saying that." He heard Liara say in his head.

"Nor am I, Liara. I love you too, more than anything." He replied telepathically.

"I spent two years mourning you and Feron. And now I've got you both back." Said Liara, resting her head into Austin's shoulder as he once again hugged her close.

"You deserve it after all you've been through, Liara." Said Austin, stroking Liara's crest gently.

"Thank you, Austin." Said the Asari, a tear of happiness trickling down her cheek before Austin wiped it off.

Xun then finally uncloaked, sensing that the couple were fine now.

"I can't believe I forget you were there." Said Liara.

"You needed a moment. I would've said "don't mind me",

but..." Xun smiled.

"Xun, thank you." Said Liara.

"Hu?nyíng n?, w? de péngy?u." Said Xun, bowing her head slightly. "Now, let's see what we've got."

Xun made her way over to the console and started examining the Shadow Broker's data further.

"Li?obuq?. No safeguards or user restrictions. It's like the Shadow Broker never anticipated anyone but himself being here. And it's all ours." She smiled.

"You sure you want to stay here? You're more than welcome on the Normandy." Austin asked.

"Trust me, Shepard. I'd like nothing more, but I have to stay here. It's where all this is, all the information." Said Xun.

"What kind of information are we talking about?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'll need to go through his files. Come back later, and I'll try to have something useful by then."

"All I wanted us to do was rescue Feron. But... is it wrong that this seems like a wise thing to do?" Liara asked.

"Not at all, Liara. With the Shadow Broker's network, I can help your fiancée. Maybe even turn this whole operation into something better." Said Xun.

"Just be careful you don't let this change you." Said Austin.

"Small chance of that." Xun smiled.

Both Austin and Liara bowed their heads to Xun and left to head back to the Normandy. They planned to return sometime tomorrow after they'd recovered from what they'd just endured.

"Xièxiè, w? de péngy?us." Xun smiled.

Assembling her helmet back up, the Chinese Helldiver turned back to her new information network and began looking through the massive amount of data it had.

Sure enough, Austin and Liara returned the next day to visit. Almost immediately they found that Xun had wasted no time and getting a new crew to run the ship. Obviously, she couldn't trust any of the mercs and so had sought to it that several Helldiver crew were assigned to help run the ship. Each one of them had also signed an official secret act to keep Xun's identity as the Broker a secret.

Already, the crew seemed to be hard at work on construction. It looked like Xun's was having the ship refitted. As Austin and Liara neared the door, Xun's face appeared on the screen above.

"Shepard! Liara! It's good to see you again." she smiled. "I've set up a few terminals with information I think you'll find interesting. Take a look."

The doors opened and a large white drone suddenly hovered out.

"Welcome back, Shadow Broker!" it said.

"What's this?" Austin asked.

"That's the old Broker's VI assistant. It's actually been helpful with rebuilding the network." Xun replied.

"Please let me know if I can organize anything else for you, Shadow Broker." said the VI.

"It also thinks anyone in the room is the Broker. I'll play around with the settings later."

"My manual is ready whenever you have a moment!"

As they walked in, they could see some more Helldivers focusing on moving several supply crates, repairing the tank and also making space for no doubt some new furniture or something along those lines. Austin then spotted a very familiar face directing many of the workers while Xun was still at the console.

"Good. Now put that one over there. That's where she'll want to put the statues." said a purple Asari.

"Oranna!"

"Shepard! So good to see you. It's been too long." smiled Oranna Traas as she hugged Austin.

"Nice to finally see you again too. Must be nice to be back at Xun's side." said Austin.

"Indeed. Especially when I heard about how Nyxeris was the Observer. I recommended that Asari myself. I thought she was my friend." said the Asari, almost with regret.

"Don't beat yourself up, Oranna. It's not your fault. Besides, Xun might not have found out about her if she hadn't been posted." said Austin supportingly.

"True. Anyway, what's done is done. What matters is that I'm here now." Oranna smiled.

"What's with all the Helldivers here?"

"The ship feels a bit gloomy and lonely, so we're having it refurbished. Plus, it'll be pretty hard to run a base this size with no crew."

"No argument there."

"No! No! This one goes here, that one goes there!" Oranna instructed to some of the soldiers that were moving the crates. "Sorry about that. Xun mad it my job to supervise the refurbishment. Need everything to be right for my mistress."

"Three years, and you still call her that?" Austin asked. "You aren't a servant, Oranna."

"I know, and so does Xun. But she doesn't mind, and I still owe her my life from rescuing me from those pirates. I wouldn't be here without her."

Oranna had first come to be Xun's assistant when the information broker had rescued her from some pirates during a raid.

The Asari had been eternally grateful. Since Oranna was still awfully young (even today she still only a few years older than Liara) and had been struggling to find some decent employment, Xun had taken her in as a temporary apprentice and had taught her to become her assistant. Since then, Oranna had remained by Xun's side ever since. Some of Xun's reputation even partly belonged to Oranna since she had made several things in the past possible. Things that Xun would not have been able to easily do by herself.

"No! Over there! Look where I'm pointing!" Oranna shouted at another Helldiver.

"Liara and I should probably leave you to it. You seem busy enough as it is." said Austin.

"Always a pleasure, Shepard." Oranna smiled.

Liara found Feron up the stairs in the next room. While she took some time to catch up with her friend, Austin explored a bit.

"What's this?" he asked as he found a strange looking panel connected to what looked like projectors.

"This is the video surveillance access point. I've queued up the archive footage you requested on your last visit, Shadow Broker." replied the VI.

Austin figured it couldn't hurt and scrolled through several different videos. Some of the ones included were Aria, Captain Bailey, Emily Wong, and even some of the Normandy crew. It was nice to see that they were getting along well after leaving the Normandy. It would be nice to see them again at the wedding. Just as Austin finished looking, he spied one more clip. The VI identified it as the Eternity bartender, Matriarch Aethyta. She appeared to be looking at a picture of an Asari. Something about that picture caught Austin's attention. The Asari looked very familiar.

Using the zoom and enhance version, Austin could soon make out the face of the Asari. For a moment though, he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him.

"Wait. Is that...? Liara?!"

Austin found it strange why Aethyta was looking at a picture of his future wife. As far as he knew, the two hadn't even met before. For now, he felt it best to deal with it later. He knew Liara was safe with him, so he didn't have to worry about her safety. After Liara had finished talking with Feron, they both headed back into the main chamber to talk with Xun.

"How are you doing, Xun?" Liara asked.

"I'm a bit overwhelmed, to be honest. The Shadow Broker had more resources than you can imagine. Here, come on over." said Xun. "He had top level access to the Turian and Asari governments, rather worryingly. And more than one Salarian dalatrass traded Intel. At least I get to share it with you."

"You're not going to turn into a recluse with creepy information on everyone in the galaxy, are you?" Austin asked jokingly.

"I can understand the temptation. I've got all the secrets of the galaxy at my fingertips. Give me ten minutes, and I could start a war." Xun chuckled. "But I've got a purpose: helping you stop the Reapers. That will keep me honest. You know, relatively speaking."

"Is it too much? If you're in over your head, we could just crash this thing and walk away." said Austin.

"That's just it. In a way, it feels like I belong here. Working on my own, I was always hunting for leads. With the Shadow Broker's resources, it's about organizing, cataloguing. My job is now practically a dream job... although, the location could be better." said Xun.

"Have you found anything useful yet?" Liara asked.

"The Shadow Broker knew about the Reapers. Perhaps that's why he offered to prove Saren's guilt to the Council." said Xun.

"He didn't want Saren to succeed." said Austin.

"He also knew that the Collectors were Protheans repurposed to be Harbinger's puppets. There's even some data on the Protheans, which of course I've given to you, Liara." Xun continued. "I think he knew what was coming and was looking for a way to survive."

"By the way, Liara. I've been meaning to ask. How'd you know what the Shadow Broker was?" Austin asked.

"I didn't. I had no idea what to expect when we finally found him. But I researched pre-spaceflight cultures during some of my Prothean studies before I met you. I know a bit about the Yahg. They're a fascinating culture... and a terrifying one." Liara replied.

The Asari then turned to Xun. She had a question about the Prothean data the Broker had been keeping.

"Why was he still looking at Protheans? They gave us the warning and the Conduit at Ilos, but we've used those." she asked.

"The Shadow Broker seemed to think there was more out there. Perhaps the Protheans had other plans. Or maybe he was just grasping at anything that offered some hope." said Xun, shrugging slightly.

"You know, we didn't come down here just to talk about data, Xun." said Austin, changing the subject.

"I agree. It would be nice to have a more social chat. I can't leave for too long, but spending all my time on this ship..." said Xun.

"Why don't you come to the Normandy for drinks?" Liara suggested.

"Of course. I'd like that." Xun smiled.

"Good. Get your things and come on up." said Austin.

"Okay. I'll be right there."

Both Austin and Liara had sought to it that their quarters were tidy for

when Xun came up. Currently, the information broker was being given a tour of the new Normandy.

The quarters were also a part of the Normandy that hadn't been changed much. Although, the sky window which offered a view of space had been made larger and they also mood and environment settings. For example, the room could simulate them waking up to a tropical sunrise or something along those lines.

As Austin finished pouring the drinks, Xun walked in.

She'd removed her armour and now wore a red Chinese dress. It was usually her favourite one to wear when she was off duty.

"Did you enjoy the tour?" Austin asked.

"Yes. It's a magnificent ship. The Arkanes have really outdone themselves this time." Xun smiled. "I also spoke with the rest of Alpha Squad. I'm glad they're doing well, and it was nice to meet some of the newer faces."

The Chinese Helldiver then took a small plack of some kind from out of her dress and presented it to Austin.

"Here. I brought you something. Took some digging, but Liara recovered your Alliance tags. She gave them to me for safekeeping." she said.

Austin took the tags and looked at them.

"Technically, these aren't mine anymore. It not officially in the Alliance anymore. But thank you. I appreciate you giving them to Me." he said, trying to sound grateful. He did at least appreciate that the effort had been made to get them back to him, even if he didn't need or want them anymore.

"You can't get back everything you lose, but sometimes you get lucky." said Liara.

"Yep. That was the plan." Austin smiled as he put his arm around Liara and hugged her close. The Asari happily rested her head against his shoulder. Xun simply smiled at the happy couple.

"How are you actually doing, Shepard? I mean, really. Not what you tell everyone else to keep morale up." Xun asked, this time her face changing to concern.

"I'm always honest with everyone, Xun. You know that. I'm fine, really. But... between you two and me, I do worry a bit. I worry about the coming war; how we're gonna do this. I'm doing all I can, but..." said Austin.

"Give yourself some credit, Shepard. You've done more than most. You and your team destroyed the Collectors and walked out alive." said Xun positively.

"You got that right. We fought them in their own base, and we won. They can't call us young or primitive anymore." said Austin, his mood brightening back up again.

"Young? You know I'm 109. 110 in a couple of months." said

Liara.

"I should get you something nice." said Austin.

"You're alive again and we're getting married. I've got everything I want." Liara sighed happily as she practically snuggled against Austin.

"Forgive me for being curious, but is it possible it'll go beyond this? Can we maybe one day expect more than marriage in the future?" Xun asked.

"I believe Austin did say marriage, old age, and a lot of little blue children. I'm still holding him to that by the way." Liara chuckled slightly.

"Aw. That's sweet. I think you two would make great parents." said Xun.

Both Austin and Liara looked at each other with surprise.

"We would?"

"I know you will, and I have faith that we'll win this war. You'll win a future for those children." said Xun supportingly.

"Thanks, Xun. That's worth drinking to, I think." said Austin.

The Helldiver handed two of the glasses to Liara and Xun and took the third in his hand and raised the glass.

"To our future."

"Our future!" Xun and Liara repeated.

The three of them drank.

"I should get back to my ship. Thank you both for inviting me up. I've never had truer friends." Xun smiled, putting her glass down.

The information broker first hugged Austin before then hugging Liara.

"You've made me proud... my apprentice." she said.

Just before Xun got into the elevator, she quickly stopped and turned around.

"Before I go, may I ask to have some help in moving the stuff from apartment to my ship?" she asked.

"You don't even have to ask, friend." Austin smiled.

"Thank you both for the drinks. I wish the two of you eternal happiness." said Xun.

"Think we already got that covered." Liara smiled.

"Come back soon, Xun."

The doors closed and the elevator disappeared from view, leaving Austin and Liara alone.

"Did she just call you her apprentice? I thought you were Zartrack's student." Austin asked telepathically.

"He only taught me how to sword fight. Xun was my actual teacher." Liara replied.

"Surprising. Xun's never taken a student before." said Austin.

"She said she saw something different in me. Something that

reminded her of you. Think you can guess why." Liara smiled.

Austin had opted to go to Illium ahead of schedule before Xun arrived to start packing up all the stuff in her apartment and moving it onto the ship. There was something he needed to sort out with a Matriarch.

Sure enough, as the Helldiver entered Eternity, Aethyta was in her usual place behind the bar.

"Well well, haven't seen you in a while, babe. Shepard, right?" she said.

Austin nodded.

"What can I get you then? Sorry, no sex. Just cleaned the bar." said Aethyta.

"How did you end up with a job like this?" Austin asked.

"Thought I told you already." Aethyta replied.

"I'm not so sure it was the truth though. I've seen some video footage, of you looking at Liara. Care to explain that?" Austin asked.

Aethyta didn't even seem to look like she was nervous. Nor did she even try to make up any excuse. She didn't even do what Austin had expected, which was for her to ask who Liara was.

"I guess one of you was eventually going to find out. Well, Matriarch Benezia was her mother and I... I was the father." she said.

Austin was completely shocked by that. Of all the answers he had thought Aethyta would say, he had not expected that. He was actually surprised with himself for not considering that the Matriarch could have been Liara's father. It made sense after all since Liara had told Austin that both her parents were Asari, that she was what other Asari cruelly called a pureblood.

"Father?! I thought you... You were her other mother?!" he asked.

"No! I didn't pop her out!" Aethyta replied, rolling her eyes slightly.

"Sorry. If you were human, you'd both be called the mother." Austin apologised.

"Well, I'm not human am I?" Aethyta replied.

"Liara would love to meet you." said Austin.

"Why? We've never seen each other before and she doesn't even know me from a hole in the ground. She's friends with one of the biggest Intel brokers in the galaxy, and she's got some shady connections. Like a boyfriend who used to work for Cerber..."

But before Aethyta could finish, Austin immediately interrupted her as soon as he heard her start to mention Cerberus. He'd said it before, and he would say it again.

"That bit's not true! Any rumours you might have heard about me working for Cerberus are false." he said defiantly.

"I know. You certainly proved that. Besides, if they were true, you wouldn't get within a light-year of Liara." said Aethyta.

"Is that a threat?" Austin asked, his eyebrow slightly raised and his arms crossed.

"I'm no commando, but I've had a thousand years to learn to fight dirty. Nobody messes with my girl." said Aethyta. "Anyway, you combine her work with Benezia's and the matriarch's might have ordered a hit."

"That's not gonna happen!" said Austin defensively.

"No argument here! At least I know she's staying safe in your care." Aethyta quickly added.

"Just as long as we're clear. Nobody messes with my girl. Actually, change that. Nobody messes with my future wife." said Austin.

"Ha! You're good enough for her after all." Aethyta laughed.

"I really think you and Liara should at least talk. You should come clean with her. It'd be better for everyone." said Austin.

"Yeah. We'll see where that goes." Aethyta sighed.

Austin left the bar for a minute and activated his omni tool to contact Liara. The Asari was quick to arrive in a few minutes and they both sat down at a nearby table.

Although it couldn't clearly be seen, Austin could tell that Aethyta was watching from behind the bar.

"Liara, you know that bartender?" he asked.

"The Matriarch hired by the Asari government to keep an eye on me?" Liara replied.

"She... she's your father." said Austin.

"I know." Liara simply said.

"You know?" Austin asked. But his question was quickly answered when he remembered that Liara was friends with Xun as well. So of course Xun would tell her or at least Liara would figure it out herself. "I don't think I'll ever get to surprise you with anything now days."

"Xun's a very good information Broker." said Liara.

"And you haven't talked to her about spying on you?" Austin asked.

"If I did that, they'd probably send someone who wasn't as sympathetic to me." Said Liara. "Besides, I don't know if it would be what you would call a family reunion."

"Liara..." said Austin.

"Oh fine!" the Asari sighed.

Just as she got up however, she stopped. Using their link, Austin could tell what the problem was.

"You're nervous, aren't you?" he asked.

"Admittedly, yes." Liara replied. "Would you mind...?"

"Coming with you? Sure. I could do with a drink anyway." Austin replied reassuringly.

Austin held his love's hand as they walked slowly up to the bar.

There was an awkward silence before Liara finally spoke first.

"Hello... father." She said.

"Hey, kid. Guess Shepard got you to talk with me." Said Aethyta calmly.

"My bond mate is very persuasive." Said Liara as both she and Austin sat down.

"So I've heard." Said Aethyta as she poured Austin a drink. "You know, you might not think it's true, but you do look quite a lot like your mother, just... younger."

"I'm her daughter. It's to be expected." Said Liara. "Why are you watching me?"

"Come on, you can't blame the Matriarchs for keeping an eye on you." Aethyta replied.

"I am not what my mother became." Liara objected.

"Well, you did threaten to flay someone alive with your mind." Said Aethyta.

"Did you?" Austin asked in surprised. Liara then sent a quick image into his head and then he understood. "Ah."

"I had to make Miranda take me seriously. I wasn't actually going to do it." Said Liara.

"Wait a minute. How do you even know about that? She was on the Normandy when she said that." Austin asked.

"Thought you Helldivers were smart." Said Aethyta.

"You put bugs in the Normandy, didn't you?" said Liara.

"That'd be the logical conclusion, yeah. Although I hadn't realised at the time that you were sleeping with Shepard in his quarters. Thought you were sleeping in the quarters that Lawson eventually got." Aethyta nodded. "I changed them shortly after I found out."

"I see." Said Liara hesitantly.

"I didn't spy on you two having sex. I'm not that kind of father." Aethyta objected, seeing what Liara had been thinking.

"True, although I saw a video clip were you head-butted a drunk Krogan who insulted you." Said Austin.

"He was like that before he got drunk. He had it coming." Said Aethyta. "So, yeah, my dad was a Krogan."

"Yes, I'm aware of that." Said Liara.

"So that makes you a quarter Krogan."

"That's... not how it works."

"I'm a thousand years old. I've had kids with Hanar. Don't tell me how Asari reproduction works."

"Wait... I have a half-sister who's part Hanar?"

“I thought that wasn’t how it worked?” Aethyta smiled. “All I’m saying is that if you feel the urge to head butt something, it’s genetic.”

“I have never wanted to head butt anything.”

“Really? Not even a little bit? Come on.”

“Well, you did head-butt a Collector Captain...” Austin sniggered.

“We were in a fight. That’s different. I do not head butt people!” Liara objected.

“All right, fine, don’t go all blood rage on me.”

“Or what? You’ll tell the other Matriarchs to order a hit?”

“Like hell she will.” Said Austin defensively.

“Hey! Both of you calm down. That’s not gonna happen. I may never have met you before, but you’re still my daughter, and Benezia’s.”

“What was it like, with her I mean?” Liara asked.

“Nezzy and I were together for more than a century.”

“You loved her?”

“Course I loved her. She was so smart. Always thinking. Nice, too. Hell of a lot nicer than I am. And damn, that rack. I mean, even before she hit the Matriarch stage...” said Aethyta. “Something I can already tell she passed on to you.”

“That’s none of your business.” Said Liara, folding her arms so as to stop Aethyta staring at her breasts.

“Shepard?” Aethyta asked.

“No comment.” Austin replied.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Aethyta smiled naughtily.

“Considering I’m descended from you, I’m surprised I never act like that.”

“Actually you sometimes do. Not all the time, but occasionally.”

“Oh, yes.” Said Liara, slightly agreeing. “It does make me wonder though, how did you and mother meet?”

“Nezzy was the only one who ever listened to me when I said the Asari were stuck in the past. Only difference was, I wanted us to stand on our own. She wanted alliances with the other races.”

“That sounds like how I used to know her.” Said Liara, smiling slightly. “But, is that why...”

“Why it ended? Nah. Well, maybe. I don’t know. Mostly it ended because she wanted to solve things the smart way. I wanted to fight.”

“Those aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“Yeah. I hear you and your fiancée have racked up quite a body count. But then, you are quarter Krogan.”

“Now you’re doing it on purpose.”

“Anyway, it was pretty clear she was leaving. Can’t be the wise councillor when you’re married.”

“Why not?”

“Sex appeal. Most species only pay attention when they want to have sex with you. So you have to be available, mysterious...”

“What? That’s not true! Austin listens to me!”

“And how many times have you thrown him down on the bed, peeled him out of his uniform and popped his heat sink?”

“Once again, that’s none of your business. Besides, do you have to make it sound so... “Tawdry?”

“If it’s all civilised, you’re not doing it right.”

“Trust me, Aethyta. They’ve been a fair amount of uncivilised moments in our relationship. We’ve been able to get to the point where we can communicate with each other telepathically.” Said Austin.

“No you’re not. You can’t...”

“He’s telling the truth, father. You’ve seen footage of us in combat haven’t you?” said Liara.

“Well, yeah, but I always thought that was because he trained you how to fight with a sword.” Said Aethyta, slightly surprised now.

“I only helped. We now use each other as one weapon.” Said Austin.

“Well, in that case, I take that back. Sounds like everything’s quite healthy with you two.”

“Of course it is. We’re getting married after all.”

“I know. Believe it or not, I actually cried when I found out. You may not think that I hold Shepard in high regard, but I actually do. Helldivers are fine soldiers, and he especially is an honourable human.”

“You have no idea. Benezia herself even approved of our relationship in her final moments, when she wasn’t...”

“I know what you’re saying. It’s better to remember her like this than as whatever she turned into with that Saren bastard.”

“It wasn’t her fault. She was trying to stop Saren, guide him as a force of good. But she was indoctrinated.”

“Look, I heard stories about the Reapers messing with your head...”

“They’re more than stories. I’ve seen it. We both have. She fought it with every fibre of her being. She even broke free and helped us on Noveria before she died. I was there. She said I’d made her proud and she even told Shepard to “watch over her beloved daughter.”

“All this time I’d blamed Nezy for it. Thousand years old, and I still don’t know crap. Thanks for telling me.”

“Should we ask her?” Liara asked telepathically.

“We should. I think she still deserves it, even if you never did know her as a child.” Austin replied.

“Listen, you know we plan for the wedding to be in a few

months.” Said Liara.

“I’m happy for you both. Hope even one day I might have grandchildren.” Said Aethyta.

“We hope so to. But, we were hoping you could attend. It would mean the world to both of use if you did.” Said Austin.

“I don’t know. I’ve hardly been around for Liara’s life.”

“Benezia approved of my relationship with Austin too. If I knew her as well as I did, I think she would’ve wanted you to be there as well.”

“Don’t you want to actually be there and see your daughter happily married just as you once were?”

“Liara was right when she said you were persuasive. You remind me a bit of another matriarch I used to know.” Aethyta smiled. “Yeah. If you really want me to attend that bad, who am I to refuse? I’m sure Nezzy would’ve done the same thing if in my position.”

“I’m tempted to say you’re the best father a girl could wish for.” Liara smiled.

“Don’t go soft on me, now.”

At that moment, Austin’s omni tool bleeped.

“We should go. Don’t want to keep Xun waiting.” He said.

“Just take care of yourself out there, okay, kid?” said Aethyta.

“I will... Dad.” Liara smiled.

Liara left first. As Austin went to follow, Aethyta quickly spoke.

“Shepard... thanks for getting us to talk with each other.” She said.

“You’re welcome, Aethyta. And thank you for agreeing to come to the wedding. It means a lot.” Austin smiled.

“At first I didn’t want to believe that she’d chosen a human as her bondmate, but I regret thinking that now. It’ll be weird to say I have a son in law, but I’ll get used it.”

“It’s feel weird calling you father in law too.”

“Look after her, Austin. Because if anything happens to her, you’ll have to answer to me.”

“I’ll protect her. You have my word on that.”

Aethyta then took something out of her dress and threw it to Austin.

“Here.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“You’ll find out. Consider that an early wedding present.”

SOMETHING MAGIC IS BREWING

CH 3

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It was a misty morning, and Jess woke up not cold like she always had awoken, but warm and comfy.

"Goooooood Mornin'!!!" Tori Tarrlela through her hands up into the air with a huge grin on her face. "Did you sleep well!? I know I did!!!"

"Hey, Stori Tori...!" Jess sat up, and rubbed her eyes. "Yup, I slept better than I ever have!"

"We have most of our classes together!" Stori Tori's grin grew larger. "First, we have Divination! They're starting to let first years take it!"

"Cool! What do you do in Divination?" Jess asked.

"We get to learn how to read the future!!" Stori Tori pulled Jess out of bed. "C'mon!"

Stori Tori dragged Jess happily all the way to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"Sit down!!" Stori Tori told Jess still smiling.

Jess looked around and noticed Harry, Ron, and Hermione weren't there, just like last night.

"Hey... Stori Tori...?" Jess said. "Could I ask you something...?"

"Sure! Through it at me!" Stori Tori replied.

"Well... Do you know who Harry Potter is...?" Jess asked.

"Of course!! He's like totally famous!" Stori Tori replied. "Why?"

"Well... I met him on the train... Him and two of his friends, Ron and Hermione... Then he didn't turn up for the sorting yesterday, and he's not here at breakfast today..." Jess said.

"That's strange... Should we tell someone...?" Stori Tori asked.

"I think the professors know..." Jess replied.

"I think we should tell someone." Stori Tori stood up and dragged Jess to Professor McGonagal's office.

"Hi, Professor McGonagal!" Stori Tori cheered. "We have something to tell you."

"And what is that?" Professor McGonagal asked.

"Well, Harry Potter and his friends have been missing! They were on the train yesterday, but weren't at the sorting or at breakfast!" Stori Tori replied.

"Yes, I knew that..." Professor McGonagal said.

"Are the Okay!?" Jess suddenly blurted.

"They're fine... I'm sure." Professor McGonagal replied.

"Oh, good!" Stori Tori dragged Jess out of McGonagal's office.
"Okay, now to Divination!"

It took Stori Tori and Jess a while to get to Divination, but because it seemed Stori Tori knew a lot about the school, they didn't get lost once.

There was a trap door on the ceiling.

"That's the classroom!" Stori Tori said. "Our teacher is Professor Trelawney!"

"Okay..." Jess replied.

A few seconds later, the trap door opened, and a latter hung down. Everyone climbed up one by one, until everyone was up.

"Hello, students. I am Professor Trelawney." Trelawney said in a misty voice. "Today, we will be looking through crystal balls. Now, that is very advanced magic, so I don't expect anyone to see anything. It's just a test to see if anyone can."

Trelawney had already put the crystals on the desks before class.

"Now, look through, and try and see something." Trelawney said.

Jess looked through, not expecting to see anything, but after a few seconds of looking at the crystal ball in silence, she saw something, it was blurry, but it was there. Jess sort of went wide eyed, and kept looking at it until...

"UHG! This is HARD!" Stori Tori whined. Most of the kids were staring at her. "What...?"

Jess looked back at the crystal ball. *Is that... Harry...?!* Jess thought. Suddenly, the bell rang.

"Okay, class... You can leave. Oh, and Miss Cranberry? Can I talk to you?" Trelawney asked.

"I'll meet you outside the classroom..." Jess whispered to Stori Tori, and then she walked up to Professor Trelawney's desk. "Um... What do you need...?"

"By the look of your eyes, I think you saw something. Did you?" Trelawney asked.

"Um... Yeah..." Jess replied.

"What did you see?"

"Well... Um..." Jess didn't want to tell Professor Trelawney that she saw Harry Potter. "Um... I saw... Sarah! Yeah... That Ravenclaw third year girl..."

"Really? What was she doing?" Trelawney asked.

"Um... She was... In a classroom...! It was kind of blurry though..." Jess replied.

"Hm... Interesting... You may go..." Trelawney said.

Jess left the classroom to see Stori Tori standing outside.

"So..." Stori Tori was rocking on her heels. "What was that

about?"

"Well... Er... I saw something..." Jess replied.

"NO WAY!!!" Stori Tori yelled.

"Shh... I saw Harry... But... But I lied..." Jess said.

"You saw Harry!?" Stori Tori almost yelled again.

"Be quiet! I saw Harry... And I think Ron and Hermione... They were in a forest... They... They looked scared..." Jess tried to remember what she saw. "You... You were there too! And... and me too!"

"Whoa... What were we doing!?" Stori Tori asked.

"I... I don't exactly know... You were running... I think... Hermione and Ron were following you... And... I think Harry was backing away... With me behind him... I think..." Jess replied.

"We were in a forest... Right?" Stori Tori asked.

"Yes... I think..."

"Maybe it's the forbidden forest! You know the one right outside?!" Stori Tori said.

"A... A forbidden forest...?" Jess gulped. "Please don't tell me you want to go look for Harry..."

"Well, too bad, because I do!" Stori Tori jumped with glee.

"Oh c'mon! This is gonna be bad..." Jess said, staring at the clock. "We're... We're late for potions!"

"WHAT!? Oh this is bad... THIS IS REALLY BAD!" Stori Tori grabbed Jess and dragged her to potions.

"Wait... Why is this bad...?" Jess opened the door.

"And why are you two late?!" Said the potions teacher, a black haired, big nosed man.

"That's why..." Stori Tori whispered.

"I am Professor Snape, and I would like if you both sat down!" Snape snarled. Jess and Stori Tori ran to the back of the room and sat down. "And don't be late again!"

"Wow, potions was annoying..." Jess said, sitting down for lunch.

"I know, right!?" Stori Tori replied. "So! Tonight we go find Harry and the others, right!?"

"Er... Stori... I'm not so sure about that..." Jess said.

"Oh, don't be silly! It'll be fun!" Stori Tori giggled.

"Mmm... Sure..." Jess sighed.

"I knew you'd give in!" Stori Tori grinned.

"Um... Tori...?" Jess asked. Tori and Jess were in Gryffindor common room doing homework.

"Yeah? And it's *Stori* Tori!" Tori replied.

"If we're going to try and find Harry and the others, how are we supposed to sneak out of the castle...?"

"Don't worry, Jess! I've got this under control!" Tori said, standing up.

"Alright..." Jess replied, following Tori.

Jess followed Tori out of the common room, extremely worried. What if they ran into a professor, or worse, Dumbledore? But she just kept following Tori, now realizing it was rather foolish to trust her, considering she was very energetic, and crazy at times. Jess wanted to turn back, and run strait to her bed, and pretend she never met Tori, forget about her, but something told her that Tori wasn't planning some kind of joke, and they weren't going to run into any professors. Jess followed Tori for what seemed like hours, but finally, they reached the of the forest.

"Here we are..." Tori entered the forest with Jess on her tail.

There was a scream in the distance. Jess gasped and said, "That sounded like Hermione!"

"C'mon!" Tori pulled Jess toward the scream.

"Harry!" Jess shouted. Harry, Hermione, and Ron were backing away, looking terrified.

"Jessica!?" Harry stopped and turned around. "What are you doing here!?"

"I came- I'll explain later!" Jess replied. "Just... Er... RUN!"

Stori Tori ran out of the forest, followed by Ron and Hermione.

"What were you backing away from...?" Jess asked, turning to Harry, who looked much less worried.

"I really don't know... We were kind of stranded here anyway..." Harry replied, starting to walk back to the castle with Jess.

"Oh... Well, Tori Terralela forced me to come and find you guys..." Jess said. "I saw you in a Crystal Ball..."

"You... You can actually see things in those!?" Harry asked.

"Yeah..."

"Cool..." Harry replied, approaching the castle. "Oh!" Harry pulled out a cloak from his bag. "This is an invisibility cloak, we may need it to get by Snape or Filch..." Harry put it over the two of them, and they became invisible.

"This is cool..." Jess whispered.

The two of them wandered back up to the common room, and Harry started to walk to the boys dormitory, when he stopped and turned around.

"Hey... Thanks..." He said, walking away.

"You're... You're welcome..." Jess replied.

Just then, someone walked into the common room.

"Jessica...?" It was a tall girl with medium length blond hair.

"Um... Hi?" Jess spun around to face her.

"Oh... Sorry... I'm Stephanie Sorin..." The girl walked a little closer to Jess. "I... I heard you found Harry Potter and his friends in

the Forbidden Forest..."

"Oh? Who told you?" Jess asked.

"Tori Tarrelala... That git..." Stephanie replied. "She's so loud, and yet I can still sleep at night..."

"You don't like Tori?"

"Nah, not much..." Stephanie replied.

"Oh... She's really not *that* bad... I think she's mentioned you before... Something about you being friends with Draco Malfoy..." Jess said.

"Oh... Oh yes... We've been friends for a while... I was supposed to be put in Slytherin... But..." Stephanie started.

"You were put in Gryffindor?"

"Yeah... Draco wasn't too happy..." Stephanie stared at the ground.

"You like him... Don't you?" Jess saw Stephanie blushing a bit.

"Well... We did... Kiss... Once..." She replied looking rather pale now.

"Kiss!?"

"Yeah... Then he left me to go and stalk you..." Stephanie looked a little angry now.

"So he was stalking me..." Jess muttered. "Thought so..."

"Well, it's getting late..." Stephanie said, walking toward the girls' dormitory.

Jess followed her, and stood at the end of her bed for a moment.

"You okay...?" Stephanie asked.

"Er... Yeah..." Jess started, but there was a creak near the stairs. Jess spun around, but heard Stephanie scream, and Jess was knocked off her feet, lying face down on the floor.

POETRY

is published here thanks to
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!

SNOWFLAKES

NextBestSeller1
of <http://NextBestSeller1.deviantart.com>

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.

MORNINGRISE

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

See that my pain is real
That you know how i feel
And i confess my loneliness
In hope that you will feed me your tenderness

I can sustain myself during the lonely nights
Because your love lasts a lifetime
I find myself holding onto that word that i so hate:
Hope

The sun remains silent
Everything changes, but your benevolence
Burn away the day, seek me In the night
And just like the morning rise
I rise and fall with the day

And in great days yet to befall
the sun shall embrace the moon and in silence tell of its love
with pride not measured by distance, a heart not torn or
rendered by greed
i shall love you as my second half.

NOT DATING

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

Always been there for me,
When no one else would be.
We are the best of friends,
Even as our dating ends.
Always making sure I'm okay.
You want to talk everyday.
You want to road trip here.
I would love to have you near.
And even though you're my ex.
You and I still had sex.
Our relationship seems great,
But you don't want to date.
We both still love each other,
But I also loved another.
We used to say forever,
But now we're not together.
I don't really know what we are.
But dating really doesn't seem far.