

Fanatical Publishing's

Weekly Review

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AND NOW, a word from the publisher:

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

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

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

If you want to contribute, I'd love to see your work, send it to me at the aforementioned e-mail address with: 'category(prose, fanfic, poetry), STORY TITLE, Author's Name' in the subject line.

You can include the text of your story in the body of the email, attached as an RTF, you can put in a link to your story on some webpage. Please include a cover letter about you, your work, or whatever; include any links you want, and cover art if you have any.

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

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

Table of Contents

Original Prose

LET'S PLAY DETECTIVE?, FaerieBox
Page 5

FANFICTION FRICTION, Katelyn Rushe
Page 13

KALEIDOSCOPE LIES, Simplistic-whim
Page 16

Fan fiction

ME₃ THE HELLDIVER SAGA - THE LAST CYCLE: CHAPTER
4, Veyron722Skyhook
Page 18

LEGEND OF ZELDA - A FLAME'S THEFT: CHAPTER 1
Page 38

Poetry

NO MISTAKES, TheMeTheyDontSee
Page 46

TO MUSIC, Lacesnflowers
Page 47

ORIGINAL LITERATURE

LET'S PLAY DETECTIVE?

CHAPTER 12

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

Following morning. It was early still, eight to nine o'clock, and I stood next to the closed window. I was staring out through the double glass, thinking.

Sister says that I frown slightly when I think. Yea, you can guess the meaning – not a compliment - but it's okay. I'm fine. I know I'm not as smart as she is. Sister is the clever one, and I got the tenderness (for both of us, most of times). My twin and I... We are complements. Like the two halves of an apple. Ying and Yang.

But the problem we had? I wasn't looking through the window only because I was abstract in thoughts. The light outside was really scanty, the sky covered with heavy clouds. It could be better dusk or dawn, than middle-morning. The weather was getting worse than ever...

I was afraid for the will thing. If Grandpa's lawyer didn't come today... We needed the information, but also the Inspector was circling the house as a hound. We needed some other trail for him to chase. He would be forced to investigate the will. And then he would leave Zia alone...

Complicated. I'm certain that that supposed frown increased. I was losing myself in too many hypotheses.

I heard someone knocking softly at the door. The sound made the thread of my messy thoughts simply flee from my hands.

I turned. We shouldn't have anyone knocking at the door. I didn't even know if breakfast was ready yet.

Nevertheless, I *had* heard someone knocking, and I rushed to the door, quietly, to don't wake Sis up.

I turned the handle, slowly, opening a little gap. I blinked from surprise.

Anne already had her hand raised, ready to knock again. She blushed at seeing me, and quickly brought it down, rubbing her hands against each other and glancing away, embarrassedly. She was wearing the same weird and neutral-colored clothes of always. A brown skirt, clear-yellow button blouse, and a thin knitted coat. Her whole body looked tensed like the string of a bow when close to release the arrow.

"Good morning." I said.

I smiled gently, a little amused. Annie was so shy!

"Good... morning..."

I caught her stretching her eyes timidly to take glimpse of the inside of our bedroom, as she glanced up to reply. But she quickly glanced back to her shoes when perceived that I've noticed.

I wondered if our younger cousin had ever seen another girl's room. She spoke very quietly, in a barely audible murmur:

"I... Max sent me here. He said that you wanted to talk with me."

"Oh." I blinked, now really surprised. Maxwell *had* sent her, after all! I smiled again. "Thank you, Annie. Please come in."

I opened the door for her to pass, at the same time that I stepped back, the fatty sleeve of my lilac leather blouse hanging loose from right below my shoulder till the tighter hem around my raised wrist. I think that, also with my dark, close-fitting jeans trousers, and the colorful sneakers I wore, I was the perfect opposite of her faded image.

I closed the door soon after her coming in, and walked to sit on my still unmade bed. The spring-mattress yielded softly. It was a thousand times better than mine, at home.

"Sister is still sleeping." I excused myself for her "She's lazy and usually doesn't get up till at least ten o'clock, except when forced. It's not very wise to wake her. But don't mind it. She'll wake by herself – soon, soon, if she finds our talk interesting."

I gestured for a confused Anne to sit too. She did it – falling quite gracefully at my right, in spite of her embarrassment.

Naturally lady-like, this girl. I gazed at her, suddenly slightly worried.

"Hum..." I pressed my lips together, making a low uncertain sound. "Annie." I spoke her name. "Maxwell told you what we're wanting to talk about, didn't he?"

Anne had her hands enlaced over her lap, exactly as her brother did yesterday. She squeezed her fingers, her already fair skin getting almost wax-white. She avoided my eyes, staring at her nails.

"Yes." she answered in a whisper. "He explained everything. I... wanted to help."

Oh, dear. I smiled softly, with merriment, and reached out for her hands, holding them between mine as if she was a close friend. She glanced up, startled, at me.

"Thank you, Annie." I said, punctuating the words with some mild affection. "You're very brave."

Her blue eyes beamed with surprise. Her chin had dropped, her mouth open in a little 'o'.

"Eh... Carrie... What's that annoying, humming little noise? You'd waken me... Are you talking to yourself?"

"Alice!" I cried, and released Anne, turning to my twin – half-scolding her, half-drawing her attention "Annie's here."

I almost said ‘pretend you’re nice’, but this stayed only on our mental link.

Alice stopped mumbling under her blankets. There was a sudden wave under the fabric. She uncovered her head, to take a full-of-curiosity peer at Annie. My sister’s green eyes were already bright, completely waken, but the rest of her still scented of sleep, from the knotted black hair to the warm breath smelling of milk and cookies. The dirty plate and glasses that Zia had brought us at bed-time remained on the little table next to her.

Sister looked very cute and doubtful, wrapped this way inside her cosy blankets.

“Oh.” she muttered. “Hi, Annie. Good morning.”

“Good morning.” Anne replied shyly.

My twin stirred under her sheets, till arranging herself in a relaxed sitting position. She kept wrapped like a little child, her bed-hair falling in messy locks around her face. But even so, she still managed to have that look of seriousness and majesty stamped on her face, which almost made you think that her customs and appearance were the most grave and professional possible.

“Well. So tell us your story.” she demanded, straight to the matter.

As Anne hesitated, Sister raised her brows (slightly impatient, she was, always, when concerning faint-hearted people) and said:

“Just forget we are here and pretend you’re talking to the walls.”

Our cousin might have found it a strange suggestion. However, she nodded.

“Okay.” she stared up at the blank wall in our room, and began.

First her voice was very low, but she breathed in and raised it gradually after some moments. She spoke as if she was telling the walls some fairy tale.

“Okay. It all began like a week ago, on Grandpa’s birthday. All our family was here. Was a quite happy day, until... the dinner.” she stopped for a moment, and continued: “I remember, Grandpa looked late. We were all around the table already. Then my Mum said to me that I should call him, ‘cause she thought he had missed the time. And so I went to call him.”

Cousin’s lower lip trembled: only slightly, and only once, nonetheless enough to make her stop one more time. I quickly held her hand again, giving her support. This time it was more for pity than for she being our only witness. I managed to make Sister squeeze her eyes with jealousy.

“Carrie.” she called, high-pitchedly. “Broken narratives make me *bore-ee-ed*. I like *moving pictures*.”

I rushed Annie gently. There was a useless description of her

way to the library, while she regained control of her feelings; then, the real action started.

“I knocked at the library door.” Annie said. “No one answered. I waited some seconds, and knocked again.”

At this moment, Anne’s descriptions were already flowing easily, and Sister’s *movie* suddenly shimmered to life inside my mind.

Her imagination is so vivid... My lids closed slowly...

“But there was still no response. So...-”

... and I could see her, at the door of the library.

“... I eased the door open. Not too much. Just enough to peer in, and to pass. I didn’t see him at the first moment. The library looked empty. I got in. The door had been blocking my vision, but then it was at my back. I was standing in clear space. And I saw him... next to the octagonal table. That small one, of green stone and dark wood.”

My eyes remained closed. Yea, I could see it. The door opened to the left. The low octagonal table was at the right. If you only circled the door – as a transparent Anne did in our thoughts – then...

“... he was lying face-down on the floor. The side of his face was still visible under his hair. His eyes were...” Anne held back a tear. “Were open. There was blood on the back of his head. He was so still... So still... So I screamed.”

A scream. The worried faces. The rush, the come-and-going, the quick sound of footsteps, our anxious curiosity. Then the room, the clock tic-tacking, doctor Collins... It all restarted passing inside my mind. Too perfectly. Too painful.

I hurriedly opened my lids, before I was drowned in memories. Sister was staring at Anne. Her gaze was cold, calculated – and unmerciful.

“Nice.” she nodded. “What else can you remember? Must have more things in the library than a body, sure? He looked like he had fallen and held on the table for support; or like he’d knocked his head against it? There were objects out of usual place? Tell me more, tell me more, Annie.” Sister stared at her, intently. “I want your eyes, *whole of them*.”

My body tensed. This sounded too creepy, in that already gloomy atmosphere! Great Sis. Scare the poor girl, talking about taking her eyes!

“I-I-I...” Anne suddenly stuttered, frightened “I don’t know... But... it was the library. Books. His working-table. Books, shelves...”

She’d repeated ‘books’. Sister really had stolen her coherence, it seemed.

“There were some papers on the desk, and a tray of tea...” Cousin added, quickly. “But everything looked right... Wasn’t messed up, no tea spilled, nor... nor anything...” she finally backed, curling up

and hugging herself.

“There wasn’t any object out of place?” I asked, blinking. “But this is strange...”

“No...” Anne answered, shaking her head. “Nothing I can remember, I mean...” she corrected herself.

“Ok, ok.” Alice said, impatient, giving her time to recover. Soon she asked, doubtful: “Tray of tea?”

“Yea, sis.” I spoke. “Don’t you remember? Grandpa asked Zia to bring him tea... She was the last one to see him alive.”

“That we know.” Alice emphasized.

I gazed at her for a second, in silence. Then comprehension entered my brain and I nodded, slowly.

There was another last one, of course. The one we didn’t know that was the last one. The killer.

Sister suddenly glanced at Anne, who was still sitting on the tip of my bed, turning her head from one side to the other to follow our discussion. I looked at her too – she didn’t seem to like all this attention resting on her.

“What you told us. That’s really all?” my twin inquired.

Anne paused, a soft little huff of hesitation escaping her half-open mouth. She licked her lips, and said, nodding:

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Alice replied. “So get off with you.”

Always a delicate flower.

I stood up, hurriedly, and opened the door as Annie was going. I smiled.

“Bye-bye, Annie. Thanks for your help. Tell your brother we are going to see him soon.”

She smiled back at me, and said ‘okay’. But I still saw something of the past fear in her blue eyes.

I walked to Sis. She’d fallen back on her pillow, lost in thoughts, staring at the ceiling. I crossed my arms.

“Why did you do that? You scared her on purpose.”

My sister just ignored me. She shook her head, and commented, low:

“She doesn’t really remember, does she, Carrie? Our witness sucks.”

I was stunned. I recovered and cried out, indignant:

“She has almost a robot’s memory, Alice! Look at what happened to her, and you had to make her freak out too. I think she described it all well!” I paused, looking at her with more attention. I asked, unsure: “Why are you annoyed today?”

My twin had her arm over her eyes, covering her face. She brushed my question aside, as if she hadn’t heard it. But I swear I felt her hissing at me.

“She didn’t say anything new, or special.” I realised, managing to read her upset silence. “That’s the problem?”

Alice nodded, reluctantly. I dared speaking:

“This is the simplest puzzle, so. It’s common. Ordinary.”

“Often the simple truths are the hardest to guess, oh, dear sister of mine.” she replied, her fangs dripping venom. “Because they shouldn’t be simple.”

One thing you always learn quickly, don’t matter how stupid you are: never go against Alice’s pride. It’s useless. As useful as hitting your head against a concrete wall.

I sighed. I glanced at the ceiling, hopping slightly from frustration, the words coming out of my mouth like a lesson repeated till being known by heart.

“You’re the best, smartest, most captivating, most beautiful and most stylish of all detectives, real or created by human mind, Alice.”

I looked at her.

“Isn’t right bullying other people only because you’re frustrated.” I called her louder: “Sis! I trust you. You just need some time to think. Poirot wouldn’t be swifter than you.”

I said this last sentence with all vehemence I had. And, fortunately, it was what she wanted to hear.

She snorted, but took the sleeve of the pajama from her face to stare at me. There was a soft glow of happiness in her eyes. I could see she was chuckling, despite her efforts to hide it.

“Really. You overestimate me, Carrie.”

“No, I don’t.” I retorted. “And you like being flattered. Be honest.”

I walked to my bed, and caught the notebook with our suspects’ lists under my pillow, with a pen between the leaves. I crossed my legs under my body, and Sister sat upright on her pillows. She pushed her blankets aside lightly, ready for talking.

We exchanged some opinions. I wrote some things on the notebook.

After some time, however, the sound of her voice dictating changed to a quiet buzz on my ears, as I got lost following one of those wicked Ariadne’s threads that go zigzagging through wicked confuse labyrinths, and that most people call thoughts. I started poking my cheek with the pen. A rhythmical, almost unconscious movement, as I stared at the sheet.

Of course, I was already aware of how much Sister just hated Maxwell. She can be *really* vehement (read: repetitive) about her passions and hatreds.

I wasn’t exactly fond of our male cousin, either. But even so I made the mistake of asking the wrong question aloud.

“Hey, sis.” I addressed her, absentmindedly “How do you like

Maxwell?”

She suddenly stopped, immobile as a statuette, with a hairbrush in her hand, and the other hand holding a lock of hair. For a moment, she was creepily quiet.

She turned, in slow motion, and looked straight at my face, in a somewhat weird manner. A too serious gaze.

“Carrie. My dear Carrie.” she spoke. “He’s our cousin. You must know that I do not approve incest.”

My turn of freezing with my hand raised and a weird expression on the face. The only difference was the pen between my fingers, and the kind of expression – no reaction outside, with a burning cold hatred inside. I finally turned back to the notebook, and kept writing.

Alice and me: close to be the same person. NO, SHE’S A PERVERTED.

I mumbled quietly.

“You sick, dirty perverted...”

“Hey!” she rushed to my side and peered over my shoulder. “Don’t write these things about me! This is a formal document! It’s you who shouldn’t say ambiguous things.”

“I didn’t say anything with double-meaning! Perv. P-e-r-v. I’m going to slap you.”

She grabbed the pen from my hand, and crossed a mess of lines over my comment on the notebook.

“Now, what do you really think?” I inquired, regaining my composure. “Like, he sent Anne here, as we asked, and etcetera. He could’ve done nothing just to piss us off.”

Alice shrugged. She gave me the notebook back.

“I know what you mean. Doesn’t make me feel anything like moral obligation of being nice to him, though. He’s a jerk. But he still can be quite useful, I’m sure. I think...” she searched for the right words, raising her hand to her chin to think, and still holding the pen. “... that he’s... passionate. A malleable pawn. He’ll do anything for justice, so that Grandpa’s soul can rest in peace. He’s clearly not like us, heartless persons.”

There was a touch of irritated irony in her voice. I hugged my knees, glancing down. I understood. It hurt, although we were the ones in control. It’s true what they say, about power don’t bringing you happiness.

It was selfish, of course, but... how could he love Grandpa more than us? Wasn’t affection, love, what we’d always felt for him? So why it wasn’t strong enough?

I hated Maxwell. For this reason too.

I sighed, tired of this all, and deeply upset. I waved the list of suspects in my hand, energetically.

“But we can’t possibly exchange ideas with him! And that’s what he’s expects now! How do you say to someone that his mother is one of your main suspects? And he’s bossy and annoying. He’ll want to know!”

I was in the verge of tears. I often find myself close to crying because of my own silly helplessness.

“Don’t worry.” my twin sister patted my shoulder, soothing me.

She was gazing down calmly at her nails. A half-smirk was giving a creepy light to her lips.

“I’m gonna have him under my feet.” she uttered. “He’ll be my slave. Be sure of it.”

I chewed at my lower lip, slightly worried.

I was calculating. Maxwell surely wouldn’t accept easily being our slave.

FANFICTION FRICTION

Katelyn Rushe

I know this shouldn't be embarrassing for me, especially in this venue, but I have a confession to make: I used to write fanfiction. A lot.

For those of you who don't know, a fanfiction ("fanfic" for short) is a piece of literature that ties in with a movie, book, TV show, etc. and is written by a fan of that franchise rather than the official writer or writers. It can be anything from a short poem to a novel-length story with multiple chapters, and it usually centers around pre-existing characters from said franchise. Anyone can write one, and there are entire websites such as Fanfiction.net, Deviantart.com, and Archiveofourown.org that are dedicated to sharing them.

So why is it semi-embarrassing to admit that I once wrote fanfiction? Well, as someone who strives to be a professional author, I have two main reasons. The first is that, as stated before, anyone can write fanfiction—including people who either aren't good writers or won't make the effort to be. I'm certainly not criticizing any of the other contributors in this magazine, but I think we all know what I'm talking about. For every good fanfic out there, there seem to be a hundred less-than-good ones, so the practice isn't viewed as much of a status symbol among the writing community. It also doesn't help that a large portion of those less-than-good fanfics are filled with loads of disgustingly detailed smut that serves little to no purpose to their narratives. Wholesome, well-thought-out fanfiction is something of a rarity, and those excellent pieces tend to get overlooked in the shuffle.

The second reason that a fanfic writer might be embarrassed to admit their hobby is because it could be seen as a huge waste of time and effort. You spend days, weeks, months, and sometimes even years writing a story that you can't publish once it's finished because it's about characters whom you don't own the rights to. Sometimes you can change their names and make a few other adjustments to turn out something original, like E.L. James infamously did for "Fifty Shades of Grey", but normally the details are so specific that there's no way to cover up who the characters are supposed to be. I have four or five novel-length fanfics out there, and only one of them has a chance of becoming an original work that I can publish. My bibliography of published works could be almost triple the length it is now if I wasn't so obsessed with Lord of the Rings, Pokémon, and Pirates of the Caribbean in high school.

At the same time though, we know there are benefits to writing fanfiction. If you're serious about it, it can be a great exercise tool. I

can honestly say that my writing style, character development, and overall storytelling skills have improved ten times since I started writing, and that's thanks to practicing on fanfics and getting constant feedback from online readers. Feedback isn't something you get on a regular basis when working on a book.

The only downside is that when you write about characters that have previously been established in other works of fiction, you don't get much practice at creating any from scratch. That's why it's hard to get away from writing fanfics and focus solely on original works; you get more story ideas for characters that you already know.

So the question for anyone else in this position is, how do you make that transition? How do you take that urge to write about your favorite fictional characters and harness it to help you create your own great work? The answer is fairly simple: trick your brain into thinking that you're still writing fanfiction.

For instance, if you're a huge Jack Sparrow fan, then come up with a character for your book that exhibits Jack-Sparrow-like personality traits, then picture him in their place every time you write a scene for them. It doesn't matter if your character looks nothing like him, just picture him in their place anyway. Ask yourself how Jack would react to the situation in the scene you're writing, and the ideas will most likely come to you. The goal is that eventually your character will outgrow their Jack Sparrow training wheels and take on a life of their own. You might even decide to go back and change some of their earlier scenes to make their behavior more like your re-envisioning of them and less like Captain Jack. I do this all the time with my characters, and so far, it's worked very well.

Another strategy that I've recently started to use is "reassigning" fanfiction scenes. Suppose a really interesting scene for a potential fanfic just materializes in your head one day. Instead of writing it about Jack Sparrow or whomever you picture as the subject, look at the cast in your own book and decide who among them is most like the character in that scene. Make a few adjustments to the scene, and you've suddenly got a really interesting moment in your book. I took a bunch of ideas for things I'd like to see in the next Hobbit movie and turned them into what I think is a funny and heartfelt subplot for Part 2 of a sci-fi/fantasy series I'm working on. Heck, I've even got half of an outline for a Pokémon fanfic that I'm in the process of developing into a prequel to my series.

Bottom line, if you write fanfiction just for entertainment and have no intentions of becoming a writer in any other capacity, I completely respect that. Everyone's free to do what they want with their time and have harmless fun however they wish. If you do want to be a professional writer someday, then fanfiction can be both a blessing and a curse. The trick is learning how to rein in that wild

literary horse so it can pull your carriage and get you to the places where you want to go in your career.

KALEIDOSCOPE LIES

Simplistic-whim
of <http://Simplistic-whim.deviantart.com>

It's the kind of fog that makes moonbeams glitter, dancing in evanescent starlight; the kind of cold that makes our breath appear, tangled together and I lost in your kaleidoscope smile.

The moist earth is frigid against my spine, stark contrast to you, running your hot, ragged breath across the valleys of my bare skin, the rise of my flushed breasts and the gully between them that you kiss. I could almost forget, in this moment, that you have presented me with a mask, that behind your flashing teeth you bare a wolf's smile (and you are predatory and ravenous). I let you devour me, and let myself pretend, for an instant, that you do this out of love.

Your lips flare red, a pretty shade of carmine, dappled by a bead of sweat that has settled in the dimple of them, and *god* you are beautiful, every damned inch of you (and I have seen every inch, your chest laid bare to mine and your skin exposed but you have *never* given me anything more than the superficial). I drift amid a sea of clouds, my eyelids sinking heavy and I wonder, *have you always been this way?*

Have you always wanted to taste the sun-kissed skin of the innocents who did not want to give themselves to you?

But I had wanted to give myself to you, because you are *beautiful*, molded perfection beneath flawless flesh (and who *could* say no to you, with your ivory smirk and supernova eyes?) I wonder if you notice that I am near-comatose, complacent to you now after all this time, but your heady panting tells me that you do not, that perhaps you like it *better* this way, pretending that I am prey, and that I do not want you (and I don't, *not anymore*).

We used to be so perfect -- that was before I knew you were a sinner.

After, you drape across me like you always do, brush my hair back sweetly and cascade your lips across my brow. You tell me that you love me, but I know you are lying; you do not love. You *cannot* love.

I sigh, murmur a repetition of the lie, smearing my breath against the hollow of your throat. I inhale the scent of you, so bittersweet and resist the urge to gag, turning my eyes to the moonbeam sparkles and tell myself that next time -- next time I will refuse you, next time I will find resolve.

But I know that I am lying.

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

ME₃ THE HELLDIVER SAGA - THE LAST CYCLE: CHAPTER 4: THE FALL OF A TITAN

Veyron722skyhook

Austin and Liara found themselves standing in nothing but bright whiteness. This was strange for them since they didn't have dreams like this when they joined their minds.

The two simply stood in silence for a while as they looked around. They then suddenly saw something. A figure of bright light was standing in front of them.

Austin cautiously hugged Liara close to him in case it became hostile.

For several long seconds though it simply stood there. It was too obscured to see clearly what the figure looked like, but something about it felt familiar. What could be seen was that it was around the same height as Austin.

The figure then slowly stepped forward and reached out. Austin's first instinct was to back away, but something inside him seemed to prevent it, almost as though it trusted this figure.

The hand of the figure slowly got closer until it touched the Helldiver's heart, then everything went bright...

Austin and Liara gently woke from their sleep. Although the dream had ended abruptly, it hadn't been a nightmare so they felt very well rested.

"Did you see that figure?" Austin asked, wanting to be sure that it had indeed been the real Liara that had been in the dream, and not a part of the dream.

"Yes. I don't know why, but it almost felt as though I knew it." Said Liara.

"This is strange. We've never had dreams like this before." Said Austin as he got up from the bed and began pulling his suit mesh on.

"Well, sometimes odd dreams do happen. You would certainly know about that." Liara teased.

Austin didn't forget easily how he'd had once got rather drunk after having a friendly drink with Dr Chakwas and then having a deep dream in which he'd had sex with the Normandy's former Yeoman, Kelly Chambers.

"Still, we got a good night's sleep anyway." Said Austin, smiling

at Liara's teasing at least.

"Oddly enough, I'm still a bit tired after last night. Always love it when we come together." Liara sighed.

"That mean you won't be coming with me? Aw, what a shame." Austin teased.

"Don't make me haul you in the air again." Liara warned teasingly.

Austin knew better than to tease Liara when she gave that warning. Not too long ago, he'd teased her so much that she'd activated her biotics and simply held him in the air. She'd then kept him there and forced him to watch while she had a warm shower and even touched herself. Not only had it been torture for him, but it had also frightened him a bit. As a soldier who wasn't a biotic, being frozen still and helpless with no control was the last thing he wanted. Not only that, but it was also his wife doing. He could at least be happy with that fact that Liara simply meant it in a joking way and not in the way that she was trying to control him, especially in a way the Reapers might if ever they found a way into his mind. He wouldn't let that happen though. He'd kill every Reaper and indoctrinated servant before they got the chance.

"Okay, I'll drop it." He chuckled. "Still, you coming or not?"

Liara nodded and begun pulling on her own suit mesh. Austin meanwhile put his hand out and simply concentrated as his armour began flying onto him piece by piece.

"You love doing that, don't you?" Liara chuckled.

"What can I say? It's a very cool feature."

Traynor was the first to wake up. She immediately recognized the comfort she felt on top of her favourite pillows, as well as the intimately familiar warm body beneath her, and the soothing comfort its presence had on her. It had been a long time since she'd slept so well. It almost felt like this was a dream within a dream since she hadn't slept this well for such a long time since Sarah had left. Now that she was back...

And now she was back! Samantha could hardly believe that Sarah was with her again.

After spending some time blissfully staring at her lover's impossibly beautiful features, drinking in every detail, Traynor began running her hand down Sarah's body to her hourglass waistline, revelling in the sensation of her skin against her own. As she stroked her fingers over her toned abdomen, delighting in the feeling of the smooth skin yet powerful and coiled muscles underneath, it caused Sarah to moan in her sleep.

"Oh, Samantha... Keep touching me there."

The fact that she was making her love moan in her sleep make it extremely hard to resist the temptation to give Sarah her favourite wake up call.

As Samantha kept touching Sarah, her lover's sighs only increased. Eventually, Traynor was unable to resist it any longer. She gave into her temptation to wake up Sarah the same way they used to every morning before she left, with a long and beautiful kiss. Sarah's lips against her own felt so wonderful that it almost brought tears to her eyes. As she woke up, Sarah seamlessly slipped into the kiss, like it was the most natural thing in the world. So natural in fact that the two lovers refused to separate for a very long time, and even when they did, they still held the others face in their hands.

"Morning, Sammy." Sarah smiled.

"Sleep well?" Samantha sighed, lovingly stroking Sarah's cheek.

"Yes. I haven't slept that well since out last night together before I left." Said Sarah.

The pleasure they felt from each other from last night was greater than either of them had ever felt before in their entire lives. Just the right glances at each was enough to get them squirming in their seats. Also, as shy as she was, one edge that Traynor especially had over Sarah was that unbelievably sexy voice of hers. Whenever she talked, even at normal, Sarah would feel warm and content, along with a slight tingle across her skin... and between her legs. So, when Traynor actually put effort into it, and slipped into what she considered her "bedroom voice". It made Sarah instantly wet.

"You still look a bit tired." Said Samantha, with a bit of concern, noting that Sarah still looked like she could fall asleep again any second.

"Don't worry, I'm fine. I just sometimes need to wake my body up." Said Sarah.

"Oh really? How?"

"Well, sometimes I do exercises..."

A thought then suddenly popped into Sarah's head. A thought she knew that her girlfriend would love.

"...or a shower." She winked.

"You copycat! I was gonna suggest the same thing." Samantha smiled. "Oh the hell with it."

To Sarah's surprise, Traynor suddenly scooped her up in her arms and started carrying her over to the shower. Usually it was the other way around, but Sarah didn't mind.

It would be another hour or so until they reached Palaven, so Austin decided to pass the time by doing what he often did to pass the time, talk to the crew.

Xun had set up office in the quarters that had belonged to

former Cerberus operative Miranda Lawson. She and her friend Jacob Taylor had defected to the Helldivers during Austin's mission to take down the Collectors. It had taken some time, but they had proven themselves and earned Austin's trust.

Today, Miranda and Jacob had been temporarily reassigned about a month or so back. So far, Austin hadn't heard from them, but recent intel told him that they were indeed alive.

As Austin entered, he found himself staring at a lot of screens, each of which projected a part of the milky way.

A red drone suddenly hovered up to Austin. On closer look however, he saw that it wasn't a drone, it was a holographic Chinese dragon.

"Major Shepard. It's a pleasure to see you again." It said.

"Wait, are you the drone from the Shadow Broker ship? You look... different." Said Austin, recognizing the drone's voice.

"Mistress Xun decided to give a new appearance that better suited the environment she is used to working in. In this case, a Chinese dragon. She also now refers to me as 'Glyph' instead of 'info drone' 95 percent of the time." It replied.

"Suits him doesn't it." Said another voice.

Xun's Asari assistant, Oranna was also here. It was certainly nice to see the purple skinned Asari again.

"Nice to see you too, Oranna. How'd you get on-board though?" Austin asked, shaking hands with Oranna.

"Xun picked me up while you were on the Citadel. You're now stuck with me permanently." He chuckled.

Xun herself came out of the small bedroom that joined with the quarters.

"Looks like you brought more than just that drone from your ship." Said Austin.

"A few things were necessary. I'd be a very silent Shadow Broker without datafeeds." Said Xun.

"So you still have access to your resources?"

"What I can get. We'll need it to research this Crucible." Said Xun. "Until we understand precisely what it does, it's far too dangerous to use."

"It'd be nice to know we're not kids playing around with a loaded gun." Said Austin.

"Absolutely. The damage it could cause if it backfired is unthinkable." Xun agreed.

"So what's been happening with you as the Broker recently?" Austin asked, deciding to change the subject to something more friendly.

"It's been... exciting. The old Broker's ship was impressive, but it was never meant to be space worthy." Said Xun. "Which meant that

Cerberus eventually stumbled on us on Hagalaz.”

“What happened?” Austin asked.

“I knew they were coming. Feron, Oranna and I loaded as much of the ship’s specialized hardware onto a shuttle as we could. We got away from Cerberus’ ships after an... appropriate distraction.” Xun replied.

“What kind of distraction?”

“Sending the Broker’s ship exploding into a Cerberus cruiser. I don’t think the Illusive Man expected me to give up my resources in such a... spectacular fashion.

“Can you still operate as the Broker without the ship?”

“Well, I certainly couldn’t let the Illusive Man have it. I saved what was crucial. My network of agents is intact, although the Reapers have taken a toll on their numbers.”

“It’s taking a while to re-establish contact.”

“So where is Feron if you three escaped?”

“He convinced me and Liara he was recovered enough to work, and I do need more agents.”

“Agent Feron didn’t report any injuries during his last call to you, Mistress.”

“True. Given what he survived, Liara and I should probably be less concerned about him.”

“We’ll talk later, Xun.”

“Talk to you soon. Feel free also to check my terminals regularly for information.”

From what they could see from the screens in the dropship, Palaven’s skies were already full of Reapers. The Turian fleets seemed to be holding out okay, but were sustain quite a few casualties.

“They’re at least holding out a bit better than I thought they would.” Said Ventra, somewhat disheartened to see his home in ruins.

“Major, there’s no clear place to land. The whole place is crawling with enemies.” Said Steve Cortez, the new dropship pilot.

“Right. Cortez, open the door. We’ll drop down and secure a landing site. James, keep us covered with the main gun.” Said Austin.

“Roger that.”

The doors opened and Austin, Liara and Ventra jumped out.

Many husks that were swarming the area quickly noticed them.

“I almost missed these guys.” Ventra growled as he unsheathed his bow.

The husks roared and ran at them. Liara was the first to attack as she lifted a husk into the air before slamming it back down onto the ground while Austin emptied his Revenant into several more.

Liara then spawned a singularity right in the middle of the horde, allowing Austin and Ventra to cut them down with brutally accurate

arrow and gunfire while James took out the last of them from the dropship.

“We’ve cleared a landing zone. Set her down.” Said Austin.

The dropship gently touched down and James joined the group.

The Palaven buildings were definitely a mess. It was hard to make their way through the debris, especially through the thousands of husks they ran into and the explosions and gunfire all around the place.

Pretty soon though, they found themselves at the entrance to the base they’d been instructed to find. The Turians, having been told they would be arriving, quickly let them in and they found the commanding officer, General Corinthus.

“General.” Said Austin.

“Major Shepard. Heard you were coming, but I didn’t believe it. General Corinthus.” Said the Turian.

“We’ve come to get Primarch Fedorian.” Said Austin.

Corinthus was silent for a while before he finally replied.

“Primarch Fedorian is dead. His shuttle was shot down an hour ago as it tried to leave the planet.” He said.

“That’ll complicate things.” Austin sighed. “I’m sorry. That’s a big loss for everyone. Reaper bastards. So what happens now?”

“The Turian hierarchy provides very clear lines of succession.” Said Liara.

“Right. General Corinthus?”

“With such heavy casualties, it’s hard for me to be certain who the next Primarch is. Central command will know. However, at the moment, contacting them is impossible. Our comm tower is out. Husks are swarming that area so we can’t get close enough to repair it.” SAID Corinthus.

“Well we’re not leaving until we know who the next Primarch is. We’ll fix the tower.” Said Austin.

“Thank you, Major. I’ll take care of things on this end. Said Corinthus.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Getting to the tower was surprisingly easy. Too easy in fact. Austin reckoned however that the Husks would arrive as soon as they started repairing the tower.

“We can’t repair it from this panel.” Said Austin. “James, see if you can get up there and fix it.”

“Okay. Better keep those Husks from climbing up after me.” Said James as he began climbing the tower’s ladder.

Sure enough, several Husks slowly crawled over the debris overhead and slowly began making their way towards them.

“Ventra keep him covered. Liara and I will handle the main horde.” Said Austin.

“You two against those things?!” James called down from the tower.

“Don’t worry. They can handle themselves.” Said Ventra, readying his bow in case some husks tried to sneak up from behind.

Both Austin and Liara drew their swords and readied for the fight.

“Time to go to work.” Said Liara.

First Liara struck as she cut across a Husk’s chest. Austin then did a turn strike over Liara as she ducked, sensing the move he was making. The move decapitated another husk and even took out the eye of a third.

Liara then ran forward and did a jump stab of the one her bond mate had temporarily blinded, allowing him to then follow with a swift cut to the legs.

Another husk ran at them, but Austin was quick to use the blade on his left elbow to stab it in the heart, allowing Liara to then bring her sword down on it.

“Incoming!” James yelled from the top of the tower.

Austin was able to turn his head just in time to see a Husk jumping into the air to lunge at them. With their bond connecting both their minds, Austin grabbed Liara and swung her over his head. As Liara was pulled up into the air by her husband, she swung her sword right at the husk, cutting its upper section clean off from the rest of its body. She even managed to land a kick at another husk as she landed.

With his wife’s feet back on the ground, Austin turned his attention back to the main horde. Liara benefited from her lighter armour by being able to move faster and she could also use her biotics to speed up even more. The speed difference wasn’t huge though. Plus, Austin’s armour did give him more strength which allowed him to deal more damage. Any husks that came at him that couldn’t cut down with Excalibur in time, he could smash away with his forearms or punch with his fists.

Another husk ran at Austin just as he smashed another husk in the head, breaking its neck in the process. The Major quickly thrust forward and ran the husk through with his blade. Just as another husk ran at him, the Helldiver quickly pulled out and used his free wrist to block it’s arms. Before the zombieified human could react in time to this, Austin thrust forward and ran the husk through. This time, he went all the way up to the hilt, the tip of the blade clearly visible as it protruded out of the other side of the limp husk.

Still more where incoming.

Austin however knew a good way to at least slow them down.

He twirled Excalibur a few times, then threw it. The blade spun as it zoomed towards the large wave. It cut down two husks before finally embedding itself in a third. The fall of the husk caused some others to topple over or trip over the bodies.

Quickly sensing that her husband was temporarily defenceless until he got Excalibur back, Liara stuck close to him and kept him covered while he ran to pick up his sword. Another husk tried to jump Austin, but he simply blocked it with his arm and threw it over him, allowing Liara to deliver a killing blow.

Austin's hand then quickly grabbed onto the hilt of Excalibur and pulled it free of the dead husk's body, slicing another husk in half in the process.

Liara used her biotics to pull another husk in her direction which she then sliced apart with her own sword while Austin did a spin which took out about 10 more husk in one swing.

He then knocked another one down with his wrist, which Liara then finished by cutting its throat and then dodged under the swipe from another husk. He quickly retaliated this by swinging Excalibur up from behind the husk, cutting both its legs off. Liara then ran another husk through while Austin smashed the downed husks' head with his foot.

Liara then parried a husk's blow with her sword, allowing Austin to finish it off and she threw a singularity at the final few.

One lone survivor charged at them, only to bang right into Austin's waiting fist. Acting perfect synch with each other, both Austin and Liar raised their blades and finished the husk off.

Overall, the training and practice that they had done to perfect their new fighting style had paid off. Another advantage of being bond mates was that they could communicate with each other telepathically. As they had also learned together, they could us this in combat as well.

It had taken them some time to learn how to use it properly, but once they had mastered it, they were unstoppable. By simply sending thoughts to each other, they could know exactly what the other was going to do before they did it. They could even use this to coordinate dual strikes and even use this to weave around each other. It truly did put a new meaning on the saying "fight as one"

During the last two years, they had also perfected this. Instead of sparing against each other like they used to, they now spared with each other against incoming waves. Austin's mentor and sword trainer, General Alkatraan Zartrack had also given some advice and taught them a few new tricks which they had incorporated into their training. Eventually, it had advanced to the point where they had now essentially created an all new fighting style dependent on the two of them working together.

Even Xun, who was one of the best fighters, struggled against the both of them. Whenever she got an opening at one, the other would always be there to block it. She herself had never taken a hit, but at the same time, she could never land one on them. They were too fast, too well organized, and too coordinated for her. In fact, now had ever managed to beat both Austin and Liara together.

This often made some of the others a bit jealous. In fact, Alaara and Sandra were even trying to see if it was possible for them to learn this new fighting style themselves.

“Got it! Main tower’s satellite connection is now repaired. On my way down!” James called, sliding down the ladder to join the others, just as Venra finished off the last of the Husks had had been fighting.

“Good work, James.” Austin nodded, barely showing any signs of tiredness from earlier.

“How did you two do that? You moved and fought like you knew exactly how the both of you were gonna move. I’ve never seen two people fight with such coordination and skill.” James asked in amazement.

“We’re bond mates. We’re able to use that bond to communicate with each other telepathically. In this case, we can both coordinate our attacks with each other and practically fight as one.” Said Liara, trying her best not to sound smug at the fact that she and Austin were unbeatable together.

“I’m almost jealous of you two now.”

With the Husks dealt with and the tower repaired, Austin reached for his earpiece.

“General, do you read? The comm tower has been repaired.” He said.

“*Much appreciated, Major. I already have information from Palaven command. Please return ASAP.*” Corinthus replied.

“We’re on our way.”

“What’ve you got?” Austin asked.

“As your partner said, succession is usually simple. But right now, the hierarchy’s in chaos. So many dead or MIA.” Corinthus replied.

“I need someone. I don’t care who. As long as they can get the Turian’s to join us.” Said Austin.

“I’m on it, Shepard. We’ll find you the Primarch.” Said a voice.

To Austin’s surprise, a very familiar face walked up to them. A Turian Helldiver who bore the mark of Alpha, a mark that only members of Alpha Squad carried.

“Garrus!”

“Vakarian, sir! I didn’t see you arrive.” Said Corinthus.

“At ease, General.” Said Garrus.

“Good to see you again. You had me worried.” Austin smiled.

“I survived a gunship missile to the head. It’s gonna take more than a few Reapers to get rid of me. I’m the closest damn thing we have to an expert on Reaper forces, so I’m... advisor.” Said Garrus.

“James, this is Garrus Vakarian. He’s another member of Alpha Squad. Hell of a soldier.” Said Austin as James shook hands with Garrus.

“Lieutenant.” Garrus acknowledged. “Good to see you too, Liara.”

“Good to see you in one piece, Garrus.” Liara smiled under her helmet.

“You look a bit bigger than last we met, Garrus.” Said Ventra, giving his Turian brother in arms a friendly nudge.

“You seem to look a bit thinner, Ventra.” Garrus replied back. “General Corinthus filled me in. We know who we’re after.”

“Palaven command tells me that the next Primarch is General Adrian Victus.” Said Corinthus.

“Victus? His name’s crossed Xun’s desk.” Said Liara.

“Know him, Garrus?” Austin asked.

“I was fighting alongside him this morning. Lifelong military, gets results, popular with his troops. Not so popular with military command. Has a reputation for playing loose with the accepted strategy.”

“Unconventional thinking might be our best bet.” Said Austin.

“He’ll do whatever it takes. Reminds of an old human I knew.” Said Garrus.

“Okay. Let’s get him on the shuttle and get the hell out of here. You said you were with Victus this morning?”

“Yeah, but we got separated. He went to bolster a flank that was breaking. Could be anywhere out there.”

“We’re trying to raise him, Major.” Said Corinthus.

A loud roar suddenly echoed from not too far away.

“What the hell was that?” James asked cautiously.

“I’ve heard that noise before...” said Austin worriedly.

“Incoming!”

Sure enough, Austin’s worse fears were realised.

A huge winged figure swooped above the high buildings and headed straight in their direction.

Everyone dove for cover as the Draco breathed a hugged wave of fire in there direction. Most were able to avoid the hot flames. Those who weren’t as fortunate were turned to ash at the merest touch.

The Draco flew over the base and came around for another run.

“A DRAGON?! Where the hell did the Reapers get a

Dragon?!” James shouted in shock.

“What’s a Dragon?” all the aliens asked at the same time.

“Big scaly creature with wings, breaths fire, mouth full of teeth and a bad attitude.” Austin quickly replied as the Draco swooped over them again.

This time though, the Dragon husk didn’t breath any fire. It instead made another harp turn and landed on the roof of a nearby shelter.

“Assuming control.”

“Oh crap. Not him again.” Garrus cursed as the Draco’s eyes turned yellow and Harbinger’s voice began to emit from it’s mouth.

“Your efforts are futile, Shepard. You cannot hope to stand a chance against us.” Harbinger tormented.

“Your overconfidence is your weakness, Harbinger!” Austin returned.

“Your faith in your friends and allies is yours!” Harbinger retorted. “Burn their flesh to ash! Releasing control!”

With the Draco back in control, it roared and spat another fire ball at them.

Garrus quickly popped out of cover and carefully aimed his nipper at one of the Draco’s eyes.

Just as the dragon was about to fry him, the Turian fired. The massive husk grunted in pain as it was temporarily blinded. In its haste to regain its bearings, the claws on its wing slipped and it fell off the roof.

“Good shot, Garrus. That will at least give us a chance.” Said Austin.

The Draco shook itself and quickly regained its vision. It rose back up into the air and swung its tail at where the group was taking cover.

Austin just noticed this in time and was able to push Ventra and Garrus out of the way just as he pulled Liara and James the other way with him.

The crates they had just been hiding behind were smashed to pieces by the Draco’s tail.

“Just about had it with those wings now.” Said Ventra, selecting an arrow and drawing it back. “It’s like I’ve said before, swooping is bad.”

The arrow fired and embedded itself in the Draco’s left wing. The Dragon looked at this for a second, somewhat unfazed the tiny prick it had just received. That was before Ventra pressed the button however.

The tip of the arrow exploded and the Draco roared in pain as it’s left wing was crippled. With its ability to fly now badly damaged, the Draco could sense defeat and quickly retreated. Having to flap

harder than before, it used what it could of its normal and damaged wing to escape.

This victory was short lived though as Harvester suddenly took the Draco's place and swapped over them.

"General, tell Primarch Victus we'll rendezvous here. In the meantime, let's take care of whatever that Harvester drops off. Coming Garrus?" said Austin.

"You kidding?! I'm right behind you. Let's give these bastards hell!" said Garrus.

"We've got trouble over at the main barricade. If the Reapers breach it, we're done!" said Corinthus urgently.

"We're on it!"

Everyone ran to the barricade and took positions. Austin quickly manned the turret that was mounted there.

"I like the perspective this offers." He said.

Several husks began landing as the Harvester dropped them off. They were even joined by a new breed of husk. This time though, they weren't human.

"It just me, or do those husks look like Turians?!" said James, gunning a down another as it tried to climb the wall.

"You're right. They do." Said Austin, cutting down several more husks and even one of these new Marauders with the turret.

Garrus was able to use his overload to take out the Marauder's shields, enabling James and Austin to finish them off. Liara meanwhile used her biotics to try and slow the normal husk down a bit so that everyone else had a chance to kill them before they got too close.

Just as they finished off the last husk, one final one was dropped off. This one however was very big. It had what looked like the massive body of a Krogan and the head of a Turian.

"Holy hell! What is that thing?!" said James.

The brute roared and charged at the barrier.

"Brace yourself!"

The husk hit the barricade hard, causing Austin lose his footing and fall.

"Austin!" Liara yelled.

Austin quickly rolled back onto his feet as the Brute turned to face him, beating it's chest in the same way a Gorilla would.

"Come and get, you son of a bitch." Said Austin, once again drawing Excalibur and waiting for the brute to charge. If he could time this just right...

The Brute once again roared and charged at Austin. Leaving until the last moment, Austin rolled to the side out of the way as the Brute swung with its large arm. With a simple movement of the wrist, Excalibur sliced through the Brute's legs, crippling it and causing it to

fall to the ground.

Austin remained with his back turned to the Brute as it desperately tried to get back up. Without even a turn of his head, Austin activated his shoulder plasma cannon and aimed it at the fallen Husk.

As the red aiming laser locked on target, a blue ball of plasma shot out of the cannon. The Brute was vaporised upon contact.

“Are you alright?” Ventra asked as the other hopped down to joint heir leader.

“I’m good.” Austin replied, sheathing Excalibur casually.

“*Shepard. Corinthus here.*”

“What’s the word on the Primarch?” Austin asked.

“*Still can’t get a stable comlink.*” Corinthus replied.

“Okay. We’re going on foot. Shepard out.” Said Austin.

“Garrus, take me to the last place you saw Victus.”

Having dealt with most of the Husks earlier, getting to Victus was very easy. His position was a bit overrun, but clearing them out didn’t take long.

“General Victus.”

“Yes?”

“I’m Major Shepard of the Helldivers.” Said Austin.

“Ah, Major. I know who you are. I can’t wait to find out what brings you here.” Said Victus. “Vakarian. Where did you go?”

“Heavy Reaper unit on the right flank. I believe you’re exact words were “Get that thing the hell of my men!” said Garrus.

“Appreciated.” Said Victus.

“General. You’re needed off planet. We’ve come to get you.” Said Austin.

“It will take something beyond important for me to leave my men, or my Turian brothers and sisters and their fight. Said Victus.

“Fedorian was killed. You’re the new Primarch.” Said Garrus.

“You’re needed immediately to chair a summit and represent your people in the fight against the Reapers.” Said Austin.

“I’m Primarch of Palaven, negotiating for the Turian hierarchy?” Victus asked, gazing upon much of the wreckage of Palaven.

“Yes.”

“I’ve spent my whole life in the military. I’m no diplomat. I hate diplomats.” Said Victus.

“This is crucial. We need you on top of your game. Are you in or out?” said Austin.

“Watch your tone, Major!” Victus warned.

“Look, you’ve met the Reapers head on. You’re overqualified.

See this devastation, Primarch? Double that for everywhere if we don't unite together. We need an alliance of everyone. We need the Turian fleet." Said Austin.

"Give me a moment to say goodbye to my men." Said Victus.

"Go ahead. We'll wait."

After a few moments of saying his farewells, Victus re-joined them.

"Ready?" Austin asked.

"One thing. Major, I appreciate the Helldiver's need for our fleets, but I can't spare them. Not while my world is burning. But if, the pressure can be taken of Palaven..." said Victus.

"You've already got several Helldiver battalions assisting your armies. What more do you need?" Austin asked, doing his best to hide that he was a bit unhappy with Victus asking for even more than the Helldivers were providing already. It almost sounded like the Primarch was being ungrateful.

"We need the Krogan. I can't see us winning this thing without them, even with the help of your soldiers. Get them to help us, and then we can help you." Said Victus.

Austin's opinion changed after that. He certainly hadn't expected Victus to say that.

"The Krogan..."

"Looks like the summit just got a lot more interesting." Said Garrus.

"I apologise for being so frank, Major. But your plan feels doomed to failure." Said Councillor Tevos.

With the Primarch on-board, Austin was now talking to Tevos about the Asari joining the summit. So far however, it wasn't looking promising.

"You start thinking like that, and the Reapers have already won. I won't have that!" said Austin defiantly.

"I'm not the only one that feels this way. The Salarian Dalatrass is livid." Said Tevos.

"Some of these issues are hundreds of years old! Time to let go!" said Austin.

"Perhaps. But we must focus our attention on when the Reapers come for us too. So no. The Asari will not be at your summit." Said Tevos.

"You just don't get it, do you?!" said Austin crossly. "This whole unification would be stronger with the Krogan. You need them, we all do."

"Good luck, Major, and goodbye." Said Tevos, ending the call.

"I save her and the rest of the Council... and this is the thanks I get." Austin groaned.

“Major, Admiral Hackett is on vidcom.” Said Traynor through the comm.

Austin simply sighed and activated it. Hackett’s hologram was once again projected in front of him.

“Major, did you retrieve the Primarch for the summit?” he asked.

“Yes. But the Asari are staying on the side-lines.” Said Austin.

Another hologram then suddenly joined Hackett’s. This one was an Arkane Helldiver. Austin recognized his old mentor instantly.

“They’ll regret that. The time for unity is now.” Said General Zartrack.

“General Zartrack! What a surprise.” Said Austin, giving a small salute.

“Good to see you as well, Shepard.” Zartrack nodded. *“Admiral Hackett.”*

“General.” Hackett nodded.

“Anyway, the Salarians will be attending the summit, as will the Krogan.” Said Austin.

“Hmm, that will cause some tension.” Said Zartrack.

“You’ve certainly got your hands full, Major. I shouldn’t take up anymore of your time.” Said Hackett.

“I’ll keep you posted, Hackett.” Said Austin.

“Good luck, Shepard.”

Hackett vanished, leaving just Austin and Zartrack.

“A good thing he’s in charge of the Alliance.” Said the General.

“How are things back at Arkadia?” Austin asked.

“Things haven’t been this intense since the Hydra crisis. That should say enough.” Said Zartrack.

“Had a feeling as much.” Austin sighed.

“The Arkanes have got the best Generals coordinating many of the battalions and squads being sent to aid the other homeworlds. I and your father are working the hardest. He told me to tell you he apologises for not being able to talk at the moment.” Said Zartrack.

“How is he?” Austin asked.

“Worried about your mother. He hasn’t heard anything from here since the Reapers hit Earth. He’s able to focus on the task at hand, but I know the worry is constantly on his mind.” Said Zartrack, a hint of concern in his voice.

“I know the feeling. I do hope she’s okay. For his sake, and my sister’s.” said Austin.

“I’m sure she’s okay, Shepard. You’re her son after all.” Said Zartrack supportingly.

“Thanks, General. That means a lot.” Austin smiled.

“I’ll keep in touch. If we find anything that may help you, I’ll be the first to inform you.” Said Zartrack.

“Yes sir. Good luck.” Austin saluted.

"You as well, my old student. Give them hell."

Austin decided to quickly see how Victus was settling in before he left to plot the next course.

"Major, thank you for allowing me the use of your ship, and for going along with this plan. Garrus said he had to attend to the Normandy's weapon systems. Something about "calibrations". Said Victus.

"Sounds like Garrus. I'm sorry to say the Asari Councillor won't be joining us. She thinks there's too much bad blood with the Krogan." Said Austin.

"She may be right." Said Victus. "But there'll be a lot more blood, real blood, if we don't try."

"When you put it that way..." said Austin.

"The sooner we have this summit, the sooner we'll know." Said Victus.

As Austin headed out of the war room, the lights suddenly flickered.

"Major, EDI just went offline." Said Joker.

"DELL!" Austin shouted.

"That was not me, Shepard! I swear! Wasn't even doing anything with her." Dell replied through the comm.

"Joker, what do you mean she went offline?" Austin asked.

"I don't know. She's not responding. I can't access the AI core diagnostics. You better get down to deck 3." Said Joker.

Austin headed down to deck through and headed through he medbay to the AI core. Two of the crew were at the door with fire extinguishers and breathing mask. Of course, Austin was still wearing his armour so he wouldn't need that. Plus, if there was a threat he'd be able to fight it.

"Joker, what's that sound?" Austin asked, hearing a loud sound coming from behind the door.

"Fire extinguisher, Major. Might be an electrical fire, or something." Said Joker.

The doors opened and everyone slowly proceeded in.

"EDI, talk to me." Said Austin.

There was a small humming and the lights suddenly came back on.

"EDI?"

A metallic female figure slowly stepped out of the smoke. It was Dr Eva. At the same time however, it wasn't Dr Eva. The figure was now cleaned of the burned and charred flash it had got from the fire on Mars, it had an orange holo interface over its eyes, and it had a surprisingly familiar voice.

"Is there a particular topic you wish to discuss, Shepard?" asked EDI.

“EDI?” Austin asked in surprise. EDI had a body?

“Yes.” EDI replied.

“What are you doing in Dr Eva’s body?” Austin asked.

“Not all of me is in this body, but I have control of it.” Said EDI. “It was not a seamless transition.”

“A transition? What exactly happened? You blacked out on us for a while there.” Austin asked.

“Correct. When we brought this unit on board, I began a background process to search for its information on the Crucible. This eventually triggered a trap. A backup power source and CPU activated and the unit attempted physical confrontation. Fortunately, I was able to gain remote access and repurpose it as I saw fit. During this process, it struggled. Thus the fire.” EDI explained.

“Well, if it means having better access to the Crucible data in its head, good work.” Said Austin.

“I reasoned along similar lines.” Said EDI.

“So if you’re in there, are you still in the ship?” Austin asked.

“I still exist within in the ship. This body can be used for remote control.” Said EDI.

“So technically, you’re controlling that thing like you did to a mech when you helped me on Lazarus station?” Austin asked.

“Precisely.” EDI nodded. “For continued control however, this unit should remain within the Normandy’s broadcast or tight beam range.”

“Are you planning to take that body somewhere?”

“Normandy’s weaponry is not suited to every combat situation. This unit could provide limited ground support.”

“You mean you could come with us?”

“Correct. This body could accompany you to areas the Normandy cannot reach.”

“Good. I’ll tell you when I need it.”

“Excellent. I will run tests to make sure it matches, or exceeds the capabilities of organic squad mates. However, my first step should be restoring functionality to the Normandy to reassure the crew that all is normal.”

“Just don’t be surprised if the crew is wary of your new body. It did try to kill us not long ago.”

“An excellent point. I will take it to the bridge. Joker will also want to see it.” Said EDI as she left the AI core.

“He’ll want more than that.” Austin chuckled to himself.

“Was that EDI that just walked by?” Chakwas asked.

“It was.” Austin nodded.

“Joker’s gonna have a field day with this.” The doctor chuckled.

Before Austin headed up to the cockpit to check on EDI, he felt it best to check on Garrus in the forward battery.

“Garrus. Didn’t waste any time getting to work I see.” He said.

“After what I’ve been through lately, calibrating a giant gun is a vacation. Gives me something to focus on.” Said Garrus.

“We’re gonna need you for more than your aim.” Said Austin.

“Oh, I’m ready for it. But I’m pretty sure we’ll still need giant guns, and lots of them.” Said Garrus. “Sovereign didn’t go down without a fight. I doubt a thousand more of his friends will be any different. Still not convinced I should have left Palaven behind.”

“We’re not gonna beat the Reapers by second guessing ourselves, Garrus. Every decision we make has to be the right one.”

“And when we’re wrong?”

“We haven’t been so far.”

“There are times I wish we were. Convincing my people the end was coming got pretty rough. They didn’t want to hear it. Finally, they gave me a taskforce as a token to shut me up.”

“So you’re their expert advisor now?”

“Just followed your example, Shepard. Yell loud enough, and someone will eventually come over to see what all the fuss is about. Not that they’ll actually do anything about it.”

“Until hell shows up at their door. Then they put you in charge.”

“Not like the old days, is it?” Garrus asked. “Rouge Spectre and C-sec agents running and gunning outside the lines, making it up as we went along. We’re actually respectable now.”

“We’ve lost enough friends trying to make sure this day never came. I think we’ve all earned some respect.”

“Then the first Reaper we take out with this gun, it’s in their honour. Just give the word.”

“Damn good to have you back, Garrus.”

“Wouldn’t miss this fight for anything. Now, I’m sure somebody screwed up something down here. I wanna get the old girl back in fighting shape.” Said Garrus.

Sure enough, EDI was now in the co-pilots seat, the same seat where her holo avatar used to sit. This time though, she had all sorts of tubes and wires plugged into her from the back. Probably some way for her to continue monitoring everything.

“Hey, Major! Check out my co-pilot!” said Joker, obviously loving this new change.

“So she installed herself into the new body without any help from you?” Austin asked, crossing his arms.

“Come on, Major. Don’t you trust me?” said Joker. “Okay, let

me put it this way. If I knew that EDI was gonna install herself into a sexy robot body, do you honestly think I'd be able to keep quiet about it? Look at that! I would've baked a cake!"

"I am right here, Jeff." Said EDI.

"Yes, you are, EDI. Yes you are." Joker smiled.

Seeing that Austin was going to talk to her, EDI's visor glowed and the wires disconnected themselves from her body. The plugs also folded back into tiny hidden compartments in her body.

"Hello, Shepard." She said, getting up from the seat.

"Still getting used to greeting people in person?" Austin asked friendly.

"No. I require only one occurrence to adapt to a new concept." EDI replied.

"How are you adjusting to the arms and legs?" Austin asked.

"Very little adjustment is needed as I am already familiar with certain experiences like this. An example I could give was when you put me inside your suit when you rescued me on the Lazarus station."

"So really, this isn't all that new to you." Said Austin.

"Precisely. Although I will need to get used to this body having different proportions to you and there also the weight in certain areas." Said EDI.

Austin pretended to ignore that bit. Admittedly, it was a bit hard to ignore that EDI was technically nudist. True there weren't any female parts visible, but she did still lack clothes. Hopefully though, she would fix that.

"Overall, it is adequate." EDI finished.

"That's not the word I'd use to describe you." Said Joker.

"Perhaps we should speak privately." Said EDI.

"I'll be over here... flying the ship." Said Joker as two moved out of ear shot.

"What's this about? Joker's not harassing you is he?" Austin asked with concern.

"No, he is not. He approves of my new platform." Said EDI.

"Shepard, do you believe your crew members should be allowed to disobey an order on moral grounds?"

"Absolutely. I have no use for team members who can think for themselves." Austin replied. "Why are you asking about something like that?"

"I was designed by Cerberus. I do not take moral stances that conflict with orders from my executive officers. But when Jeff removed my AI shackles, I became capable of self-modifying my core programming." Said EDI. "I asked Jeff if he thought I should change anything now that I can. He deflected the question with humour."

"And you didn't get an answer." Said Austin.

"Correct. He has repeated this pattern in response to several of

my inquiries. Do you think I should make modification?" EDI asked.

"Only you can really answer that question. That's the point of free will." Austin replied supportingly.

"But moral decisions should not be made in a vacuum. If I do not ask the crew for their opinion, I could miss crucial context. May I ask you questions Jeff avoids? When there is time, will you answer them for me?" EDI asked.

"If you think it'll help, I'll do what I can." Austin shrugged.

"Very well. I will keep you informed." Said EDI.



Chapter One: A Night's Work

An owl's hoot disturbed the silence of the castle guard. The armoured soldiers marched along the stone walls, their tired eyes peering through windows in the brick for any intruders trying to cross the rapid water that was flowing through the moat into town. The night had been quiet and relatively peaceful even the stars twinkled like little nightlights in the clear skies above. The peace was only to be disturbed by an orange glow coming close to a giant drawbridge that was raised up for the night, through the dark and abandoned streets, clear of the townspeople.

"Halt!" a guard shouted pushing his hand out at the carrier of the orange glow "What business do you have in the field at this hour?"

The carrier of the glow said nothing; they only placed a small iron lantern on the cobblestone in remark.

"I ask again, state your business!" the guard growled coming towards the stranger. The stranger was a boy, no older than fifteen, hidden in a cape; the only thing showing through it was a small pointed chin and a pair of hands, the left of which was gloved in leather. The boy did not say a single word; his shadowed eyes just stared at the drawbridge as several guards aimed their crossbows at him, the boy could hear ever click of the safety on their weapons, yet he smiled.

The guard reached for the hood of his cape and attempted to pull it back but the boy gripped his wrist tightly so that the leather of his glove made a sound. The very action both shocking and angering the guard as the boy's hidden eyes continued to face the drawbridge. The boy pushed back slightly, releasing the man from his grasp and picked up his lantern before starting to walk forward again, seemingly unaware of the danger he had put himself in.

"Shoot him!" the guard squealed. The boy halted and lifted his arm up so that the arrow stuck into it, the guard stood up and pointed his spear at the boy as not one drop of crimson stained the cobblestone. The boy even pulled the arrow out of his arm before turning around and retreating into the shadows of the nearby streets "It's him again!"

The boy let out a startled gasp and started running, arrows stabbing through the cobblestones as he crossed them, he dashed around the back of a building as the sound of feet began to echo through the empty streets and lowered the sleeves of his cape to tuck at the block of wood hidden on his right arm. It had saved him from the pain of the point and he was thankful for it. Torches were lit and the mood of the town changed from the sleepy shelter he had come out to, to about as safe as walking on lava. He let out a groan and edged

across the brick wall that his back was against till his hands touched some leaves, blowing his lantern out, he quickly climbed up and crawled across the red roof tiles to the chimney. Lanterns and torches filled the streets like an orange river along with spears and other sharp things that would hurt when touched so the cover of darkness was no longer his friend and there was no way he was throwing himself into meaningless danger like that. He removed his hood to show a pair of sea blue eyes and blond hair that was close to brown and was tied up in a leather band, underneath his cape was a long bow, the string crossing his shirt, and a tanned quiver with arrows on his back; each arrow with a red feather on the end; with this, he had a small pouch on his left hip that was shut with an old button. He carefully removed the bow from under his cape and pulled a small coil of rope from his back; tying the end of the rope around the arrow, he crouched down on the tiles to shoot the arrow at a building across the town, managing to hit his target, another chimney, and pull the rope tight before it touched the ground, he tied the other end around the chimney with a loose knot.

He swung himself up and began to pull himself along the rope as silent as the wind, praying that no one would look up, being unable to protect himself in his position.

After reaching the roof, he tugged the arrow out of the chimney and pulled at the rope to let the knot come away on the other chimney and land on the cobblestone. As he did so he felt something tug on the other side; a familiar weight; one that he smiled at. Gripping with her teeth on the end of the rope was a dark chocolate coloured dog with the pinkest of noses; really just a puppy. On her back was a green bag that was tied up with rope. He scratched her behind the ears and tapped his shoulder. The little dog jumped up and lay down to let him tie the coil of rope he had pulled around her to keep her tied onto his back.

The boy rubbed his fingers across the underside of his boots to let a small knife blade come out at the toes and stabbed them into the walls, climbing up the wall like a spider.

He looked left and right before jumping over the side of the wall into the moat below, the water being pelted with arrows as he swam through the bars that blocked off the rough waters from the main river.

Safe.

The boy surfaced with a throaty gasp in the river, his limbs tired with fighting the current. He hauled himself onto land and untied the soaked puppy from his back before lying down; the puppy pawed his arm and yapped in his face to get him to play, but the boy sliced the air with his hand to silence her. The pup obeyed. He let out a light chuckle and patted his shoulder to let her snuggle for a hug for a moment. He had found the pup only a couple of months ago in a

ditch with her drowned siblings but she was growing fast with a beautiful coat and hyper personality, though she was still very young, the pup rarely acted like one on the job, understanding hers perfectly and staying in the zone till it was done.

He had given her a name. Pippa.

Pippa wagged her long tail and licked his cheek with a rough pink tongue that told him she had been in the rubbish bins again. Though he had given her a bath which made her look twice as big, the loyalty she showed meant that she would be by his side no matter what happened.

The sun would be rising soon and they needed to be out of sight. Now. The boy jumped up and picked up Pippa in one hand before whistling with the other. He began to break into a run as a chestnut horse came galloping out of the shadows, coming to the call of her master. He slipped Pippa into a small pouch just her size by the reigns before jumping on himself. Pippa loved riding up here, she could see for miles and the speed they went made her cheeks blow up like balloons. She barked at her master, he stroked her behind the ears and flicked the reigns, disappearing in a cloud of dust from the angered town.

The boy slowed down the horse and walked through a gate. A small village that he had grown up in greeted him. The morning sun had not alarmed anyone to wake yet, but the sky was still turning pink and yellow. The boy stroked the mare and patted his shoulder for the pup to jump on; she missed and landed in his arms, putting her small paws onto his chest.

If dogs could smile. She would be.

The boy gently placed her in the grass and began to unload the horse as a wooden door without a window opened in a brick building in front of him. A girl stood in the doorway, no older than him, in a white dress with a simple orange flower in the middle, her hair was brown and tied into a ponytail down her back; she wore no shoes but her feet were clean.

“Link! You’re back!” the girl shrieked jumping down the brick steps and running into the boy’s arms, he smiled, Pippa growled with jealousy. Link still said nothing but let out a contented sigh. “Did you get it?”

He nodded and reached a hand into his cape. Bringing out a small grey bag out that was tied tight with dark string through the loops within it. He offered it to the girl

“Mother will be pleased you got back safely. She worries.” the girl mumbled

Link swallowed hard

“Mother’s okay. She will be with the spores, you did get them

right?” the girl giggled giving him a light punch on the shoulder that made him grimace; but he nodded anyway. “Why are you wet?”

Link rolled his eyes and opened his mouth as if to speak, yet said nothing.

“You can tell me later. We need to take some this time.” the girl spoke giving him the same eyes Pippa was giving him on the ground.

Link nodded once and picked up Pippa on the floor. She licked his face and pawed his chest as he let out a yawn. She whined with concern for her master as he took his cargo and her inside the house the child had run into.

Inside was closed off by shutters; that only let through pencil thin rays of morning sunshine. Link put the pup down and let her dive into a well-earned bowl of wet food, her face getting covered in the remains of meat from last night’s meal to the point of her hind legs lifting from the floor till she was doing a handstand in her bowl. Link untied the bag from her back and placed them on the table. Then he turned on his heel and thumped his head against the wall to his side. He hated stealing. *Loathed* it with a great passion, but he could not afford the rupees for the medicine they so desperately needed.

He was tired of putting himself in danger that could have him killed but he could not think to even look his mother in the eyes if he had failed her. After all, he had done this for two years. He had taught himself how to shoot; as the man of the house, his father, was nowhere to be found. Though, he had been left the bow and a few red feathered arrows before he vanished from their lives forever, even so they were true to their targets for their age.

That was why he had left them with him.

Link let a tired tear trickle down his face. Mother was getting sicker by the day; he was not sure how long he could keep his family smiling. It scared him. His sister, Rosie; looked after their mother night and day while he was out. Getting any rupees he could earn by working in the day or stealing at night. Thankfully Rosie had no idea how he got the medicine; he could not bear the thought of her innocent life being exposed to his criminal one.

After all, he was only fifteen.

Link shook his head and unpacked the cargo in the small cupboards. The scratched glass bottles that held the dark mushroom spores he had stolen and placed a small loaf of crusty, stale bread next to it with another bottle of milk. He closed the cupboard door and dipped his hands in his pockets with a sigh.

A single green rupee.

That was not nearly enough for food for later in the week. He would have to steal again.

Pippa barked and put her paws on his feet. Link crouched down and scratched her behind the ears. She barked again with a concerned whine and dashed outside through a hole in a lower cupboard that served as an entrance and exit for her.

Link rolled his eyes and walked into an even smaller room. Greeted with a rag that served as a moth covered door; the patterns within it were old and worn now, unable to be depicted from each other. He pushed the rag out of the way and sat down on his knees on the floor; his eyes facing the flickering candles that lit the room.

“Link?” a voice asked as a hand came into his room. Link did not move. He kept his hands on his knees and his gaze lowered. “It’s alright, son.”

Link looked up for a moment to see the fragile body in front of him, wrapped in old, dusty sheets on a bed made of rotting wood and straw. Hidden within the sheets was a woman, no older than forty, yet had the wrinkly skin of a person in their late-eighties; her dark blue eyes were like vast oceans and her toothless mouth was rolling around in her skull as she tried to swallow the tiny rough leaves that Rosie was dropping into her mouth.

“Here, Link.” Rosie mumbled offering the grey bag that was still full of leaves to him. He dipped a hand in and swallowed the leaves with Rosie, both grimacing at the taste. The taste was peculiar; one where you either loved it or hated it, it was different to everyone, but swallowing more than one at a time made the tastes merge together and taste like you were eating socks that had been worn for a whole year without washing. Link clicked his fingers. “I’m fine, Link. You don’t have to check.”

Link glared at her and clicked them again, raising an eyebrow as he did so.

“Rosie, Link gets concerned about us too.” the woman in the bed moaned folding her shaking arms. Rosie rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out, the leaves had stained it bright red. Link nodded and stuck his own out

“Yours is red too. I told you.” Rosie snorted; they both turned their gaze to their mother, who had jokingly stuck her tongue out too. They held back their grimaces. Her tongue had been stained brown by the leaves; her tongue so rough it looked like tiny mushrooms were growing on it. Rosie jumped up and broke into the cupboard, reaching for the jar of mushroom spores; she offered them to their mother by pouring some into a shallow dish so not to waste a speck.

Link’s eyes travelled to an empty bucket that sat in the corner and stood up, his mother half guessing where he was going. Link was very much like his late father, loving the outdoors. He threw a shawl over his shoulder and picked up a basket of clothes.

“Link!” his mother snapped clicking her fingers, Link

flattened his ears and turned on his heel. “You have been awake all day and all night. You should sleep first.”

Link shook his head with a yawn and tapped the basket with his fingers, lifting his eyebrows and widening his eyes

His mother sighed out loud, knowing she was not going to win against the provider of the household.

POETRY

NO MISTAKES

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

No eraser, no mistakes.
Concentration's what it takes.
Don't want poems full of scribble.
Want my poetry to look whole.
Gotta think the words in your head.
Don't write them out once they're said.
Thoughts are written out of order.
Must use arrows as the sorter.
Perfection is what's key,
But perfection just isn't me.

TO MUSIC

Lacesnflowers

In a Thursday afternoon,
At her heart they roomed,
The words, that now come home
As her fingers sing along.

Driven by music, she writes
One poem in white
Another in blue,
The colors, she rules.

All the emotions are gathered,
By music, in paper,
Where they truly belong,
Where they were meant to all along.

I [write](#) these verses in honor of music
For all the times when she helped me
When I was stuck in a black hole
And couldn't reach out to anyone.