

Anime North Fanfiction 2011

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Introduction

2011's contest got off to something of a late start. I'm happy to say, though, that despite the short notice, we recieved a healthy number of entries. We also saw quite a wide variety of genres and some very interesting fandoms!

I want to give my heartfelt thanks to all of the participants. This was my first year involved in the fanfiction contest, and you guys really made it an experience to remember! I hope you'll all be back for more fun in 2012.

– Zosia Hartleib, 2011 Fanfiction Contest Coordinator

Grand Prize - Best Overall: Night Solace

Author: Nicole Moore

Source Material: Saint Seiya

He woke with a start, sleep-hazed blue eyes staring up at the shadowed ceiling incomprehensively as he groggily attempted to figure out what it was that had yanked him out of a sound sleep without warning. The silence of the room – of the entire house – wrapped around him, drawing a frown to his face as he pushed himself into a sitting position, sheets pooling around his waist.

Hyoga didn't consider himself to be a light sleeper, and it was unusual for him to wake up in the middle of the night without any real cause. And there wasn't much going on in the house right then that *would* have woken him up – despite its size and its ability to house several active and eager teenagers at once, there were only two occupants. Ikki had taken off only a few days after returning from Elysian, followed by Shiryu once his injuries had healed enough to make the journey to Rozan. They had their own issues, their own internal pains to deal with – Hyoga knew far too well what that was like. Having to once again bear witness to his Master's death not once, but twice, had been a heavy weight upon his heart. He might even have been tempted to

take off himself...if he had had anywhere to go. But he wasn't like Ikki – he couldn't simply wander. Nor was he like Shiryu – any place he might have once called home was no longer a comfort to him. He had nowhere to go, and so he stayed.

He almost envied Seiya.

There.

Hyoga's thoughts came to a sudden halt as his ears picked up a sound from outside his room. He tilted his head towards the door – but no, it wasn't coming from the door, but rather from the other side of the wall behind his bed.

A soft cry, caught somewhere between pain and panic.

Hyoga threw back his blankets and leapt out of bed, moving as quickly as he could without managing to sound like a herd of lumbering elephants. He hurried down the hall and pushed open the door to the bedroom next to his, not bothering to flip on a light – the soft moonlight that filtered in from the curtained window and fell across the bed was enough to see by.

Hyoga's gaze immediately went to the bed and its occupant.

Shun lay on his side, curled up in a tight ball, blankets and sheets twisted around his lower body from his position constantly shifting. His knees were drawn up towards his chest, his arms wrapped around himself and his nails digging into his skin, knuckles white enough that Hyoga knew despite the long-sleeved pyjama shirt there would be marks on Shun's pale skin. Sweat-dampened hair clung to his neck and shoulders, and his eyes were clenched shut tight with panic. Another cry tore from his throat, and Hyoga's heart wrenched painfully when he saw a small, delicate tear making its way down his cheek.

Closing the bedroom door behind him with a soft click, Hyoga quietly made his way

to the bed, cursing himself. He'd grown complacent, lax...it had been nearly three weeks since Ikki had left for parts unknown, and those three weeks had proven so uneventful that he'd pushed the conversation that he'd had with the Phoenix Saint before he'd departed into the back of his mind.

"Hyoga. Can I talk to you for a second?"

The blonde teen looked up in surprise to find Ikki standing over him, a travel satchel hanging from one shoulder, a serious expression (when was there ever anything else?) on his face. Hyoga wasn't surprised to note that everything about Ikki seemed tense at the moment. The older teen had barely spoken two words to any of them since they'd left Elysian, since Hades' defeat...since Seiya's coma.

So none of them had been shocked when, abruptly, Ikki had started to make preparations to leave, to go off on his own again and he was wont to do. How long he planned on being gone for, he wouldn't say – he probably didn't even know.

Usually, though, when he left he just...left. He didn't stop and ask to talk to any of them, so Hyoga figured that whatever was important enough for Ikki to delay his departure was important enough for him to hear. "Sure," he said, rising to his feet. "Here?"

Ikki shook his head. "Walk with me."

And that was how Hyoga found himself leaving the house with Ikki, the two of them walking in silence. The air was chilly, the winter months approaching faster, but for Hyoga the crisp chill was welcome. It was nothing compared to the harsh winters of Siberia, after all.

Finally, just when Hyoga was starting to wonder if he was supposed to start the

conversation, Ikki spoke. "It's about Shun," he said finally, and with those three words had Hyoga's full attention. "He hasn't spoken about what happened to him, with... him." Ikki clenched his jaw tight for a moment. "I've tried to approach the subject but..." Here he stopped and gave a slight shrug, and Hyoga understood immediately. Ikki wasn't a 'talking about feelings' sort of guy. And if Shun didn't want to talk in the first place, it was easy to imagine the non-conversation that must have taken place.

"He doesn't act like it's bothering him," Ikki continued, "but since it's Shun we're talking about, I can't see how it isn't." Ikki clenched his fist. "He asked me to kill him, Hyoga. When he seized control of Hades for that brief moment, he told me to kill him. He can't be all right after something like that. I don't...know what it was like for him, but..." He cut off again, and then shook his head.

"It sounds like you want me to look after him for you while you're gone," Hyoga said quietly. "Ikki...the most important person in Shun's life is you. You're the one that he needs more than anyone else."

"I can't stay." Ikki shook his head. "There are...there's too much that I have to work out for myself. And even if I stay, I'll indulge him too much." He stopped walking abruptly and turned to face Hyoga. "You're the only one I can ask, Hyoga. With Seiya...gone...and Shiryu planning on returning to Rozan to see Shunrei, you're the only one that I can count on to be with him. I'm not expecting miracles, just...be there for him. When he needs someone, be there. Don't let him be alone."

It was the closest Hyoga had ever seen the proud Saint come to begging, and damned if it didn't tug at something inside of Hyoga. For all that Ikki could be a certifiable bastard at the best of times, the one thing that could not be denied about his character was how much he loved his brother. Ikki had the Big Brother Complex in spades and Hyoga pitied the fools who pressed that particular button.

And that, Hyoga realized, was at the crux of Ikki's turmoil. No matter what, in the past whenever Shun had needed him, Ikki had come. Ikki had been there, had saved him, had delivered his wrath upon those who attempted to harm him. Oh, Shun was more than capable of taking care of himself, but there had never been any doubt that if his older brother could take all the burdens of battle off of Shun's shoulders and settle it onto his, he'd do so in a heartbeat.

But in the Underworld, Shun had needed him more than ever...and Ikki hadn't been able to do anything for him. Even when Shun had pleaded with him, he couldn't deliver the final blow that would have ended Hades – would have saved the Gold Saints and Seiya – because he loved his brother too much. And it had been Athena, not Ikki, who had eventually expelled Hades from Shun's body and saved him from that dark fate.

Hyoga could have told Ikki not to blame himself, but it wouldn't have worked. And so he kept his observations to himself, simply met Ikki's eyes, and nodded.

But despite his promise to Ikki, Hyoga knew that he hadn't been keeping as close an eye on Shun as he should have been. And if Shun had been having these nightmares each night, then Hyoga very likely could have slept through them completely.

For whatever reason, *this* time he had woken up, and the full force of his failed promise hit him like a train. He crossed to the bed and knelt upon the mattress, grasping Shun's shoulders firmly and giving him a sudden shake. "Shun," he said, keeping his voice steady, trying to keep panic out of it so that he wouldn't subconsciously increase the other boy's. "Shun, wake up!"

Emerald green eyes snapped open, staring unfocused at Hyoga. His shoulders

trembled under Hyoga's hands, and the Cygnus Saint had to fight back the urge to pull Shun into his arms and hold him until the shaking stopped. He wasn't even sure if Shun realized who he was, where he was, or that he was out of his nightmare.

A moment later Hyoga saw the light return to Shun's eyes, saw them come into focus and the recognition that lit within them. "...Hyoga?" he whispered, voice shaking slightly.

"It's me," Hyoga said softly, loosening his grip in relief. He started to shift, to move from his knees to a normal sitting position, when he suddenly found his center of gravity thrown off balance by one hundred and thirteen pounds of shaking, green-haired Andromeda Saint suddenly ending up in his lap. Shun's hands grasped at the fabric of Hyoga's tank top, clutching so tight as he proceeded to try to hide himself in Hyoga's arms that it strained the material to near the ripping point. Hyoga managed to catch himself before he tumbled off the bed, supporting both of their weights with one arm on the mattress while the other came up to wrap around Shun and hold him still. "...Shun?"

"...Scared," Shun whispered, voice muffled as he pressed his face against Hyoga's chest. "It's...so dark...so cold..." Every word trembled, and it immediately brought out the protective instincts within Hyoga, tightening his arm around Shun and pulling him closer.

"Shh," Hyoga murmured, resting his palm flat on Shun's back. He could feel the chill of the other boy's skin through his shirt, and if *Hyoga* thought someone felt cold, then that was a sure indication of alarm. Without thinking he began to run his hand in small circles, trying to work some warmth back into Shun's body. "It's all right, Shun. It was a nightmare. Just a nightmare." He closed his eyes. "You're safe now."

Shun's reply was lost in the midst of a hiccup, and Hyoga shifted their positions so

that he was sitting up fully with the smaller boy in his lap, both arms wrapping around him now for comfort. The gesture caused Shun to curl up, and his death grip on Hyoga's clothes loosened. Slightly. Very slightly.

Gradually – painfully so – he could feel Shun relaxing in his arms, the tension and fear slowly draining out of him as Hyoga continued to whisper to him. What exactly he said not even the blonde boy could recall, but it didn't seem to matter – it was the sound of Hyoga's voice that was serving to comfort Shun, not the exact words that he spoke.

Finally, Shun drew in a shuddering breath, and pulled back enough for him to be able to look up at Hyoga. His eyes were rimmed red from crying, tearstained tracks running down flushed cheeks. Sniffling, he reached up to wipe at his eyes. "Sorry," he said, his voice hoarse. "I... I cried all over you. Sorry."

Hyoga couldn't help but smile. "Don't worry about it," he replied. "Are you all right?"

Shun took another deep breath, then nodded. "Better," he whispered. "I... I wasn't expecting to be woken up, and then..." Another shudder rippled through him, but he managed to get control over himself. "Usually it doesn't end until the sun comes up."

Expression turning serious, Hyoga lifted his hand and brushed back a few strands of hair that had fallen into Shun's face. "How long has this been going on, Shun?" he asked quietly. "How long have you been having these nightmares?"

A guilty look spread across Shun's face, and he suddenly averted his eyes, as if he couldn't bear to look at Hyoga when he answered. "...since Nii-san left," he said softly, hanging his head a little. "He...he was staying with me when I slept, but then he was gone and..." And Shun had been alone.

Hyoga closed his eyes for a moment and wondered if it would be irrational to blame

Ikki, but just as quickly wrote it off as irrational. There was no way Ikki would have known that without him there, Shun would start having nightmares. And it was irrational to think that Ikki would always be able to *be* there. No, the real worry was that Shun was having the nightmares in the first place.

“It’s all right, Shun,” Hyoga replied, opening his eyes again and looking down at him. He couldn’t stand the look on Shun’s face – as if the Andromeda Saint thought it was shameful to admit that he couldn’t sleep peacefully without someone with him. “You don’t have to be ashamed of something like nightmares. Everyone has them - even me.”

“But...” Hyoga held up his hand, and Shun’s voice trailed off.

“You had to go through something that none of us can even begin to understand,” Hyoga said. “The only person who *might* be able to understand would be Julian Solo, but he doesn’t remember being possessed by Poseidon. Even Saori-san doesn’t know what it’s like. It’s natural for it to affect you, Shun. Having nightmares doesn’t make you weak.”

Shun was quiet for a moment, still not-quite-looking at Hyoga. Then he shifted, resting his head against Hyoga’s shoulder and making himself a little more comfortable. “...It doesn’t bother me during the day,” he whispered. “It’s only at night, when the sun goes down and it gets dark... I feel like I’m back there. Back in that void of nothingness, seeing everything happening around me, hearing my voice and yet not speaking, knowing my body is being used to hurt my friends and unable to do anything to stop it. And with each passing second I felt as if I was drifting further and further away. I was helpless.”

“But you fought back,” Hyoga said. “You gained enough control back from Hades that you were able to halt him.”

Shun closed his eyes. "...I wasn't fighting," he whispered. "I was...I gave up, Hyoga. For one moment, just *one* moment, I gave up. I decided that there was no saving me, and so I decided that the only way out for me was to do what only the Andromeda Saint *can* do. The only path left for me was sacrifice. But I...I didn't *want* to die, Hyoga."

"Of course you didn't," Hyoga replied matter-of-factly. "None of us *want* to die, Shun, but we all accept that death is a possibility in our lives. None of us were left naïve about that. Shun, look at me." While he'd spoken Shun had turned his head away again, hiding it against Hyoga's shoulder. Hyoga had no idea that Shun could be so physically clinging when he was upset, but he wasn't going to complain about it. When someone was single-handedly responsible for saving your life, getting apprehensive about physical space intrusion seemed pointless.

Tentatively Shun turned his head just enough to peek out at Hyoga again.

"Shun," Hyoga continued, "you are one of the strongest, *bravest* people that I know. I don't believe you when you say that you 'gave up', because in all the time I've known you, you never have. You didn't give up on your brother. You didn't give up when we fought the Gold Saints. And you didn't give up on me – you even risked your own *life* to save mine. It's who you are, and you should *never* be ashamed of it. You may have been afraid, so afraid that you couldn't think of anything else, but you did *not* give up."

Slowly, Shun's eyes shimmered as they filled with tears again, and he sniffled and blinked rapidly as he tried to keep them from falling. Hyoga's heart ached at the sight – how long had Shun been holding these feelings of failure and shame inside of him? And how had none of them realized it before? Ikki had, Ikki had come the closest, but he hadn't known how to handle it. His own guilt had kept him from being able to help his brother through his.

And Ikki had known it...and reached out to Hyoga for help.

Hyoga tightened his arms around Shun, closing his eyes and pressing his face into the other boy's hair. Together they sat like that, holding each other tight, each battling with their own personal demons in companionable silence. Only the sound of their unsteady breathing and the heavy beating of their hearts broke through, their grips on each other impossibly tight.

Somewhere in the vast, still house, a clock chimed, reminding them both that it was the middle of the night. Slowly they pulled back from each other, their eyes meeting, emerald-green to ice-blue. Hyoga took a deep breath. "You should try sleeping again," he said to Shun, starting to untangle himself from the other boy so that he could get up. "It'll be morning soon enough."

Pale, slim fingers suddenly grasped Hyoga's shirt with unexpected strength. "... Stay with me?" Shun asked, his tone somewhere between timid uncertainty and sweet hope. He held Hyoga's gaze. "I don't want to be alone."

Who leaned in first was impossible to say. They seemed to meet in the middle, Hyoga's arms tightening around Shun's waist, Shun's reaching up to wrap around Hyoga's neck. The sudden shift in emotion felt as natural as breathing, and it didn't matter that this hadn't been Hyoga's intention when he'd come to Shun's room. Focus narrowed, and there was only the now.

The response to Shun's question came in the shifting of fabric, the rustling of sheets, soft sighs and whispered words as the night stretched on, the rest of the world, both real and imagined, vanished beneath tender touches and gentle embraces.

And as exhaustion at last claimed them both and the sun's morning rays began to slip through the heavy curtains, Shun curled up in the warmth of Hyoga's arms and closed his eyes, drifting off into dreamless sleep.

Best Plot: Sisu

Author: Thing2BK

Source Material: Axis Powers Hetalia

Notes: "Sisu" is a Finnish word roughly translated as "unshakable courage in the face of adversity". This story is based on a real WWII conflict between Finland and Russia known as the Winter War (1939).

Twelve days...

We'll be done in twelve days at the most...

We have but to raise our voices, and they will cower...

Fire one shot and they will raise their hands in surrender...

Ivan's grip on his gun tightened. These were high expectations his leaders had. Finland was weak, this was true, but one should ever boast like that before a battle...

It often came before a fall.

But the Russians had tanks. They had men doubling in the millions. Finland was

sure to fall. An eerily childish grin formed on his face. 'He will become one with Russia once more. And the others will follow. No one can stay away forever.' This was the thought that kept him striving through this war, through every war.

They will all become one with Russia.

Only the first chill had begun to streak through the wind, but Russia wasn't concerned. His only objective was winning without losing too many. His people were his children after all.

The men began to march.

The tanks began to roll.

The winter war had begun.

The November skies were grey, laden with clouds that would soon release more snow. The season would last until mid-April at least, without the temperature peaking 0 degrees once. Daylight would be limited, and snow would pile high.

And Finland loved it.

Or at least, he was used to it. His people had long since accepted that sort of winter as a part of their life. A part of their heritage.

And he loved his heritage, (he has even gone as far as to choose his surname after the hero of his national epic) so he loved the winter. And he had been willing to fight Sweden for it, so he would fight Russia any day. He had a long-held grudge against the man that he was almost eager to go to war.

Almost.

"How does our artillery stand?" He asked, hoping the panic he felt didn't show in his voice. He knew Russia was incredibly powerful.

"Not good." Came the general's reply. "They've got the heavy-artillery tanks, and the most we have are a few lightweights, but that's it. It doesn't look good."

The smaller blond murmured something, a strong gleam starting in his eye.

"Excuse me? Could you repeat that?"

"*Sisu*." He knew the word well enough. Knew what it meant. But still.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"It is how we will win. They are stronger, and greater in numbers. But we have *Sisu*. We are the greater nation, the greater fighters. We *will* win."

And he believed it. He had believed it would come to war long ago, and even then he had known the Finns could win.

"Our best chance for winning is to snipe on skis." Mannerheim declared suddenly.

"What?" Finland asked, blinking in surprise at the general. Where had this come from?

"Think about it. We have no tanks, and no heavy artillery. But every Finn has skis. With both winter and the Russians on the way, this is our best hope for mobile attack!" He sounded almost as giddy as a child on Christmas. It reminded him of Russia. But he shook that thought from his mind. He couldn't go comparing his people to that bastard; it would only hinder his judgment.

Finland thought about it, and the more he did so, the more appealing the idea sounded. It was true, if every soldier were to move individually, across territory he knew, and Russians didn't, it would give them the upper hand. They were marching with tanks. That would slow them down exponentially...

His face broke into a smirk, that didn't look quite right on his normally gentle face. "Let's do it."

Finland pulled the goggles over his violet eyes, not taking them off of the border for an instant.

Ivan was coming, he knew it. The same chill ran down his spine that had done so that day...

"We wish for Finland to fight with us against Germany." Russia said formally, though there was a cocky glee in his voice that Finland had only heard once before, when he had demanded his independence. He opened his mouth to argue right away, only to be silenced by a raised hand. "If you agree to do so, I can assure you the full aid of our military, as well as the assistance in stabilizing your economy."

He clicked his mouth shut. It was a good deal. All of his problems gone, just for fighting Germany. He knew that what the Germans were doing was wrong, but if it meant making his position known to Russia and Sweden, he'd fight with anyone. He smiled and shook his head slowly. "I cannot accept your request."

The Russian gritted his teeth, but remained civil. "I hope you are aware that if you remain adamant in that decision, you will face an attack from the Soviet Union."

"I know." Was the only reply he could manage.

"I assure you, Finland may not remain neutral in this war. It is impossible."

The day was November 30th. The snow was already thick on the ground, and the Finnish soldiers lay in wait for the announcement that would set them in motion.

And just like that, the wait was over. Hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers made their way across the border. They were well trained, but disorganized, was Tino's first evaluation. He did a final check to ensure his skis were secure, and hefted his gun from its place in the snow.

"There are so many Russians." The young man, a boy, really, whispered. "Where will we bury them all?"

He tried to laugh, but in all honesty, he was terrified. This would be his first major war since independence, and the last thing he wanted right now, was to lose. "Alright. To your positions." He murmured, setting himself up to move out, parallel to the invading forces.

The men obeyed, letting the single word course through all of them like a unified heartbeat.

Sisu.

Hardly the first Russian soldier had stepped over the border, when an explosion rang through the air. Mines were everywhere.

Russia glared across the land of his enemy, but there were none in sight. They were all currently camouflaged in the snow, making their way towards the startled Russians.

His men would later call the Finns 'cowardly' and 'the masters of foul play' for planting mines in almost every conceivable location, but for now, the soldiers were nervous. Every step they took, every door they opened in villages, could kill several of them, without the Finns even firing a single shot.

They were good. The Finns who weren't racing by on skis had machine guns in position from trenches. Suddenly, it was the Finns who had the upper hand.

Until the tanks came in. They shielded Russia and his men from the stream of bullets that came from the Finnish trenches, and pushed on to drive them out. His anger gone, now he only felt eagerness to fight. To him, tanks meant power. They meant victory.

To Finland, they only spelt death.

He watched the tanks advance from the trees by the road, carefully hidden. They couldn't find a clear shot without immediately announcing their presence, so they could only wait until nightfall. Their first day of combat really wasn't looking up.

Ivan stood at the edge of their small camp, watching the dark woods warily. He could feel Finland's presence, but couldn't find a single trace of the blond. "Where are you малютка?" He whispered to the shadows, watching his breath billow above his head.

From the other side of the camp, the snipers made their move. They slipped out of their skis, and crept up to the camp, and began to fire. Russia jumped at the sudden noise, and whirled around, watching his startled men fall. The white hood of one of the offenders fell down, and goggles hung off of his neck carelessly.

Finland.

"Bastards!" He roared, raising his own gun, and firing, striking several white-clad soldiers down. His eyes locked with Finland's and he saw them widen. He turned and shouted something to the small group of men with him in their own language, and they made for the woods once more.

Not if Russia could help it. He lifted his gun once more, but they were already gone. Scowling, he tossed it aside, and took after them on foot in a blind rage. The cowards had the gall to attack him during the night, being too weak to do so in daylight. They would regret it.

He only had his first ski on when Russia caught up. "Perkele!" He snapped when he heard the man crashing through the trees behind him. He released his leg, and turned to meet the opposition... and a fist to the head.

Finland went flying into the powdery snow behind him, barely an inch away from hitting a pine tree. He could feel a small trickle of blood flow from his temple, where the knuckles had broken the skin. Wiping it away with a swift motion, he stood up, and glared at the Russian. "I won't let you win this!"

Russia grinned menacingly. "You don't have a say in the matter. Why not make it easier on yourself and surrender now? I'm sure Estonia would be thrilled to see you."

He turned and spat in the snow at Russia's feet. "Not like this."

The grin disappeared almost as quickly as it had come. "Then run back to your fellow cowards. Hide in the snow, and wait until our treads crush your pathetic skulls." And with that, he turned, and made his way back to the camp, unconsciously pulling his coat closer. He would never admit it, but it was getting really cold, even for him.

Finland didn't feel a thing. He was numb with shock as he slid into his own

camp. He had stood up to Russia at least three times now, and each time he felt like the life had been drained from him, leaving only fear. "Where were you?" One of his men called from a fire. "We thought they'd gotten you!"

He forced a weak smile. "Like I'd ever let that happen Matti."

"You okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost, just a Russian."

Matti laughed, and made his way back to the others, who were sitting down for their meal. He would join them, just not yet. The chill of fear still clung to him like he was standing barefoot in the snow. He needed a sauna. One of the few things his men insisted on having everywhere, whether they be in a town, or camping in the woods, was a sauna. God's given gift to Finns indeed.

He thought about what Russia had said before leaving, that they would be crushed by the tanks. True, the tanks posed a huge problem, and the Finns had no way of eliminating them. Germany had promised to send some anti-tank rifles, but that had posed the threat of breaking the treaty he had with Russia, so he never came through on that. All that left was...

Finland gave the three behind him the signal to move, and aimed his gun carefully in the direction of the advancing Russians. They nodded, and grinned, racing straight at the nearest tank, launching two lit 'Molotov cocktails' as they were now calling them, into the air vent of the metal beast. Finland kept careful aim in case any enemy soldiers spotted them, but Ivan's men seemed too preoccupied with the cold to notice.

A moment's pause and the tank burst into flames. Russia jumped at the sudden explosion, and wall of heat that followed. Just behind the flames, he could make out

Finland's pale face.

His violet-blue eyes gleamed with amusement.

The sight made Russia's blood run cold.

He had never been truly afraid until he saw that expression.

The Finns were winning one fight after another. Russia winced from the wounds that now covered his body. They were losing focus from the cold, and the hunger, they'd already eaten a few horses, which had died in the cold. He despised how low they'd fallen. It just made him want to beat Finland all the more.

Speak of the devil; the blond was leading his men into another attack, looking determined, yet oddly cheerful for one risking death.

That was what annoyed Russia the most. The Finns weren't cocky at all. If anything, they were even more modest than usual, but they were incredibly carefree, and confident. 'And they shouldn't be! They should be scared! They should be losing!' The voice in his head hissed fiercely. He silenced it with gunfire, losing himself in the chaos, unaware of how clearly his fear showed on his face.

When had he been separated from the others? Tino couldn't remember, but suddenly, there wasn't a single soul around.

"Hello comrade."

He stiffened at the voice behind him. Stiffened, but not frozen. He dropped his rifle, and reached for the handgun and his waist, only for a gloved fist to make contact

with the back of his head, knocking him foreword in the snow.

"Your men are skilled, but *you*, you are weak." Russia sneered, waiting for Finland to scramble to his feet.

Finland's skilled eyes saw the way the taller man held himself. He was hunched slightly, trying to keep as much body heat as he could. 'I can use that.' He thought with a smirk. "You'll regret invading this land."

"I've never regretted such a choice, and I do not intend..." He was cut off as Finland launched himself foreword, landing a solid punch to Russia's gut.

He doubled over at the blow. He hadn't been expecting such a quick or strong retaliation. "Start regretting." The blond hissed, pulling back for a second punch.

Russia couldn't remember the last time he'd been beaten like this. The cold seemed to make each strike send a sharp pain throughout his entire body, and he couldn't even move to retaliate. He'd never felt so useless.

Somehow, his hand closed around Tino's wrist. "That's enough *малютка*." He murmured, tasting blood. *There*. The Finn was looking nervous. That would soon turn into the fear he desired.

Neither knew how long they'd fought for, neither seemed to grow tired, and both were determined to bring the other to his knees. But somehow it was nearly dark when some white-clad Finnish soldiers ended up in the clearing with them.

"Hey! I found him!" One called, waving the others over, and Finland felt himself being lifted to his feet, and he reluctantly let go of Ivan's jacket, which was now spattered with blood from both of them.

Russia staggered to his feet, ready to attack all of the others, and then finish his brawl with the blond, but another soldier yelled in broken Russian, "Go back with the rest of the cowards Ruskie! It's over!"

Tino blinked in surprise. "It's over?" He managed to mumble through swollen gums.

"Yeah!" Another boy cheered. "We did it. Now all that's left is the cleanup, and we can leave that to the losers!"

Finland grinned despite his pains, and the cold. "Yeah, we won. Let's go home."

"No! You can't take Karelia! That place is home to so many!" Finland cried, outraged at the very idea.

"They may still live there. They will simply be Soviets." Russia offered, smiling in a way that appeared civil, even peaceful to the humans in the room. But the two nations knew better. The smile was a wicked, spiteful grin of triumph. It was Russia's way of saying that he'd won, and there was nothing Finland could do about that.

"You bastard! To even think my people would give up everything about their heritage for their land..."

"Stop this. It is the only way to end this war. You honestly believe we can keep up what we've done this far? If we continue to fight, the Russians *will* win. You have to see that." His boss pleaded. He looked thin, Tino suddenly realized. They all did. This war alone had had so much impact on everyone.

He sighed, and sat back down. All of his efforts to protect his nation seemed worthless now. Russia got what he wanted, and he would just be left with debts and

fallen soldiers. The treaty was signed, and everyone went home alive. It felt like he had lost, even when he had been celebrating victory with his men mere hours before.

"Comrade..."

"Don't call me that!" Tino snapped, making his way out of the room. "You had no right to take what you did. I won, damn it!" He whirled around to face the larger nation, fury flashing across his face.

A flicker of something resembling fear could've been seen in Russia's eyes in that moment, but Finland was too angry to notice, let alone enjoy it. He had said his piece, and then turned and continued on his way out.

A heavy hand fell on his shoulder. "My people and I would never have caused harm to the Finns. I hope you recognize that." The Russian murmured.

His anger melted into horror. Twenty-five thousand dead and over twice as many injured, and he wouldn't have *hurt* anyone? He lost land, and his people lost homes, and what *would've* happened was his only consolation?

He wanted to scream. To cry or run until he couldn't move. Instead, he managed to calmly walk out, and go home. Only when he was lying in bed, alone in the dark, did he let the tears come out.

Present Day

"Something has been bothering me."

Finland looked up from his notes from the meeting they had just finished. Russia was sitting in the previously vacant seat beside him. "Oh? And what's that?" He asked coldly. He only ever used such a tone of voice where Russia was concerned. No one else would ever believe he could sound like that. Not even Sweden.

"During *that* war..." Neither one of them needed telling what *that* war was. "You had every odd stacked against you."

"As you constantly see the need to remind me."

"How did your people fight, and win? How were they so happy in everything they did, even when they were in the midst of a war, one that they were destined to lose?"

"Simple. It was Sisu." He stood up to leave. "It's a Finn thing, you wouldn't get it."

Best Character Piece: Yogafire

Author: San-san

Source Material: Street Fighter

2010 in Tokyo, Japan

Dhalsim shook his head in dismay. The brass rings on his wrists clinked as he crossed his thin arms in front of him. He might have looked like a normal Indian man but barefoot and dressed only in a yellow loincloth, he was undeniably not a local. With red paint on his face, a hairless head and brass hoop earrings, they suggested that he was still in the India of the nineteenth or eighteenth century. As he slowly opened his eyes, the sun's rays gleamed against his pupil-less eyes. He looked down at the young teenage girl sporting yogawear, complete with a rolled yoga mat in arm. Well-over six feet tall, he towered over her. The young blonde was obviously nervous, glancing left and right in-between her glimpses at his loincloth. She jumped as he spoke.

“Do you think yoga is simply concerned with the manipulation of the body in queer positions?”

“I don't th-”

“No. It is not and you are deeply mistaken.”

With one swift movement, his arm stretch around her, pulling the mat from her. He held the yoga mat over his head.

“Yogafire!” he cried.

A small burst of flame exited from his mouth. The mat that had once been royal blue had now become engulfed in flames, burning in deep red and amber, and almost a livid purple. The girl stood motionless and wide-eyed, not knowing which was more appalling: watching a pupil-less Indian man produce fire from his breath or the sight of her yoga mat being burned before her.

“Who do you think you-” Before she could finish, Dhalsim had teleported, vanishing into the air in a flash.

She swivelled around to follow a whirling sound to catch sight of him, levitating away in a lotus position, something she recently learned from her yoga classes.

It has been a week since Dhalsim had heard of the new yoga studio which had opened around the corner. Frustrated, he spoke aloud to himself, “Yoga is misinterpreted today as a physical system with a spiritual component, when in reality it is the other way around – a spiritual system with a physical component. It is nonsense

that it is heard in gyms more than in religious discourse. The goal of yoga is involved with the realization of the eternal self, which is beyond the physical human body. Yoga, in its original sense, has very little to do with exercise.”

Dhalsim chanted, “Om”, trying to block the insanity out. The mid-day summer heat reminded him of his past.

The sweltering heat began to get to his head. Dhalsim rested his head in the palms on his hands, elbows pressed against his crossed legs. Living on the streets of Bombay, he had been struggling to find food and water to live day by day. His twelve-year old body, hungry and tired, did not have enough energy to begin to fathom what had happened to his parents in the terrorist bombing that occurred just a few weeks ago. Missing for several weeks, he had long convinced himself that they had both died in the explosion. Just before he was about to doze off, he felt a hand resting upon his head. He looked up to a Buddhist monk smiling down on him, prayer beads in one and a loaf of bread in the other.

Together, they traveled into the Tibetan mountains where he joined a remote monastery. There, he followed the monk as his master, learning and living with Buddhist doctrines, mastering the arts of meditation and yoga. Although he did not wear the traditional Kasaya as his master did, he had kept his head shaved since. When he left the temple, he longed to see and experience the world with a new perspective. In his travels in Calcutta, he came upon a sect of Buddhist monks practicing Kabaddi, the ancient martial art native to India. Although he grew up with a philosophy which strongly opposed violence and combat, he was deeply intrigued. He could not help but notice a certain degree of enlightenment and inner peace that the monks seemed to have. He joined and began to train with them, mastering the art in

ten years. Since then, he had promised himself to further his enlightenment not only through mental exercise but physical exercise as well.

The monk's hand felt comforting upon his head. He looked at the smiling face of the monk and again to the piece of bread.

Dhalsim's stomach growled.

Dhalsim was whole-heartedly beholden that Edmond Honda had been kind enough to let him stay at his place on his visit in Tokyo. Although the sumo wrestler had come down with a fever lately, Honda made sure that his friend's stay would be pleasant. Dhalsim tried to make up for his stay by cleaning the place from time to time and by making supper for his big-appetite friend each day.

"C'mon, you made chicken and you're not having some for yourself?"

"I've told you many times, Honda; I don't eat meat."

"I thought you said it wasn't forbidden."

"Yes, but it a conscious decision I make. It is part of my own understanding of being Buddhist – the idea of right mindfulness. But thank you, Honda."

Honda took a spoonful of curried chicken into his mouth. His large smile stretching from ear to ear displayed his enjoyment of Dhalsim's cooking. Although the

two were both Buddhist, they obviously had differences between them. One grew within the Buddhism of Ancient India while the other was involved in the Buddhism of modern Japan. While Dhalsim had trained in a Buddhist monastery for years, Honda had not even tried the practices of meditation. Nevertheless, they had always got along and quite good friends since meeting at the Street Fighting Tournament.

Dhalsim was very content with his his bowl of chicken-less curry. No longer hungry, he decided it was time to encounter what was at hand.

He stood in front of the yoga studio, analyzing its exterior. The white fascia sign, lit up, displayed "Yoga-a-gogo" in a bright red font. Dhalsim shook his head and he stepped inside. He was surprised to find it empty. Virtually free from furniture, this large spacious room seemed to be the site of yoga class. With finished hardwood flooring, vivid red wallpaper and large open windows, this environment was much too modern for Dhalsim's liking. In the middle of the room was a small white pedestal. He walked over to look down at the figure on it, a golden figure of Siddhartha Gautama seating in the lotus position, in deep meditation, holding his right palm facing out. The image of the Buddha before him increased the discomfort he experienced. Who placed the Buddha in the presence of mockery to classical yoga? In his frustration, the space slowly became overwhelming and Dhalsim felt as if he was being sucked into emptiness. Before he turned to stepped out and escape the room, he heard the sounds of creaking floors and the clacking of a cane against the wood flooring from a hallway that was ahead of him. He waited to see a frail old man slowly shuffling towards him. After a couple of wheezy coughs, he began to speak.

"Hello. Did you come to join our class? We just finished our last session an hour

ago.” His voice was hoarse and raspy. Creases stretched across his forehead and his laugh lines deepened as he smiled, looking up at Dhalsim with beady eyes.

Dhalsim crossed his arms in front of him.

“I didn't come to join your silly class. You've caused Yoga to be far removed from texts and it is certainly no longer concerned with attaining liberation.” Dhalsim's voice was cold and he was clearly apathetic to any notion of modern yoga.

“Yoga has gone through a number of developments, young boy. Do you know the origins of Yoga?”

Dhalsim had obviously lost patience. In his anger, he threw his arms out, accidentally knocking over the pillar. The Buddha statue sitting on it had toppled over with it, smashing into many porcelain pieces. Dhalsim panicked, not able to understand how he had loss of control.

“S-Sorry,” he said under his breath.

Nervous and embarrassed, Dhalsim quickly ran out of the room and headed back home without looking back.

For several days, Dhalsim's thoughts had been clouded with guilt. He felt awful for the way he spoke to the elderly man. He decided that a visit to the nearby Japanese Buddhist temple would do some good. He was just passing under the entrance gate as a nearby monk began the sounding of a singing bowl. Dhalsim stood

in his place, closed his eyes and took in all the other sounds surrounding him. He listened to the chirping birds and the wind passing through the trees. The calming sounds of a stream helped relieved all tension in his mind and body. In the distance, he could hear the drumming and the chanting of gathered monks.

Just as many Japanese Buddhist monks did, Dhalsim stood motionless as the busy world around him carried on. For a short moment, he continued to concentrate on the many elements that many individuals often disregard. He listened to his own breathing, concentrating on each new breath he took in a let out. He opened his eyes and felt a calmness within his body and mind which he had been searching for. Just before leaving the sacred sanctuary, he remember that there was something he was to pick up at the traditional Japanese Buddhist store that he had often passed by.

A bell chimed above his head as he pushed open the door to the small shop. It was overwhelming filled with all sorts of Buddhist items; wicker baskets along the wall held candles, incense, and cushions. Prayer beads strung along the walls and on the ceilings hung various colored *omamori*. At one end of the shop, he came upon a wall, shelved with varying kinds and sizes of Buddha. They seemed to be made of different material, each one n a different position; while one stood standing right palm held out, another was reclining on its side. The figure which quickly caught Dhalsim's eye was the smiling Buddha. It reminded him of a smile that he had been grateful to see. He picked up the figure, smiling back at it. It seemed to be made of a sort of white bonded stone. He was bald, fat, and dressed in an open robe which exposed his round belly sitting with his right leg slightly uplifted. He wore prayer beads both around his neck and in his left hand. Dhalsim carried the statue to the front to pay for it. The cashier did a quick bow of the head, giving her thanks.

“Arigatou gozaimashita. Please take care of Hotei.”

Approaching back into town, Dhalsim could see the studio from a distance but its sign was no longer lit up. As he came closer to the building, he discovered that the windows had been boarded up and a newspaper clipping taped to the door front. He looked at the clipping but it was entirely in Japanese which he was not familiar with. Dhalsim stopped a young schoolboy passing to translate the characters in bold.

“Say 'yogi die in some day after studio open'.” The boy shrugged and scurried off. Dhalsim's heart sank as he looked at black-and-white picture of the smiling yogi in the clipping. Although he could not read the newspaper clipping, he certainly could read the unmoved happiness in his eyes. He let out a regretful sigh and looked down at the smiling Hotei which he had carried with him. He meant to replace the one which he had accidentally destroyed the other day. Studying its feet, belly and finally its face, Dhalsim was confused to see its smile with an open mouth; he was quite sure it had been closed when he had purchased it. Suddenly, its mouth moved and out of it came the booming voice of his master.

“Dhalsim, my boy!”

Startled, he dropped the Buddha and shoot a step back. To his surprise, it remained in one piece, teetering until it balanced against the ground. When he was sure it had become still, Dhalsim kneeled down to take a closer look, prompting for it to speak again.

“Master?”

"Dhalsim, do not stray from the path of enlightenment. Follow the Eightfold path and you will be on your way to liberation."

Still shocked to find his master speaking to him in the form of Buddha figure, he did not respond.

"You must be mindful of your both your thoughts and action. You destroyed the yoga mat which belonged to a young yoga practitioner. Is this right action?"

Dhalsim hung his head, feeling ashamed.

"And remember, that suffering is caused by attachment to earthy objects. Your frustration of modern yoga is starting to look similar to one, does it not? Is this right concentration?"

Still smiling, the statue made Dhalsim feel uncomfortable.

"And what is this street fighting business I hear you go yourself into? You see, like you, people have their own understanding as how to live their lives in the material world. And here they are calling you 'Great Yoga Master Dhalsim'."

"I'm sorry, master."

"Remember, Dhalsim. With right mindfulness comes right action."

And with the silence of the statue, Dhalsim understood that he was far from enlightenment and had quite a lot of self-development to do. He picked up the Hotei

and looked back up at the studio.

“Om.” Dhalsim hovered in the air in his typical lotus position. His eyes remained closed as he spoke.

Nothing is permanent and whether we may like it or not, everything that we know is in constant flux. Even yoga has changed throughout the ages. Historical classical yoga has a spiritual component that has been overlooked and neglected in recent years. It has faced secularization in the milieu of the contemporary Western world. Although yoga has evolved into a new entity, its history remains in the texts that once defined it. The *asanas* or positions in modern yoga are merely a fraction of the historical yoga. The modern yoga that we familiar with today is absent of many elements of that of the classical. This is where I come in. ”

He opened his eyes to look at the fifty or so students seated in the same position as himself.

“Today, we will discover true yoga. Class, let us begin.”

Most Believable Dialogue: What Kind of Monster

Author: neuce

Source Material: Monster

Notes: "Herr" and "Frau" are the German equivalents of "Mr." and "Mrs.".

"I just – I just can't believe the *nerve* of some people. Scaring an old lady like me," Frau Drescher, the portly woman sitting across the table, says. She's doesn't say it to me, necessarily. She's just talking for the sake of it. Her teacup rattles against the saucer as she sets it down.

"It must have been quite the shock for both of you," I say, nodding politely. "Being accosted by some ne'er-do-well on the street like that."

The man sitting beside her scowls. "Please. We're tougher than we look, I'll have you know." Then his frown softens, and he rubs his wife's shoulder affectionately with his free hand. Trying to soothe her. "Aren't we, dear? It wasn't so bad."

Her husband's attempts don't work. She shakes her head hopelessly for what may very well be the hundredth time since I'd arrived – and that was only ten minutes ago. She goes on, "I don't know, something about what he said... it just bothers me, is all."

“All nonsense, Marta. Really.” Herr Drescher apparently decides patting her knee will calm her down better, but it doesn't accomplish anything.

I shift to cross my legs. The old wooden chair under me creaks. “Actually, Frau Drescher, you still haven't told me just what it was this man said to you.”

The old woman's eyes go wide, and she blinks. “Oh! Didn't I?”

I give her a little chuckle, although privately I'm not at all amused. I rarely am, when I'm with the Dreschers. Their chatter is so... mundane, so absolutely pointless – my weekly visits with them are more of a chore than I thought they'd be.

“No, you didn't. You're still quite excited about it, yes? Not at all surprising that it slipped your mind.”

She shakes her head again – it's more annoying every time she does it – and takes a deep breath. Her bony fingers rake through her greying curls. “Oh, yes, of course – well, we were on our way home from the market, like I said. Then this... this *vagrant* comes out of nowhere, grabs my arm, and – and he just starts going on about some killer on the loose.”

“A killer?” I say. My eyebrows raise. A *killer*. Something interesting to talk about, for once - suddenly there's hope that the rest of my time here might be a little less insufferable. “He told you there was a killer?”

“It's absolutely absurd, isn't it?” Herr Drescher cuts in. “This neighbourhood has

always been so safe. For any killer to make this his – into some *hunting ground* - it's unthinkable, that's what it is."

The assurance doesn't satisfy his wife, who continues to stare with big, worried eyes at the steam coming off her tea.

"Frau Drescher," I say, and her head snaps up to look at me. I smile gently. "I'm sure Herr Drescher is right. It's nothing you need be too concerned about. The man probably just had a bit too much to drink. A little sick in the head, perhaps."

My words are about as effective as Herr Drescher's in improving her mood. But quite frankly, I don't much care about making her feel better. Maniac on the loose or not, no street is ever really safe. Let her be scared. She *should* be scared.

Now Herr Drescher must have figured out there's no soothing his wife, so he starts to bring up other, trivial topics – the weather, the bakery, some column in the Post. But I don't want to play along today, so I don't, and I let every new conversation die before it can really begin. Eventually he seems to realize there's no use in talking, and so he lets a heavy silence fill the room, thickening the tension. For me, it's pleasant. For them... well, I can only imagine the rhythmic ticking of their old Grandfather clock is piercing, that the dull hum of their furnace is some ugly, foreboding sound.

They should be scared.

A minute of ticking and idle tea sipping passes and Herr Drescher tries again.

“This tea is wonderful. Thank you so much for bringing it,” he says, shooting me a desperate, pleading glance.

What will you do, Herr Drescher, when my visit ends? When your wife is huddled up against you under the blankets, unable to sleep, worried there's danger in every shadow? When there's no one else there to talk to, will you give in to thoughts of murderers, too?

Have you already?

I smile. It's not a nice smile, but I know, to them at least, it certainly looks like one. “It was no trouble, really. It's from a speciality store near my school complex. If you like it, I'd be more than than happy to bring you more.”

“Oh, it's so *nice* that you come spend time with us old fogeys.” Frau Drescher says finally, breaking her stubborn silence. But I can see she's no less upset than before. “Ever since we lost our son, we've just been so... so lonely. It's so nice to have you visit us every now and again...”

Her voice is shaking. She stops, placing a hand on her breast and taking a deep breath, and tries to continue. She's tearing up, though. She won't last long. “I mean, we haven't known you long, but sometimes you remind us so much of our son that I...”

Her husband sets a hand on her back, caressing lovingly. Frau Drescher sniffs. “I'm sorry. It's - it's been years, but...”

I shake my head dismissively, take a sip of tea. When the cup leaves my lips I've

got on another soft little smile. "It's no trouble, Frau Drescher. I enjoy your company – you know I don't get along well with people my age. And..." I feign a little sadness, for effect. They'll like that. "And, well, it's nice. Feeling like I've got a family to visit."

Frau Drescher gasps, touched, and then everything is roses again. On the surface, at least.

We talk briefly about their departed son Karl, then about their upcoming retirement, then my own academic pursuits. Are you happy, Herr Drescher? The air seems lighter now. But there's still fear lingering, somewhere. I can feel it, I can practically see the word "killer" peaking out of Frau Drescher's thin, wrinkled lips. She'll bring it up, bring everything crashing down. She'd better, anyway. As things stand, all peaches and cream, I'm horribly bored again.

But I'm not left bored for long. I never am.

"Oh, it's so silly, but you know, I'm still... I'm still worried," Frau Drescher caves in. Herr Drescher sighs, loudly.

"Marta, *please*... why are you dragging this up again? Christ, the man was sick! Stop scaring yourself."

"It was his eyes..." she continues. I don't think she even heard her husband, she looks so absorbed by her thoughts. "They were so sincere. *Earnest*. You know? I just can't help but feel like, like maybe we should have listened to him, or - "

Whatever was left of Herr Drescher's patience is gone. "Listened to him, she

says!" he throws his arms up, exasperated. "Some foreigner grabs onto you in the street – one who I don't think had showered in days, no less – he grabs onto you, tells you he's a *doctor*, that there's a killer... and you think we should have *listened* to him? You take him seriously?"

And then all the air rushes out of the room. My jaw tightens, my fingers twitch. Foreigner. Doctor.

It couldn't be.

Herr Drescher once again tries to change the subject, but this time, I won't let him. It's so much more than a matter of amusement now. "He said he was a doctor?" I ask, and I'm a little mortified that the words don't come out even. "What else did he say?"

Herr Drescher blinks, startled. "No, nothing, really. Just – well, this killer of his supposedly targets older, childless couples. I don't know what kind of monster would have such a twisted, ah - what do you call it - such a twisted *modus operandi*, but in this neighbourhood- "

"That's just it," Frau Drescher cuts him off. "That's just the thing that's got me all torn up, Georg. How did he know – how could he have possibly known about our Karl?"

Herr Drescher opens his mouth to answer, but I know he's got nothing to say. So I take my turn at shutting him up. I can't take the babbling right now. I need to know – it can't be *him*. "He was foreign? Where was he from?"

“Oh, I can't say for sure,” Frau Drescher moves to pick up her tea cup, but stops halfway and starts wringing the hem of her blouse instead. “Somewhere Asian.”

I freeze.

That's – no.

I part my lips to lick them, and to say something, but for the first time in years I have no idea what to say. A gulp of the tea, I hope, will help me compose myself, but it doesn't. My hand is shaking. The tea is only lukewarm but it seems to burn, down my throat and through my veins.

Dr. Tenma.

It's impossible.

“Goodness, are you all right?” I half-notice Frau Drescher ask me. “Oh Georg, the poor dear's gone sheet white.”

“Damn it, Marta, you can never leave well enough alone, can you? You and your paranoia - look what you've done to the poor boy!”

“Oh no,” I manage, and tuck my hair behind my ears. I can feel my pulse coming in hard through my neck, through my fingertips. “You misunderstand – I do agree with you, Herr Drescher. It's all nonsense. I...”

I take a breath and shake my head. Disgusting. That I would *ever* impulsively, helplessly twist my head round back and forth, like an idiot. Like the stupid woman in front of me. That my words would ever leave me.

That's just what he does to me. Dr. Tenma, this is what you do to me. You confuse me and you ruin my plans. Another week and everything would have been ready. I wouldn't have had to lift a finger.

I finish my thought. "This talk's brought up some bad memories, that's all. I'm sorry."

Clapping her hands, Frau Drescher stands up with a bit of a wheeze. The fabric stretched tightly across her ugly belly buckles. "Don't you apologize, now. I'm the one who should be doing that. Let's – let's just stop with all the doom and gloom, shall we?"

Herr Drescher chimes in, "yes, dear. Why don't you go and get that cake we bought? It's going to dry out, at this rate."

"Oh yes, yes. The cake." She squeezes past the tea table and scuttles over to me, heading for the kitchen. "It's an apple cake, dear," she says, and sets a hand on my shoulder. Gives it a little squeeze. Don't touch me. "Your favourite."

"You remembered," I lie. Carefully, I move her hand off me, then stand up myself. "Please, let me take care of it."

When I reach the kitchen counter, Frau Drescher calls out from the sitting room,

“thank you, you sweet thing. Such lovely manners.”

I spot the cake box. I reach past it, for the knife rack.

“Yes,” Herr Drescher adds. “Thank you, Johann.”

What kind of monster, indeed.

I find the sharpest one.

Best Use of Setting: Hunting

Author: Alisha Landfall

Source Material: Resident Evil

His right hand settled on his hip, inches from his weapons, tense, waiting, ready. Leon's left hand rose slowly, the palm flat against the rough, cool steel, and he gently pushed on the small side door to the seemingly abandoned warehouse. He nearly groaned at the high pitched, almost painful screech of hinges long unused, and stepped forward, unhappy. If there was anyone was expecting a visitor, they knew now that one had arrived.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom, for his nose to catalogue the varied scents. He stood there, breathing softly, taking in the mixed aroma's of dust and dampness, rusted metal, and something rotting. There were more, though less obvious smells, and as he progressed further into the building, moving carefully, they teased at his heightened senses.

He had no specific reason to be here, in such an old warehouse, in the industrial part of a no-where town, and he figured it was an unlikely stop in his so far futile search for the missing girl, but whatever, the clues led him here, and so he'd search the place. The sooner he found the spoiled brat and got her back to her rich daddy, the

sooner he could get back to doing something useful.

Leon went west first, moving along a scratched, mouldy, concrete wall, staying in the darker shadows, listening for any sound not his own. A shuffling, scuffle of sorts caught his attention and he focused his gaze in it's direction, straining to see anything against the sheer black contrast to the dappled sunlight streaming in from the cracked windows on the ceiling.

A low hiss interrupted his concentration, it was nearly a sigh, but with a curious backdrop of rattling metal, almost like old cans, vibrating on a shelf. He closed his eyes, listening intently, feeling the space around him until he found the slight motion of the air moving above. He looked up, spotting the long, thick piping that traveled the length of the rectangular warehouse, before disappearing up into it's higher reaches. That was what the hiss odd was, the steam venting from the heating system. It was just the pipes, letting off a bit of pressure.

He returned his gaze to the far corner of the wall he stood next to, to the scuffling sound he'd heard earlier, it was gone, faded much like the yellow paint that once graced the huge vats that lined the outer walls of the warehouse.

Leon continued walking, slowly, carefully, each measured step taking him deeper into the room, into the darkness. He avoided the clouds of dust dancing in the sporadic sunbeams, avoided making any sound, hoped he could come and go and no one would ever have any indication that he was ever there.

Once he'd circled the ground floor he moved towards the loft, to the nearest ladder made from some sort of welded piping and began a slow, steady climb. Half

way up he heard something, a scrape, like metal on stone, and he paused, listening for it, hoping to hear it a second time, preferably to identify it. In his business, knowing your surroundings could mean life or death, and often did.

Nothing, not a single sound beyond the rats scurrying in the darkness below, whatever insects they had caught for their dinner, trapped in their mouths.

Leon went back to climbing, trying not to let the weight of his heavy boots make too loud a ringing on the metal rung, trying not to jostle his weapons so they scratched against the ladder. It took him longer than he wished it, but eventually he was stepping upon the flat, riveted metal flooring, his gaze darting about as he sought to adjust his eyes to the better lighting.

He stood at the end of a long catwalk, an expanse of rusted iron railing on either side, offering balance to those who might need it. He eyed the next section of flooring, a not so simple construction of chain link fencing and cross beams. Logically he knew it would be sturdy, knew it would easily support his weight, but at the moment, his mind was full of suspicion, and he knew, if he were someone being chased, and he'd been followed up here, he'd find some way to make that section unstable.

It was instinctive, this cataloguing of his surroundings, it'd kept him alive through more missions than he should have survived. And this place, this dark, almost airless warehouse with its faded paint and its rusted smells was just the sort of situation in which people often underestimated. Harmless was never what it seemed.

A step, cautious, hesitant, and then another, his senses alert, the hair on the back of his neck standing up. His hand twitched, almost reaching for his gun when

another fat rat came around a sealed barrel and froze, staring at him, it's beady little eyes angry, and darting around while it looked for an escape route. He watched it a moment, inwardly laughing at himself because he'd almost blasted a rodent to kingdom come and the frowned, when the rat gaze swang to something behind him.

He felt, rather than heard the presence. The promised threat, the swish of air, stirring the dust particles in the air around him. The intent glare, boring in to the back of his head. Something shifted, the light, the feel, and he heard it again, the scrape of metal, only this time, he knew what it was... a knife leaving it's sheath.

He spun, barely getting out from under the descending shape before it took him down, barely escaping having his throat slit, he knew, by the thin thread of blood running down his now makred cheekbone. He lifted his gaze, letting it take in a man he thought he'd never see again, and a voice he would recognize in his sleep. "Been a long time, Comrade."

Leon sneered, surprised, even though he shouldn't have been. "Krauser..."