

*Come Little Children
I'll Take Thee Away, Into A Land
Of Enchantment*

It was a cold, rainy evening. The kind they don't like to print into the tourism brochures. The Sinchi Ring was a mess of light and sound, a mix of piercing smells and bleeding neon that stung the eyes and mind. My headache would not relent.

The night before was a blur. I think I met a girl, red hair, sweet perfume, laugh like icicles. No. There was something else. Didn't matter. Ypma kept the drinks coming, whiskey, neat. He always knew what I wanted. Knew what I needed. It was all a blur after that.

What sense of duty dragged me to my office, I couldn't tell, but there I was, standing behind the flimsy door with the flaked letters *P.I.* clinging to the dusty glass like cockroaches. I fumbled with the keycard, but the door was unlocked. Had I forgotten to lock it?

The pounding headache wouldn't let me dwell. I pushed inside my office, heading for the scotch I kept in my drawer. Sweet perfume drifted in the air. A soft laugh in the dark, like icicles.

I turned around, hand fumbling for my trusty Westar.

The shape of a woman, lying casually on the uncomfortable office couch, red hair cascading down her slender shoulders, framing a face of alabaster. I stopped fumbling. She smiled.

"I have work for you," she said, taking a long drag of perfumed smoke through an elegant cigarette holder. Her ruby red lips wrapped around its slender shaft invitingly. "Are you open for business?" Each syllable was laced with sickly sweet poison.

I blurted my response, stumbling over simple words. She took it as agreement.

"A man most dear to me has gone missing," she explained, her voice as smooth as the velvet dress that hugged her feminine curves. "He was last seen in the Sinchi Ring and I desire to be reunited with him. Your troubles will be handsomely compensated."

I had no will, nor desire, to deny her. Her ruby lips curved into a feline smile.

"Very well then, I hope to hear of progress soon," she took another drag and tapped the end of the slender stalk against an ashtray. "It is unbecoming to keep a lady waiting."

I nodded, clumsily, eyes wandering behind her as she stood up and left, the shadows and her voluminous hair never giving me a clear look at her visage. But the lighting was more than ample for her *other* assets.

I considered this a fair exchange.

*Come Little Children
The Time's Come To Play
Here In My Garden
Of Shadows*

The file the mysterious redhead had left on my desk held precious little to go on. A grainy picture, heavily zoomed in by the looks of it, of a stout man with bushy sideburns. His leathery features matched those of a worn couch and the bulbous nose drooped down towards his cracked lip. Must have been a general or some sort, since despite his appearance he carried himself with distinction.

My head had cleared somewhat, but I needed a pick-me-up and there was only one place that would serve both my needs, the Sandy Kelp. Ypma had gotten me into this state, so he would get me out of it. Popping the collar of my coffee brown duster, I waded back into the rain.

The neon rain, an unholy union of black streaks and shop signs assaulted my eyes, the street alight with twisted colors. Vivid serpents slithered in the ponds, the cobbled streets awash with purples, greens and electric blues. The gutters were choked with rainbows.

Crowds of jubilant youngsters passed me by, oblivious to the insidious rain that drained the life from those who still had a soul. The narcotic zombies high on deathsticks had none left to lose. I still clung to mine, or what remained of it.

Drenched, coat dripping an oil-slick black that lingered on the spray green marble of the Sandy Kelp's foyer, I shivered from head to toe as I passed into that cool den of oceanic tranquility. Or so I had thought. The music was loud, overbearingly so, and for a moment my heart wavered. Daring the raging storm of raving bodies, I sailed after the glinting treasure of the Nautaloan's smile.

"What brings you here?" he greeted me with a set of pearls so bright it put the bands of a nearby socialite to shame. "Work? I know exactly what you need," the beaming Nautaloan stated in an almost overtly amicable manner before disappearing to fetch my go-to whisky, as usual.

When he returned, it was with a glass in hand, but one not filled with the amber spirit I was perhaps a bit too fond of, but clear and transparent. He placed it before me, making a distinct effort not to crack a cheeky smile. Water. We exchanged a look, but as always, he was correct.

His gleaming eyes never left my person as I downed the drink. Refreshing, I needed that. Finally, he snatched away the glass and turned to make a cocktail. "Looking for someone?" The question was rhetoric, spoken over the noise of bar cutlery as he cut into a fresh citrus.

I slid the image over the counter, sleeve sticking on the dregs of a previous cocktail. Ypma glanced at the picture nonchalantly, like taking polite interest in a relative's pet. He reached for a bottle of red condiment to finish off my cocktail, a bloody red drink that vividly reminded me of - *her*.

Simosan Ypma rarely, if ever, displayed anything but a polite or enthusiastic smile. Now, that smile had gone and although he was far from angered, I felt sense of unease at the sight. Had I stepped in too deep?

He raised the empty bottle of condiment on the table. "Gone," he stated. Reaching behind the counter he produced the crimson cocktail, presenting it before me and sampling it with a straw. His polite features twisted into an uncharacteristic scowl. "Bitter," Simosan decreed. I had no reason to doubt his palate.

"A drink worthy of an admiral," he continued, as if in thought. "But some prefer to forget the bitter sanguine of combat. When your hands are so red with blood, it becomes hard to remember which of it is theirs and which is yours. And whether it ever mattered."

He swiped the drink off the counter and upended it into the trash. A drop had spilled on the counter and he wiped it with a white cloth, cleaning the grime and the goop.

"Curious, our stocks are never low," he said, returning to the empty condiment bottle, inspecting it before discarding it the way he'd done the failed cocktail. "Perhaps we should have a word with our supplier? Two things never sleep on the Ring, the clubs and the docks."

Something tugged the corner of his smiling lips and I paid him handsomely. I never proclaimed to understand how he did what he did, but at least I had a lead.

*Follow Sweet Children
I'll Show Thee the Way
Through All The Pain And
The Sorrow*

The neon cacophony gave way to the comforting grime of Sinchi Logistics Hub 12, a purely utilitarian place of dulled greys and oil slick browns at the far edge of the Ring. Thousands of tonnes of cargo passed through here every day, feeding the insatiable appetite of the Ring and her hedonistic habitants.

Work crews bustled like bees around cargo modules, worker ants serving the hive. None seemed bothered by my presence, though their dull stares seemed little bothered by anything for that matter. A particularly un-dull pair of eyes did manage to point me towards the foreman, his greasy overalls marked by a poorly sewn patch of the Arconan Logistics and Shipping Company.

I made my way to the second deck where tractor cranes were sorting deliveries onto smaller repulsor sleds that darted around in the shadows of Sinchi as envoys of commerce and trade. A tall, pale creature with elongated limbs orchestrated this logistical symphony, though one player seemed off tune. Or rather, missing from the choir.

Making my presentations with the alien, I was taken aback by the celestial radiance of her (I think it was a her) eyes. The radiant blue orbs held within them a constellation of starlight and for a moment, I felt mesmerized by their beauty. So much so that her (it had to be a her) response failed to register and with an awkward apology, I beckoned her for a do-over.

“You are trespassing on ALaS Co property. Disruption of our operations carries a fine enforceable by Selenian courts. Speak swiftly or leave. Your presence has already caused disturbances in goods flow,” his voice (or was it a her?) held a melodic tone to it that remained polite even through what my mind told me was a statement of threats, the sing-song quality masking her (it had to be a her) gender.

I bowed in apology, explaining my interests in the missing deliveries on behalf of the *Sandy Kelp* and inquired the whereabouts of the shipment. My lie of convenience brought about a marked change in her (I suspected it was a her) demeanor, although little changed in the reverberant voice.

“I see. Most unfortunate events have taken place from which our operation has yet to recover.” A wide gesture towards the tractor crane sitting idle overhead. “The operator was let go after incidents involving misplaced shipment crates. We found his excuses implausible, though could not prove his guilt.”

I inquired further into the matter and he (it couldn't have been a he) indulged my curiosity.

“For three weeks shipments of condiment were misplaced, but none other. Curious, isn't it?”

I nodded my head approvingly, though my choice of word might have differed. She (I decreed it had to be a she) parted with the operator's address and a pict she'd taken of him during the obligatory de-hiring procedures, giving me a lead towards something. I thanked her and left, examining the hollow faced man in the pict as I went. Why was he stealing condiment?

Finding his dwelling proved a greater hassle than I'd hoped. The habitation around the lesser parts was a maze of alleys and walkways without any substantial signage. After wandering about for the better part of an hour, I relinquished my pride and asked a corroded protocol droid for directions. Despite its decrepit state of being, the ersatz concierge knew the neighborhood well and pointed me towards the correct dwelling with its single still-functional mechanical arm, offering its condolences of not being able to escort me due to its leg servos having ceased up years ago. I accepted the excuse and pressed on alone.

The soddy flat lay on the third floor of a stale permacrete block that was fighting a losing battle against the saline elements. The fetid aroma of human filth hung heavy in the air and the tilted turbolift looked like death waiting to happen. Pieces of crumbling grey turned to dust in my wake. It reminded me of home.

Daring the rickety stairwell, I ascended the eroding flight to the third floor where the pungent aromas were less cloying. The number on the door, laser etched on bare durasteel, matched the one I'd been given by the androgynous overseer. I reached for the door.

I paused. Withdrawing my hand, I reached within the folds of my duster and slid out my trusty Westar. One could never be too cautious, in a place like this. Rapping the door with my knuckles, I awaited a response that never came.

I heard a faint humming, a tune, poorly remembered and sung off-key. Steps ascended the stairwell. I stowed the pistol, not wishing any undue confrontation. It was a mistake.

The crane operator locked eyes with me as his humming faded, beady orbs sunken in his greasy face staring at me like a shaak before a butcher's knife. He dropped the bundle of moist clothing and bolted, my draw too slow and the stun bolt striking permacrete in his wake. Dashing after him, I leaped over the soiled rags, tumbling down the stairs as the step broke upon my landing, but the man did not care.

Heedless of the events, he threw himself into the tilted turbolift, the carriage swaying from the impact. For a moment, it looked like his gamble would pay off, but then something failed and the carriage was sent screaming down the chute, the man's wailing yelp swallowed by distance and a hollow crunch.

I found his remains in the basement, among the twisted wreckage of the lift. He had nothing on him. Not even a keycard. I decided to postpone reporting the incident. None of the inhabitants seemed to mind.

Returning to his apartment, I found the door unlocked. Within, a new sickly sweet odor assaulted my senses. Packets of condiment lay strewn everywhere, with empty crates of the same piled up in a corner. The man must have subsisted on the things, but why? I found some answers soon enough, but they were less precise than I'd hoped.

The flat was void of valuables, the damp walls holding no treasure and what passed for personal effects were priceless junk. The place seemed like the atypical spice addict's dump, except all the spice had been exchanged for condiment. Bright red smears and the lingering, tangy iron smell were still preferable to the reek of an actual spice den, though only barely.

All I could find in the end were pieces of an ill-fitting puzzle, a collection of knick-knack that made little sense. A stack of cheap toilet paper strips, an empty credit chit, a voided work permit to the docks and a handful of condiment packets. Not much to go on, but I had cracked cases with less. Or at least found a culprit.

I vacated the premises and informed the authorities of the accident, the concierge droid offering a stilted farewell as I left. The trail had not exactly gone cold, but I needed time to think. Time and a stiff drink.

*Weep Not Poor Children
For Life Is This Way
Murdering Beauty And
Passions*

The rain had petered out into a light drizzle, mobs of intoxicated street dwellers rearing their heads as the night proper began. What I'd taken as torment aplenty was being dialed up to eleven past twelve. Even at the edge of the Ring, the reverberating sounds and technicolor vomit were far too close for comfort. I needed a place to stay and clear my head.

Though I loathed to do so, I acquiesced to the fact the partygoers were drawn to alcohol like flies to a turd and following the stream of piss-faced teens would probably lead me to the same. In the current hour, I had little pride left to lose.

A gaggle of hooting hoodlums brought me to what I'd assumed at a distance to be a warehouse, no sign anywhere pointing to its true purpose. A speakeasy might have been a term some would have used, but that held with it some connotation of silence and mystery. What followed after a short elevator ride down was anything but.

The scent of tabac hung heavy in the air, next to the smell of sweating bodies and mineral oils. Red light bathed everything in photonic blood and the black-clad masses writhing on the dance floor were more akin to the lost and damned twisting in purgatory than people out enjoying themselves. When a scantily clad lad informed me the place's name was *Purgatorio*, I was thus not much surprised.

Declining the lad's offer of sodom, I sidelined the gomorrah of the stage and weaved my way past sticky shoulders and bare midribs to the counter and ordered a stiff one. The tender, a flat-chested girl with hair formed up like a Zabrak's spikes, seemed barely lucid and I felt inclined to observe her every motion, lest she slip in something untoward into my drink. Even so, I had to scan it before ingestion. In hindsight, a slip of spice might have made the bitter gin more palatable.

The oily liquid vanished down my throat, though the unfortunate taste lingered like an unwelcome relative. At least the mild buzz helped stave off my surroundings. I asked for seconds and the flat-chested *psabrak* obliged, leaving the bottle nearby in a startling act of sober thought. She might need it later.

I unfolded the crumpled pict I'd received from the crimson maned vixen and stared at the grainy visage. What was so special about this man? And why was there condiment on his shirt? I reached back into my pocket, fearing a packet had burst. My hand returned dry, though clinging to it was one of the paper slips I'd confiscated as evidence. The cheap sliver soon ended back whence it came from, but not after I'd tried and failed to clean the pict with it.

The stain was not on the pict, it had always been there. The man had condiment on his lapel and stuck to it, a sliver of paper from a half-hearted attempt at cleaning it away with a cheap napkin...

Could it be? My brow furrowed. It made no sense. The link was so unremarkable it defied reason, but Ypma had an eye for detail. Was that why he'd sent me after the shipments? I struggled to think through the gin haze. The aggravation of this revelation stung me more than the bloody neons that stabbed through the dance fog. I had to leave. Leave before I succumbed to another cup of that oily gin, served by the flat-chested devil.

I pushed myself away from the counter, but my numb hands fumbled, swiping the tumbler off the lip. It shattered on the floor in a spray of glass and gin. Grabbing a handful of napkins amidst a flurry of apologies, I knelt down to clean up my mess only to bump into a mechanical arm already at work doing just that. A droid, unremarkable in its diminutive size and bland paint job, swept up the shards of my shame and deposited them inside its chest for recycling. Its gleaming photoreceptors met mine and it blared a chirp in recognition. A greeting? As soon as it had appeared, it vanished into the crowd, navigating the shifting jungle of limbs without disturbing the natives.

A thought emerged. A dangerous one. Perhaps foolish, but a thought all the same and in that state of inebriation, it felt like a less-bad one than I knew it would in hindsight. I rose up and left a chit on the counter, leaving the flat-chested girl to her own vices along with the lost souls of *Purgatorio*. I had places to be and faces to meet.

Wandering off into the by-now nocturnal streets, I steered clear of the ruckus that passed for contemporary music and headed into the secluded shades of the Ring. The backstreets, built to accommodate the service skiffs that ferried goods to and fro and by now overgrown with vagrants, delinquents and other assorted waste of potential, were the perfect place to find what I was looking for.

The choice of building material around these parts being mostly sandstone and permacrete made things easier, the signal of a droid easier to find than on Coruscant where everything was a durasteel nightmare. Swiping the sensor wand around, I had a lock on an old friend. Drawing my trusty Westar as much for my own protection as deterrent, I pressed on into the dark with sensor wand in hand.

The groans and moans of barely sentient refuse trailed my every step, hungry hands and desperate eyes reaching out for pittance that I'd long since exhausted. A swift flash of my trusty Westar scattered their upstart demands, wails and murmurs of fearful supplication ringing on my deaf ears as they retreated back into the shadows.

My prize was near, but on the move. Cutting past a skiff lane and almost paying the price as the repulsor sled nipped past with nary a sound, so close it momentarily knocked my trilby off my head, I managed to get ahead of it and snuck into a shadowy corner. Such places were the only abundant resource around. The droid never suspected a thing as it walked

past, my hand covering its mouth as I pressed my trusty Westar against its neck and pulled it into the darkness with me.

It struggled, of course, but relented as it recognized my presence.

“You?!” it blurted in broken binary, translated a moment later by my earpiece. “What you want, fren?”

I tossed the protocol droid against the wall and remained leaning against the opposite, only a few paces between us in the narrow alleyway. It did not like that, but who cared about what droids felt? I laid out my demands. Feelings or not, the rust bucket owed me.

“Condiment? I ain’t heard nothing about that, fren,” the binary lies spilled easy from its vocoder. “You best give up that search, fren. Nothing good could come of it.”

It knew. The droid knew, but wasn’t telling. Something, or someone, was keeping its memory core sealed to me. That would not do. Leveling my trusty Westar, I flipped the charge setting to ion and began to count.

“Oooh, you should no have done that, fren,” the droid whispered, shaking its mechanical head. “He no gonna like that.”

The answer to whom it was referring to came swiftly and brutally, only my trained reflexes sparing my life as a crude hydrowrench came swinging from the dark and smashing into the permacrete wall at head height. I stumbled backwards, raising my trusty Westar at the hulking droid that emerged from the shadows.

I had not fought in the Clone Wars, neither had my father, but my grandfather, he never stopped retelling the stories of how he’d served alongside the Republic forces and fought the ‘clankers’ as an auxiliary. I would have recognized a B2 super-battledroid anywhere.

The thing prepared for a second swing, opting for melee combat despite the gleaming twins of blaster barrels on its wrist. I pulled the trigger on instinct. My trusty Westar failed me. The sound of the overload failsafe venting the ionization chamber was the last, horrifying sound I remember before the B2 brought down its hydrowrench on my noggin. After that, there was only darkness.

*Hush Now Dear Children
It Must Be This Way
Too Weary Of Life And
Deceptions*

I awoke to a throbbing headache, a sensation that had become depressingly common in my life. A sense of vertigo followed, perhaps from a concussion or from the fact I was seated at a table. I managed to contain my insides, though bitter bile rose to linger on my palate. There had been better days.

A faint chamber music filtered in through the ringing in my ears, hazy vision clearing to take in an opulent dining room decked in salmon pink velvet. The faintest fragrance of roses lingered.

“Welcome back,” a modulated voice, uncannily human in tone, greeted me. A mechanical man sat on the opposite side of the baroque table, a crystal goblet of golden nectar in its metallic grasp. “My associate informed me you’d been threatenin’ one of my informants,” the droid continued, its bulbous head mostly concealed by an abnormally large bowler hat while its motionless lips were buried beneath a tuft of stolen hair. I could still see strips of flesh where the beard had been flayed off its previous owner and the taste of bile rushed back.

The sight was unsettling in the least, an uncanny valley between man and machine that was left unexplored for reasons of sanity and decency that the droid now violated with its very presence. “You’d be’er spill the beans, before BL1-TR spills somethin’ o’ yours. Organics ‘ave a ‘ard time gettin’ their fluids back once they’re drained, I hear.”

The chilling threat, spoken by a sickening abomination while pleasant jizz floated in the air was almost more than my sanity could take. I talked. I told him everything. I confessed my meeting with Ypma and the androgynous overseer. I confided in him the errors I’d made with the crane operator. I even admitted my lingering contemplation of the dashing lad’s offer in the basement of *Purgatorio*.

But I did not speak of the crimson vixen. Not once, not even by allusion.

The droid silenced my tirade with a gesture, stroking its stolen beard with durasteel digits as if deep in thought. The moment’s respite allowed me to better take in my surroundings and finally realize the brutal B2 had been standing behind me, unmoving like a looming statue of violence. The hydrowrench in its metallic grasp had a faint reddish hue.

I touched my head and winced. The blood was probably mine.

“Triguin’, you seekin’ some answers? Some sleuth from the Ring?” the droid finally spoke, forcing me to snap my attention back towards its lifeless gaze that still somehow managed to burrow into my soul. “I might know a droid, but that sorta information comes at a price.” It extended its hand and rubbed the mechanical digits in a gesture of credits.

I nodded, a supplicant gesture of agreement and condolence as I lamented my current lack of funds. My promise of more to come once the case had been solved was cut abruptly.

“A favor for a favor,” the flesh-decked droid replied, gesturing for a passing waiter droid to fetch another glass. “It pays to keep on my good side, an’ what comes to the creds, we’ll accept a late donation. First payment free of interest, as a sign o’ good will.”

The server droid returned, placing a crystal goblet before me filled with a golden liquid, much like the one held in the macabre machine’s grasp. The droid raised its glass to a toast. My momentary hesitation vanished as I heard the B2 shift behind me.

“To lucrative partnerships and the Droid Retirement Fund,” the droid declared, raising its glass and taking a sip through the vocoder grille. I instinctively followed the gesture, realizing the industrially sweet scent of the viscous liquid only after it had already slipped into my mouth.

I coughed up the lubricant in a spray of golden droplets, bending over as I retched on the table, soiling the pristine white cloth with my bile. Around me, cruel mechanical laughter echoed, followed by the whining of heavy servos and a dull *thunk*. Blissful darkness ended my suffering.

“Wake.”

The order, as unyielding as the synthetic voice that spoke it, was enforced by a slap of durasteel back-hand against my cheek that nearly dislodged my molars. I shivered from the cold, the echoing laughter still ringing in my ears. The bulk of a battledroid filled my slowly returning vision.

“Take.”

My arm was almost yanked from its socket, something plasticity shoved into my splayed palm and then shunted back into my chest with enough force to knock the wind out of me. I gasped and wheezed, bile and lubricant mixing on my palate as BL1-TR turned around and stomped away, disappearing into the shadows of the dingy alleyway.

For a long while I lay there, on a bed of coagulated filth, before finally managing to peel myself from the decrepit and limp back among the living. I looked at the object in my hand, a simple plastoid wafer, and read the laser printed aurebesh with unsteady eyes. The wafer gave a place and a time. A quick glance at my chrono putting it three hours into the future. Just enough time to clean myself up.

Midnight had passed, alongside a pot of caffeine and two, three shots of cheap liquor. No point in wasting the good stuff, when the rancid taste refused to leave my mouth. I’d brushed off the worst of the grime from my duster, straightened the brim of my trilby and given a

proper once-over to my untrusty Westar. Sliding it back into its holster, I snatched a few more painkillers for the road and chased them down with dregs from my mug.

The streets were still damp from the rain, the petrichor scent blanketing the eerily quiet streets of the nocturnal Senchi. Droplets trickled from eaves, a faint patter on the cobblestone streets. Even the technicolor vomit had been washed away and only a few struggling signs flickered and flashed under faulting circuitry. For once, there was peace on Sinchi and I couldn't have hated it more.

The oppressive stillness was unbearable. My echoing steps on the wet stones the only sound and alone with my own thoughts I feared I would go mad before I reached my destination. Conflicting memories, twisted reveries, illusions, smoke and mirrors within my mind. I yearned for the distractions I hated, to inebriate myself like the rest of the Ring and forget the nagging dread of something, something very specific, being wrong with me.

The knock, knocks, to my noggin must have cracked something loose real good.

Surviving my headspace, I made my way to the given address, a nondescript street corner of no particular import. A cool wind swept along the street, prompting me to pop my collar and contemplate a deathstick to pass the time. Was I to meet someone? Was something to happen? These were questions I should have raised a long time ago. The best-by date had already passed. All I could do was swallow what rancid realization awaited.

The smoke had almost burnt to my fingers when something bumped my shin. Glancing down, I shooed away the misguided mouse droid, the skittish thing beeping and whirring as it circled on the spot, chasing its binary tail. It stopped, as if to look at me and beeped again.

I realized what it was after.

Flicking the fag onto the street, I followed the droid as it weaved a path through the Ring's narrow side-streets, finally emerging to the edge of a dull rounded fixture that might have been a foundry or other industrial plant. I found it peculiar I had not known of its existence.

With a distant beep, the droid had already departed and I was left to stand alone before that permacrete colossus, its smooth bulk chipped by age and industrial pollutants. The rusted chain link fence that surrounded it proved an unworthy gatekeeper, a lack of maintenance and the saline air having corroded it to a rust-red mess that crumbled under firm touch. Breaking my way into the premises, I spied a side door that looked to have been recently used, the handle polished to a silver sheen.

Reaching the door, it would not budge, the stalwart frame as solid as the day it was forged despite its run-down stature. I contemplated my untrusty Westar, but a small panel demanded my attention. A receptacle opened from the frame, a simple indented tray that reeked of sweet iron. On instinct, I reached into my pocket, digging out a packet of condiment and smeared it upon the tray. A light flickered. Nothing happened.

I stared at the pile of red goop dripping from the narrow tray for the better part of a minute, feeling like quite the buffoon. In a moment of shameful desperation, I pulled out a second item, a piece of cheap toilet paper, and unfurled it upon the condiment.

A second light flickered. The lock bolt retracted with a hollow *click*.

Testing the handle, I opened the well-lubricated door with nary a sound and stepped into a cramped service shaft. A spiralling staircase led down into the bowels of this beast of forgotten industry, a singular pathway I had no choice but to follow.

Sensor wand in hand, I began my descent, the steep steps spinning ever deeper and deeper into the depths before a flickering light illuminated the corkscrew's end. I halted, hearing faint murmurs and the hungry flames of torches. I could smell smoke, saline earth and - condiment?

Drawing my untrusty Westar, I rounded the final bend and lingered in the shadows. What opened up before me was beyond my wildest fever dreams.

Huddled within a vast cavernous space that had once served some long-forgotten industrial function stood a gaggle of hooded figures, all dressed in tarnished white and bearing a torch. Before them, on a pedestal of repurposed milling equipment, stood a stocky figure dressed the same, in his hand a wicked knife and in the other a pale white canvas strip. At the far end of the chamber stood a trio of vast tubes, each open at the base like the pipes of a gargantuan organ. I struggled to fathom their function.

The man mumbled to the crowd, a rumbling tone that was hard to decipher at a distance, the words rising and falling like waves of the Selenian ocean and working the gathered into waves of emotion. Raising his hand towards me, I instinctively flicked the safety off my untrusty Westar, thinking my cover had been blown, but from just beyond the end of the staircase a metallic rattling was heard.

A pair of hooded figures, pushing a gurney upon which a third had been bound, emerged from a hidden doorway and advanced towards the bulbous leader. The crowd parting to let them pass, the light of the torches shifted and I thought I saw a drooping nose within the shadows of his hood.

The man on the gurney seemed calm, perhaps sedated or in a religious trance, his mumbling words slurring together, yet repeating the same phrase over and over like a chant.

"We are her children of the night."

The bulbous priest, or so I assumed his function, approached the halted gurney, repeating the phrase as he sank the dagger into the man's eye. A wet pop followed, the entranced man's pitch shifting and growing ever more desperate as the blade was pulled back with a sucking plop and the maneuver repeated on the other orb. Bandaging the wounded face with

the canvas strip, the priest spread his arms wide and beckoned the haggard congregation to observe.

The pair pushing the gurney towards the central tube, the priest followed with a dark chant that might have held some deeper meaning to the cultists or perhaps offered some reprieve to the injured for his loss. Entranced, heart pounding wildly in my chest, I could not move a muscle as I observed what happened next.

The pair pushed the gurney into the tube, his wailing words now echoing up the hollow pillar into the dark, vaulted heavens. The bulbous priest turned to address the three dozen shapes behind him and proclaimed to know the will of the Shadows. The droning rote of words continued to grow, speared by the by-now desperate wails from the blind man as he trashed in his bonds. The effect was hypnotic, the beating of an unseen drum filling my mind as the priest reached for the wall by the pipe.

A rush of air flooded the tube, flooding the room through the gap as the man screamed in horror, or perhaps religious euphoria. Torches fluttered. Robes billowed. The chanting reached a terrible fever pitch before - a dark mass slammed into the man and pulped him into a reddened paste, his screams ending in a sickeningly visceral *splat*.

For a moment there was silence absolute.

A light above the hole flickered to life and a familiar *ding* announced the turbolift's arrival as requested.

*Rest Now My Children
For Soon We'll Away
Into The Calm And
The Quiet*

The shock of what I'd just witnessed, as macabre as it was bizarre, faded slowly. The master of ceremonies turned back to his flock. Ripping open a pack of condiment, he dipped his thumb in the reddish substance and smeared it across his brow, the twisted congregation following his every action. Now reddened by the tangy substance, he spoke out to the gathered, declaring words that seemed to hold great meaning.

So tantalizingly close, yet out of clear earshot, I felt inclined to eavesdrop.

Inching closer, I managed to stay in the shadow of a support strut and then slipped behind the sturdy shelter of an industrial lathe, its rusted bulk scraping against my duster. The man's sermon continued, condiment dripping from his bloated face and in the flickering light of the lit torches, I finally caught a solid glimpse of him.

It was as I had suspected. He was the man I'd been sent to find.

"And as our savior gave her life, so that we poor sinners could one day be elevated to her divine side, so too must we honor her sacrifice and never forget our Lady of Shadows. For until the bitter end, we shall forever remain, her Children of the Night."

"We are her Children of the Night!" the crowd retorted in lockstep unison.

Picking up a strip of white cloth, the man tied it over his eyes so that tears of condiment wept from behind the blindfold. The congregation followed suite, blinding themselves *en masse* as their bloated director had done.

I realized the proceedings were soon to be concluded and with everyone momentarily blind, I saw my chance to depart. Alone against so many, I would not stand a chance if they turned hostile.

Gingerly picking my way back through the industrial workshop, I clung to the shadows like a tick while the fluttering torchlight sought to thwart my every effort. Almost reaching the modest safety of the pillars, someone broke from the formation and took off their fold.

A cry of alarm, a shiver of shock, adrenal flight amidst drawn blasters.

I ran for the stairs, hollow bolts trailing my steps. My foot landed on the first treacherous step, a bolt landed on my back. I crumpled against the concrete, chin skipping off the chipped stone. My untrusty Westar clattered upon the cold floor, slipping into the shadows. I tasted condiment in my mouth.

A flurry of motion in white robes, burly hands grasping my arms and dragging me back, back into the torchlight. My head was ringing, vision swimming as they held me pinned. The bloated man approached me, curved blade dripping with ocular juices.

“A spy!” someone called.

“A trespasser!” someone hissed.

“An offer, to the Lady!” the bloated man declared. The notion stuck.

A new gurney was rattled forth, my stunned form hauled upon it and tied down with straps of heavy leather. The chanting I’d observed from a distance, enthralling and hypnotic, now reverberated all around me. Shadows danced on the vaulted ceiling, unholy demons making merry upon my demise. Sharpening their pitchforks for my arrival.

The words flowed anew, the unseen drums beating ever faster. My numb tongue slurred every effort at parlay, beseeching beckons lost in the storm of religious dogma. I knew it would be my end.

The dagger rose up above me, the man’s bloated features high on religious euphoria. It closed the scene from my mind, blotting out the coming end and the horror of an impending death by turbolift.

bzeem

The electric hiss of an igniting plasma blade stalled all action, the hooded figures snapping around to gaze into the darkness behind them.

“That’s quite enough, *darlings*.” A soft voice, smooth as polished ice. I picked a whiff of sweet perfume.

The figure stepped from the shadows with measured, feline grace, her supple form bathed in the bloody glow of her ruby-red lightsaber. Through the shimmering haze, I saw her emerald eyes peering from her alabaster face and for the first time in years, I felt pure dread.

“You have been a very difficult man to find, my dear,” the femme fatale spoke to the master of ceremonies. “I hope you have not decided to renounce our agreement without informing me?”

As she paced forward, she parted the congregation like the seas, figures in white shifting away to let her pass as the light of torches fluttered in her wake.

“Mistress Vasano, what an unexpected...”

“Silence!” her order seemed to smother every last sound around her as an unnatural stillness descended within the vast chamber. “We will not discuss this here, but we *will* discuss it.”

“Very well, mistress. However pleases you most,” the bloated man placated, bowing low with condiment dripping from his cheeks.

“But what of the trespasser?” he gestured in my direction, the curved blade almost nicking my cheek.

“Do not worry, darling. I will take good care of him,” the mysterious woman purred, her hand gently shifting in my direction as consciousness failed me.

*Come Little Children
I'll Take Thee Away, Into A Land
Of Enchantment*

I awoke in my office, the dingy cushions of the threadbare couch pressed uncomfortably against my chin. The headache would not relent.

The night before was a blur. I think I met a girl, red hair, sweet perfume, laugh like icicles. No. There was something else. It didn't matter. Ypma kept the drinks coming, water, plain. He always knew what I wanted. Knew what I needed. It was all a blur after that.

How I ended up at the office, I couldn't tell. The pounding headache wouldn't let me dwell. I pushed myself up from the threadbare couch, heading for the scotch I kept in my drawer. Sweet perfume drifted in the air. A soft laugh in the dark, like icicles.

I turned around, hand fumbling at an empty holster.

The shape of a woman, sitting pretty on the edge of my office desk, red hair cascading down her slender shoulders, framing a face of alabaster. I stopped fumbling. She smiled.

"I have work for you," she said, taking a long drag of perfumed smoke through an elegant cigarette holder. Her ruby red lips wrapped around its slender shaft invitingly. "Are you open for business?" Each syllable was laced with sickly sweet poison.

*Come Little Children
The Time's Come To Play
Here In My Garden
Of Shadows*

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Addendum

The poem used in this fiction can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1t8-_pl1-9Q

I do not claim ownership of the work. It is merely used for framing and artistic effect.

P.S. In loving memory of our Shadow Lady, may we all forever be her Children of the Night.