

Meeting in Meridian
By Angelus

The crack of gunfire and the thunder of crumbling concrete rattled Zanna's ears as they fled for cover from the highway that was collapsing on top of them. The ground shook as huge chunks of pavement crashed into the sodden ground around them. Zanna's long ears swiveled in a panic, catching the sound of rushing wind from the falling highway and guiding their feet away from being crushed. With a shout, they dove into a hole in a rocky hillside, accompanied by a cloud of dust from the collapsed highway.

Zanna panted, catching their breath and clutching their chest as their heart raced. They hadn't been more than a few seconds out of the portal from their home world when the highway came down directly on top of them. The portal had shut before they had a chance to retreat, forcing them to flee.

Now that they had a free moment, they quickly patted themselves down to make sure they weren't missing any gear or body parts. They still had their bag, and their armor was in good shape. That was a relief at least. They breathed fully, and as their adrenaline faded, they finally took in their surroundings.

This wasn't Zanna's first trip to the borderlands. They recognized the nasty Varkid nests that populated the cave, and noted the fresh Varkid corpses that were strewn about. Most of them were sliced clean in half, an uncommon sight for the gun-bloated outer planets. "Hmm." Zanna made a curious sound and got to their feet, making sure to retrieve their collapsible sword from their bag. It wasn't a question of if they were going to be attacked, it was a question of when, and they wanted to be ready.

Their ears twitched to the sound of a shuffling footstep, and they pointed their blade in the direction before their body turned to face it. Sliding out from behind one of the larger Varkid nests was a young man with dark hair, a large coat, and tattoos all over his body. He froze in place as Zanna turned their blade to him, and he put his visible hand in the air, gesturing surrender.

"H-hey, easy there, I was trying to hide here too," he said, voice shaking a bit.

"Show yourself fully. Slowly." Zanna ordered, gesturing with their blade.

"Alright, alright. Just, don't freak out, okay?" He moved out from his hiding place, showing the rest of his body. The arm that Zanna hadn't been able to see was a huge metal limb, quite oversized, and rough in construction, almost like it was homemade. It was tarnished with age, and made from obviously repurposed steel. His jacket was closed at the front, and covered him down to his knees. Zanna made special note of the red, Siren-like tattoos he had covering his still organic right arm.

"What happened there?" Zanna asked as they looked over the machine arm. Outside the cave, they could hear the far off explosions of artillery fire.

"Oh, this?" He raised it, and the pneumatics hissed. "I was born with it. Well not born with it, I had to be cut away from my twin sister after we were born and, well, I got the short end of the twin stick, you feel me?" He gave a half smile and chuckled, giving levity to his situation.

Zanna let out a vague hum in response. "Fair enough. Now where's your weapon? I take it you chopped up these Varkid." The point of Zanna's sword was aimed at his throat, despite the few feet of distance between them. They weren't going to let their guard down yet.

"Ah, it's stuck in that nasty bug body over there." He pointed towards the back of the cave.

Zanna sneaked a glance in the direction he was pointing. An oversized sword with a single edge and a glowing, orange seam was stuck into a large Varkid body. Zanna was satisfied with how long they'd been able to look him over. They were certain enough that he was unarmed that they lowered their own sword. "Alright then, I have some questions."

"I might have answers. Gonna kill me if I get 'em wrong?" He smirked.

Zanna was annoyed that he didn't seem to be taking things seriously. "Maybe. First question. Where are we? City and planet, please."

"Planet? Ah, this is totally a prank right?" Troy grinned, seeming to brighten up. "Very funny Tyreen, I bet our follower count is going through the roof right now!" He said, looking around as though searching for something as he raised his voice to a shout.

Zanna gave him a confused look and raised their sword again. "Just answer the question!"

"Whoa, alright, sheesh! Ty must've paid you well to keep up the act like this. We're on Promethea, in the woefully besieged city of Meridian."

"Promethea? Not Pandora?"

"Pandora? Hah! That armpit of a planet isn't half as nice as this one. And there's literally a corporate war going on outside right now." There was another loud boom, and the sound of something big collapsing.

"I can't say I'm surprised by that... Who are YOU then?" Zanna lowered their sword again, and the ground shook under their feet as whatever collapsed fell to the earth.

He looked surprised. "You really don't know? It's fine, I'm Troy. I was here with my twin sister, Ty, but we got separated with all the fighting. We were trying to meet up with someone important, and I'm pretty sure she's still doing that. I was hoping I could catch up, but I don't know if I have the strength to fight my way there." Troy slumped to one side, dragged down by the weight of his prosthetic arm. "What about you? Got a name?"

"Yeah, Zanna."

"Zanna? That's a pretty sweet name. Cooler than Troy." He gave a weak chuckle.

"I guess! Regardless of how cool we sound... You need to get back to your sister, right?" Zanna asked.

Troy nodded. "Yeah. We were headed to a Maliwan outpost on the other side of the highway. With the damn thing collapsed I'll have a hell of a time getting over it. But I can't wait in this hole forever, so if you don't mind, I'm gonna grab my sword and go." He straightened his posture and shuffled over to get his sword from where he'd left it. It slid out from the Varkid carcas with a sickening slosh of bug guts. Troy gave it a twirl, and the sword deconstructed into an illuminated wire frame, then vanished.

"Ugh..." Zanna grimaced at the sound, but was always impressed by the "digistruct" technology that was proliferated across the borderlands. The act of digitally storing his physical weapon was second nature to Troy, and everyone else in this universe. Zanna sighed, and their

tail drooped as they watched Troy have to catch his breath after just lifting his sword up. They realized why he had left it stuck in the first place. "You're not gonna be okay out there, are you?"

Troy paused his march toward the exit of the little cave and looked back over his shoulder. "Probably not. What's it to you?"

"I can help." Zanna couldn't stop themselves from saying it.

"We just met. Why would you help me?" Troy sounded skeptical.

"Because you sound like you could use some help, and that's just what I do," Zanna replied. "So do you want my help or not?"

"I'd be a fool to turn it down. But we're not gonna get far with just swords, so I hope you can use a gun, when we find some." Troy peeked his head out of the cave entrance, looked around, then gestured for Zanna to follow.

Sword at the ready, Zanna joined him, and for the first time they had a moment to take in the scenery. Meridian was a futuristic city, to Zanna's perspective. Skyscrapers of concrete and glass stretched to the sky, nearly blotting it out. Bright neon lights illuminated the monolithic facades, casting a colorful but artificial glow on the paved streets below. High above the rooftops, hot artillery shells streaked orange through the air, fending off an approaching fleet of spacecraft with "MALIWAN" proudly displayed on their sleek, metallic white hulls. Troy and Zanna were standing in a muddy drainage ditch underneath the highways, or what was left of the highways. The rubble of the one that had nearly collapsed on top of Zanna effectively cut the ditch in two.

Troy sighed. "Well shit, that's worse than I thought. We gotta go over it to get to the outskirts, away from the city."

"We can do that. I'll help you up." Zanna walked up to the wall of broken concrete and asphalt. The seasoned monster hunter tapped on the rubble with the flat of their sword to make sure it was stable before they climbed up the person-sized chunks of concrete.

Troy followed and offered up his bigger metal arm. "Don't worry about being gentle, it can't feel a damn thing."

Zanna grabbed his arm with both hands and pulled up. Troy grabbed the edge of the rubble with his free hand and his boots scrambled against the edge to try and help himself up. Zanna managed to help hoist him up. Troy was looking tired already, but he noticed Zanna's gaze, and gave a tired smile. "Come on, let's keep going! Can't keep the fans waiting," he said. Zanna nodded and helped him down the other side before descending herself.

The two of them made their way through the spillway without incident. The sound of artillery fire and distant gunshots was constant and kept Zanna on edge, but Troy seemed unphased by it; no doubt a consequence of living in this universe full time. This war was just a snapshot of the violence that consumed the outer limits of civilized space.

They made their way out of the mud and up a concrete slope that connected to the road above. "Soooo..." Troy began as he slowed his pace to fall behind Zanna.

Zanna stopped and turned their head to look at him. "So?"

"You always have a tail?"

Zanna felt themselves prickle all over. Usually they preferred to hide their tail and ears, but in all the commotion, they had forgotten to. "Er-"

“Alright hold up, before you answer, I just want you to know that you don’t *gotta* answer,” he said, cutting Zanna off as he waved both of his hands in front of himself. His metal hand was quite a bit further forward thanks to the oversized limb it was attached to. “I just think it’s cool. We’ve both got cool limbs,” he finished as his mechanical arm let out a hydraulic hiss.

Troy had gone this long without bringing it up, so Zanna relaxed a little. “Yeah, I’ve always had it.” They swished it behind them, dusting the slope as they resumed the climb.

“Well it’s pretty sweet!” Troy replied with a big grin. “Hey, do you think if we got you a gun with like, a huge trigger, you could use it with your tail? Ty and I, we know some people who could do a sweet custom job with neon tube lights and a car engine!”

That was the least practical sounding gun Zanna had ever heard of, but there was something endearing about Troy’s genuine excitement. They chuckled in spite of themselves. “At this point I’d take just about any gun. The gunfire is definitely getting louder,” they said as their ears twitched, trying to pinpoint the direction of the sound.

They reached the top of the slope and looked out over the street. A few abandoned vehicles dotted the street, most of them piled up in front of a military blockade that was also abandoned.

“Well hey, we’re in luck!” Troy socked Zanna in the shoulder, which made their tail straighten in surprise.

“Ow! What?” Zanna turned to face him with a scowl, but Troy had already moved away and was kneeling down near one of the cars. Zanna caught up to him and noticed that he was kneeling over a pair of corpses dressed in blood splattered armor that had MALIWAN displayed on it.

He pried their guns from their hands and held them up like he had just unwrapped them from gift boxes. “Score!” He tossed one to Zanna with no concern for safety.

“Gah, careful!” Zanna caught the gun between their hands, avoiding the trigger. It was a sleek and futuristic SMG, with some glowing blue parts indicating it was equipped with a Shock infusing module.

Troy had chosen a handgun for himself, with a red glow indicating Fire. He grabbed the frame of a vehicle nearby with his mechanical arm and pulled himself to his feet with a grunt. He looked unsteady for a moment and had to catch his breath. “You know,” he said, pausing with a winded huff, “These Maliwannabes are total chumps, but their tech is top notch.” He stood back from the looted corpses and pointed the gun down at their heads. He pulled the trigger, and the gun revved up for a moment before firing a bright hot shell into the helmet, lighting the whole body on fire. “Haha! Hot damn, am I right? Get it? Hot? Ahhh...” Troy was proud of himself.

Zanna gave a little snort and turned away from the burning body as the armor and flesh cooked off. They picked a nearby vehicle for their target, aimed for the body, and fired. The SMG charged up for a moment, before firing a volley of bright blue streaks that impacted the car’s metal body with a sizzle of electricity. The electrical surge caused the headlights to flicker on and off until they burst into a shower of sparks and glass.

“Ooohh, nice! That was sweet.” Troy was watching Zanna from just over their shoulder. Zanna could hear him taking heavier breaths than when they met.

"Thanks. Hey, you okay?" They asked, turning to face him. He looked tired. His cocky smile wasn't as wide, and he was leaning to one side because of the unbalanced weight of his body.

"What, me? Yeah, just a little worn out from climbing that embankment. I'll be fine! We just gotta meet up with Ty and I'll be good." He nodded, as though trying to convince himself that he'd be fine as well.

"Mmh... Alright. Well you know where we're going, so take the lead."

"Yeah, I got'cha. Past this roadblock is a base of operations Maliwan set up for this siege operation. That's where we were headed before things went to shit." Troy straightened his posture, seeming to regain some energy before he resumed leading Zanna to their destination.

"A Maliwan base? Why were you headed there?" Zanna followed, but their tone was wary.

"For a meeting, like I said!"

"With who?"

"Well telling you now would ruin the surprise!" Troy laughed off the question.

"I'm not too fond of surprises." Zanna pushed the question.

They were approaching tall, white metal walls that had obviously been recently erected, as they didn't match the surrounding architecture at all. There was a single entrance visible, and it was sealed up with a barrier of pure energy. Guards were posted on either side, both dressed in Maliwan armor.

"Look, it'll be fine alright? Trust me!" Troy said, about to eat his words.

"Halt you two! This is a restricted area!" One of the guards shouted at Zanna and Troy, his voice mixing with static as he shouted through a speaker in his helmet.

"Hey hey whoa, I'm supposed to be here," Troy said as he sauntered up to the guards, both of whom lifted their weapons and pointed them at him. He stopped in his tracks and put his hands up. "Whoa! Come on, I have a meeting with Katagawa, I'm sure my sister already came through here?"

The guards interrogated Troy. "That so? What's your name then, you Bandit-looking punk?"

"Troy, obviously. Troy Calypso?" He sighed and unzipped his jacket. He revealed a pair of red glowsticks hanging from chains around his neck, as well as a slim but muscled torso. He was shirtless, and his chest and abs were covered by a huge, black-inked tattoo that had "CALYPSO" done in a thick, angular font.

"Hmm... Lemme check." The guard muttered. He went silent, but his head bobbed as though he was speaking. Zanna was standing back, not wanting to get any guns pointed at herself.

A few moments later, a large screen above the energy barrier turned on, and framed in the center was a pale man with perfectly quaffed hair. He was dressed in a suit jacket with a button up shirt and a sharp tie, with a Maliwan logo embroidered on the shirt collar. "Well well! If it isn't my expected guest. You're late Mister Calypso!" He spoke in a voice that was trying to be friendly, but sounded quite fake.

"I know Katagawa, but I'm here now. Is Ty with you?"

"Well-" Katagawa was cut off as the camera jerked and was twisted around to face a young woman with white hair and a studded jacket collar of intimidating size. Her face was brimming with excitement as she greeted Troy.

"Well heeey, you're alive! That's such a relief, I thought I'd lost my favorite brother and media manager!" She spoke quickly but clearly. Katagawa grumbled some complaints in the background about having the camera taken from him.

"Ah, hey Ty! Yeah, I had a little help getting around from this one back here. Zanna." Troy jerked his head back to Zanna, who gave a halfhearted wave. "So, can you let us up?"

"Well I woould, but you see, Katagawa here isn't convinced of the strength of our family! So I was hoping that while I hold him hostage, you and your new friend could demonstrate our power by, oh, killing everyone in that camp? Have your new friend there help too~" Tyreen said, sounding joyous.

"Wait, what?" Katagawa was heard off camera. There was a bright blue glow off the side of the screen, and Katagawa screamed in pain.

The guards immediately became hostile and fired on Zanna and Troy as they shouted orders to one another. "They've got the boss! Get them! FIRE!"

"Shit!" Troy defended himself, using his metal arm to eat a few bullets as he fell back into cover.

"Fuck!" Zanna dove back under a short road barricade as elemental bullets flew past.

"Don't worry Kata-douchebag, I need you alive," Tyreen said, looking off camera towards him, her voice still playing over the speakers on the screen. "But your soldiers are expendable. Oh!" She turned back to face the battle that was breaking out. "Oh oh oh, Troy! Be sure to broadcast the slaughterfest to all our followers! Good luck! See you up here soon!" The screen shut off and the barrier to the encampment was disabled as more soldiers poured out into the street in formation, guns at the ready.

"Damnit Ty!" Troy cursed under his breath and readied his gun, peeking out from cover and taking a few shots. "Sory Zanna, Ty can be kinda... like this!"

"Like what, trying to get us all killed?" Zanna yelled with an angry scowl as they sprayed shock bullets from their clip over the top of their cover. "I hardly know what's happening!"

"Just survive for now!"

"Fine! Follow my shots! I'll eat the shield, you torch them!" Zanna did a low run to another barricade for fresh cover, then popped out from behind it and unleashed hell on the nearest Maliwan trooper. The shock bullets from their SMG quickly depleted the enemy shields, and Troy followed up with flaming shots from his pistol that caught the troopers on fire, making them yowl in pain as they burned.

They managed to thin out the soldier numbers with their tag team tactic, but it didn't last. Without warning, Troy collapsed with a pained groan, falling onto his side. "Augh..."

"Shit, Troy! You hit?"

"No! I'm just... I'm burned out..." He tried to push himself upright, but just collapsed again.

"Damnit, just stay down then, I'll finish them!" Zanna reloaded their gun and grabbed their sword, extending it to full length. The blade was made to cleave hide as tough as armor. If

they could shoot out the enemy shields, the sword would be able to get through the armor. Hopefully.

Zanna vaulted over cover, firing at the Maliwan troopers until they saw the telltale flash of their personal shields going down under the strain of the shock bullets. Zanna moved fast, darting side to side to throw off the aim of their opponents as they closed the distance. As soon as they were within striking range, they lifted their blade and cleaved it through the nearest trooper. The blade ripped through the armor, flesh, and even bone, splitting the trooper into two at the waist. The resulting spray of blood distracted the remaining troopers, and that moment was all Zanna needed. With a few deft sweeps, they killed the few remaining troopers, and their bodies slumped to the ground around Zanna.

Zanna was left panting, and they looked around just to be sure that there was no one else left. Once they confirmed this, they ran back to Troy to check on him. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm hanging on." Troy winced, but he was alive. "Help me up?"

"Sure." Zanna got down and put Troy's organic arm around their shoulder, and helped him to his feet. It was a bit awkward, with Troy being taller, but he was able to limp along toward the camp.

As they approached, a Fast Travel point inside the encampment lit up, and Tyreen appeared from the light inside. She looked over at Zanna and Troy, obviously sizing Zanna up before speaking. "Well you two sure did a bang up job out here!" She held her arms forward, inviting Zanna and Troy to approach, but Zanna noticed the blue tattoos that covered half of Tyreen's body. She was a Siren. "And hey, thanks for taking care of my brother, that means a lot to me," Tyreen said, though there was a tinge of sarcasm to her voice. "You wanna hand him over?"

Zanna looked at Troy, and he gave an affirming nod. Cautiously, they helped Troy over to Tyreen. Troy reached out and grabbed Tyreen's hand. Sparks flew between them, and their Siren tattoos glowed; both Tyreen's AND Troy's. Zanna's eyes widened in surprise as Troy straightened up and took in a hearty breath, looking recharged. He could stand on his own now, again.

"What... What's going on here?" Zanna asked, taking a step away from the twins.

"Oh, did Troy not tell you? Sheesh bro, so rude." Again, sarcasm.

"I mean, I told them I was meeting someone and that I was separated from my sister. They didn't ask about the tattoos!" Troy explained.

"Well yeah, most people don't expect a male Siren, I bet they thought they were fake, hah!" Tyreen taunted. "Anyways, now that you two took out this camp all by yourselves I'm sure Katagawa will listen to our demands now. Isn't that great Troy?"

"Oh, so we got him after all? Hell yeah! This wasn't the plan, but hey, it all worked out." Troy looked over at Zanna with a smile, and a fingergun. "Thanks for the help!"

"So since you made yourself useful, I'm not gonna drain your energy and turn you into a lifeless husk," Tyreen said, casually. "Instead, I'm going to give you an opportunity to join our family! The Children of the Vault could use a dedicated warrior like you."

Zanna's head was spinning. Too much had changed since the last time they were in the borderlands, and they couldn't figure out just what kind of mess they might have assisted with. People fighting against the corporations was a good thing, but it seemed more like the Siren

siblings were trying to take control of them. “I, uh...” They knew they had to pick their words carefully. “I appreciate the offer but, I’m not really from... around here. I need to get back home.”

Tyreen frowned. “Y’see, I know I phrased that as an offer, but it wasn’t *really* an offer. You can join us, or-” She lifted her tattooed arm.

“Hey. Ty.” Troy put his metal hand on her arm and made her lower it. Tyreen looked over at him, fuming, ready to shout, but he didn’t give her the chance. “Ty! They really saved my ass, okay? Just... Let ‘em go.”

Tyreen and Troy stared each other down, and Zanna stood, rooted in place, not wanting to make the wrong move when faced with a Siren whose powers they didn’t quite know. After a perilously long stare-off, Tyreen rolled her eyes in defeat and sighed an overly dramatic “UGH. Fiiiine. Turn tail and get the hell out of here before I change my mind, alright?” She waved Zanna off and turned her back to them.

Troy gave an apologetic look and a shrug, but Zanna merely frowned and turned to leave. They knew that, deep down, what happened here wouldn’t effect their own world, and that it was better not to worry about the things to come to the Borderlands; but they couldn’t keep themselves from worrying about what they might have done by trying to help a lost brother reunite with his sister.