

DAY OF A NEW DAWN

The Bellevue skyline, Dawn decided, looked like the instant crystal kit she'd grown on the kitchen counter in elementary school, all bluish chunks and reflective chips stretching to a spring sun. Below her office's level, a haphazard grid of streets and flat-top stores provided a base for the scene, and she tried to discern in the glass forest an angle of glare, a mirrored cloud, a particularly sharp girder that might electrify her brain into full gear. This action was necessary because behind her was a computer monitor displaying an article that needed to be fully edited by the end of the day—among five more—and for the last ten minutes, hunching over into its plastic glow had produced nothing but two comma splice corrections and a paragraph indent.

It wasn't that the piece was so good she was at a loss for input; it was that it was so bad, she didn't know where to start. The problem wasn't one of a vague opening paragraph or a scattering of unresearched claims, but a deep and coursing wrongness running from start to finish. Really, the title summed it all up: “Why *Call of Duty* is the Greatest Game Series of All Time”

Well, what about *Super Mario Bros.*? *The Legend of Zelda*? Hell, she could even see *Uncharted* up on that podium, as tired as she found its combat system and plots. But *CoD*? It was the kind of headline that made a tiny chunk of her brain (it felt like somewhere over her right ear, where a sheave of red highlights curled around a dented lobe) want to slap the Rubix Sphere by her mousepad across the room. It wasn't so much the stance being espoused as the mentality she knew lay behind it: page hits. Whether the guy who wrote this thing (one Nick “Ninja” Jameson) believed his own words or not didn't matter; the site's readers would click it to have their opinions stroked or to see how someone could back up such a ludicrous boast, meaning advertisers' dollars either way.

At least, that was the justification passed down from corporate, and for as much lush pearl-gray carpeting and hardwood shelves as her corner of the building allowed, there wasn't much she could do to change protocol anymore without a potential dip in readership getting thrown in her face. After all, how could she prove that Jameson *didn't* believe “Realism and Giant Explosions” was a valid discussion point? Or that the new kid who wrote “I'm Fine With Cleavage in Armor (And You Should Be Too)” last week *wasn't* a well-intentioned supporter of equality, instead of a misogynist twerp who lived in his parents' guest room? These days, her job was basically to check for grammar, clarify inaccurate statistics, and make sure no *excessively* offensive remarks were buried in the text. After that, it went upstream (well, down the hall) to Robbie and the rest of the Design Editors, who'd spruce up the layout and font composition for max appeal once it appeared on the RobotNews homepage.

Dawn scoffed quietly; she'd gotten caught up in another intense internal debate, where every

concern that entered her head was met with a fully-articulated counterpoint. She pictured it as miniature cartoon version of herself on her shoulder, with exaggerated proportions and an overexpressive face, threatening to whack her with a paper fan if she kept flip-flopping. Obviously, if she resented working for RobotNews *that* badly, she would never have risen to the position of “Arch-Manager” (as the strawberry-shaded desk plaque so powerfully reminded visitors, in jagged faux-8-bit lettering).

She spun the chair one-eighty and jiggled the computer's mouse, banishing the dreamy screensaver in both her mind and the 34-inch monitor for the Word document's impartial whiteness. Flicking the scroll wheel, she confirmed the thing was four pages long, single-spaced; a quarter of that was embedded images, but with as little sleep as she'd had last night, it still felt like a Herculean task.

She regarded the Companion Cube-shaped clock up on the wall to her left—a few ticks shy of noon. The sight was comforting; despite how much ever-evolving technology her work entailed, she always preferred traditional clocks. It was something about the way you could measure time by space, thinking not about the slow mutation of a single electric readout but when “the big hand and little hand reached the top.” It was more tangible, more manageable time. Also, it was lunch time.

One floor down, a bank of full-wall windows cast azure-tinted light across chairs and a rainbow of round tables, already well-stocked with Dawn's coworkers. Her usual spot, two-and-a-half windowpanes from the end of the cafeteria queue, was clean and unoccupied. As she set down her tray, Lauren suddenly came zipping up through the chatter with a sack lunch.

“Oh hey, perfect timing!” the girl exclaimed. She swerved into the opposing seat, and the city's glow was lost on her black v-neck and empty cosmetic glasses as she began to precisely extract the bag's contents. “Wow, some weather today, huh?”

“Sure is,” Dawn said, offering an earnest smile before picking up the chicken burger for a well-deserved bite. She tried to avoid eye contact as she did, focusing instead on the gray-green checkered pillars spaced about the room, the bobbing shoulders of the Mail Room crew in discussion, the sound of “Time to Pretend” by MGMT straining from the grate-like ceiling speakers... but the edge of her vision still caught Lauren giving her a concerned look.

“I just don't know how you can eat that,” she said.

Dawn swallowed at her with confusion, until it occurred her that every other time they'd eaten together since Lauren was hired earlier that month, she had bought a salad or homogenous-looking sandwich. Dawn regarded Lauren's resolutely vegetarian course: a Ziploc's worth of grapes, hummus and sprouts on wheat bread, an apple, and bottled water. “To each her own,” Dawn supposed.

“But those chickens...” Lauren frowned, twirling a knot of her neck-length auburn hair with a

nervous finger. Dawn considered casually responding with how the minerals required to produce computer hardware were often obtained by supporting African guerrilla wars, but mini-shoulder-Dawn shot the thought down (with a laser gun) before it could reach her mouth. As much as possible, she tried to keep Killjoy Avenue a one-way route.

Perhaps sensing herself how pointless the observation was, Lauren looked over her shoulder, whereupon her posture straightened up and she waved timidly at someone. When her focus returned to Dawn, it was as if she'd just seen the visual equivalent of an energy booster. "So," she whispered, "what do you think of Chris?"

The Marketing guy? Dawn tilted her head to reveal the thin-jawed, unshaven object of Lauren's attention. "I don't," she replied.

"Really?" The denial only made Lauren happier. "Could introduce me to him, then?"

Dawn took a swig of lemonade and mulled the thought over along with the tartness submerging her tongue. "Oh..." she finally said. "Yeah, no problem." She put down the glass and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Hey, Chris!" she called.

"Dawn!" Lauren hissed, hunching forward. "What the hell—"

"Don't worry, I met a guy like this once," she lied. As Chris looked up in their direction, she beckoned urgently. Chris said something assuring to his circle of associates and departed.

"What's up?" He said as he approached the table.

"Watch my food for me, would you?" Dawn asked, rising from her seat. "I'm going to go out and get some fresh air." Then, as she moved free of the table's orbit: "This is Lauren, by the way." And, at the last second: "She's awesome."

As the whirring grumble of distant traffic played over the next block's pedestrian chatter, Dawn sat on the decorative concrete wall bordering the building and tried again to find a quiet moment for herself. It wasn't necessarily a sonic loudness she'd been having to endure for the past few weeks, but a loudness of feelings; like dipping her hand into a strange paper bag (she envisioned Lauren's organic buffet), she got the vague shape of things but couldn't be certain what she was—or should be—touching on. Obligation? Insecurity? Impatience? Maybe she just needed to rummage around more.

Then she did, and she realized that the episode in her office had been an emotional smokescreen, a subconscious sleight-of-hand. The mini-Dawn was wearing a magician's hat and coattails now, looking nervous indeed for having been found out! Had videogame journalism always been so padded with shameless, petty op-eds and lists, or did it just seem like it was better in the early 2000s because she was wide-eyed enough to buy into the hype? *Obviously*, none of that mattered. But

then the question was, how *much* didn't it matter, and in what way? With extra conundrums like that tacked on, she'd hardly solved anything at all.

Then there was Lauren. Had that been a rude thing to do to her back in the cafeteria, or a very helpful one, a kindness the fog of deadlines and conferences would've prevented Dawn from seeing the simplicity of on any other day? She worried that was still her dangerous habit, though, acting on impulses snatched from a slow boil of annoyance and amusement. When she got caught shoplifting a six-pack of soda at fifteen, her mother furiously explained to her that the difference between a child's decision and an adult's decision was whether you were thinking about the future or only the here-and-now, and that she was just going to be a spoiled little girl forever if she didn't shape up. Dawn had been truly embarrassed, and she never wanted to see her parents that angry again, so she stuck by her vow of apology... but in some other tiny chunk of her brain (this one felt like it was right over the base of her neck), she wondered if what really mattered was if anybody called you on it. Alone upon the barrier now, with dust devils of cigarette ash and pollen eddying around her heels, she considered that maybe it was also like with that chicken burger, or the microchip warfare: no matter how terrible the process sounded, it was all in the results.

After all, Lauren was the kind of person Dawn was rarely *eager* to see, but at the same time, she could never quite pinpoint a logical reason to dislike her company. The intern was young, sure—23, if she recalled correctly—but Dawn never had been one to resent youth. Then again, “had been” implied the past, and that was the one thing she was guaranteed to keep building up more of as time passed. Was 32 the official age where quirky, idealistic college grads became unfrienable? It wasn't as if she'd never been one herself; in 2003, when she still had a shoebox full of floppy drives and RobotNews was her top Windows XP bookmark instead of the name on her paycheck, her social calendar was practically dripping ink with protest marches, walkathons, and pie-eating competitions. By junior year, though, she'd found a calling in writing for the university newspaper, and from there grew the decision to combine her skill with the pastime she and her brother had shared for a decade under the same roof: a spot as a guest contributor on www.robotnews.com.

And here she was, ten more years later, reviewing copy and penning weekly editorials for one of the web's preeminent gaming and general geek info sites. As for her brother, the chef-themed site mainstay Dan “Cooke” Brooke? She pulled out her phone from her jeans, unlocked the screen, and flipped horizontally to the overlay with the least apps to unveil the wallpaper. There he was, his tuxedo-clad arm around Allison, brilliant in her bridal whites against a polished and paneled church wall. Dawn stood to the left in her best scarlet dress, toasting dual flutes of Chardonnay to the cameraman. Between the beaming presence of Dan and Allie and her own oblivious-seeming cheer, it was as if she

had been Photoshopped next to the happy couple.

So if it had been three weeks since the wedding (and two since the honeymoon in Cozumel), then why did she still feel like she looked in that photo—accomplished, yet slightly dizzy, and out of place in her younger brother's life? There had never been any animosity between the two of them, let alone Allison (with whom Dawn had shared a coffee or two in the days leading up the ceremony, and discovered they both liked the Steve Miller Band and the color red). Still, ever since she'd left grad school, there was this uncomfortable sense of reticence when she would contact Dan outside of an explicit family gathering; it didn't come across as a “telemarketer” level of unease on his part, but more “polite stranger on the bus.” It was as if her counsel and concerns were something he'd keel over from in a concentrated dose, like a rich spice (could you have a spice overdose? Like with cinnamon or something? She didn't know anywhere near as much about cooking as him). Of course she loved Dan—with the fiery compulsion that only an older sister could—but the discontent her voice seemed to bring had kept her from speaking to him since the evening that picture was taken.

Marriage, she thought plainly. Or rather, as with Chris from Marketing, she didn't think. Not all the time, that was, but the word was never far from mind. A woman with an industry post as high as hers garnered lots of respect from “girl gamers” trying to break the glass ceiling (hence Lauren's quick attachment), but she'd picked up on an indirect expectation that she be ambivalent about staying single while she was at it. And she was—after a few years of male staffers and up-and-coming vlogger boys chasing her, it thankfully became known throughout RobotNews (and its associate networks) that Dawn “Won” Brooke would settle down when she was good and ready. But until the good made itself (or *himself*) apparent, that readiness was sort of bobbing up and down like an object out to sea. Her ambitions were in that mystery bag, too, and she hoped they would be turn out to be made of something buoyant, like styrofoam, and not a bundle of cloth, taking on the weight of everything that washed past it before it sunk. Meanwhile, so much was floating by her, chances drifting near and then far—and then when she experienced something like her brother's wedding? Her thoughts were always with the happiness of Dan and Allie, but when she saw them up there at the altar, the organist's last silver notes still jittering beneath the rafters, as stained-glass shadows marked out where a trail of rose petals would lead them to happiness...

Well, she didn't *not* feel anything.

She cracked the knuckles of her ring fingers; God, her skin was pale in this sun. She squinted at the clouding sky above; Washington's climate being what it was, she didn't trust a downpour to not start in the next ten minutes. So while she had full bars and a comparative amount of privacy, she decided to make a call.

After tapping the number in her Contacts, it was four rings before the pick-up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Ray! It's Dawn.” There was a tinge of hesitation in her tone; as Editor-in-chief of NerdReport.net, Ray was technically a competitor, but the professional friendship they'd struck up when Dan began starring in the site's “Take a Byte” video series was the only link she could think of to his current life.

“Ah, hey!” He replied. “You on lunch break?”

“It's more break than lunch,” she confirmed honestly. “I'm not that hungry. How's Lincoln?”

He laughed. “Link's having a heck of a day,” he said cheerfully. “Kid's got a lot of energy, but you know, that's how they say it is at this age. Anna has him playing with pots and pans in the kitchen, so he shouldn't get into too much trouble.”

“Cool, that's good.” Dawn smiled at the thought of the gap-toothed toddler with a saucepan on his head, wielding a wooden spoon like a scimitar. “Oh, and tell Anna I said 'hi,' for sure.”

“For sure,” Ray repeated.

There was a brief yet uncomfortable silence, during which Dawn could hear the alluded-to clanking and clambering in the background on Ray's end. She found her voice again. “Ray, do you think you could do me a favor?”

“Uh, alright,” he said. Then, with an audible smirk: “It's not about company secrets, is it?”

“No,” Dawn replied with mock seriousness, before her tone softened again. “No. I was just wondering if...” She sniffed. “Could you just call Dan and see how he's doing? Let me know what he says?”

“Yeah...” Ray said gently. “I can do that. Everything okay, Dawn?”

“It's fine,” she said quickly. “All fine. I've just been hitting a busy streak over here, and I know if him and I get to talking, we could go on a while, and...” She sighed. “Something like that. Don't tell him it was me who asked, though, okay? And you can even text me, if you want, later.”

A complimentary hesitation returned from Ray. “Will do,” he affirmed at last.

They said their goodbyes, and Dawn regarded her phone's display: it was a little after 1:15. Time to go back upstairs.

Hope, she considered as she strode back to the glass double doors, frosted with the icon of a box-headed robot reading a newspaper—hope was what this all came down to. She hoped Ray and Anna and Lincoln were happy together, as she hoped Dan and Allie were. She hoped Lauren and Chris could find some kind of connection. Above all, though, she hoped Dan wasn't going to end up like her, and try to juggle a dozen things just to keep the comfort of the routines he was already accustomed to.

Yet now, in the elevator, it felt like Dawn's worries had turned into determination, her buoyancy rising along with her body—until, in a flash, she had lifted clear of that dark water. If this was another moment of blind ambition, a confidence high, then she had to ride it—for *good*—before it was too late.

Back in the building, she bypassed the cafeteria; the food could still wait, and hey, Chris could have some of her fries if he wanted to. No, the first thing she did was reenter her office and shake the mouse, whereupon Mr. Ninja Jameson's *Call of Duty* article arose from its digital coma. In a separate window, she opened her email account, and typed in the address he'd send with the submission.

Subject: RE: Why Call of Duty is the Greatest Game Series of All Time

Dear Mr. Jameson,

Although we thank you for your most recent submission, we regret to inform you that it does not meet the RobotNews content guidelines as outlined in the most recent Editor's criteria. We apologize for the confusion, as the current criteria posted online have yet to be fully updated.

Please feel free to contact me directly if you have any specific questions about the status of your submission. In the meantime, we wish you luck with further Robot-tastic writing!

She added her “Sincerely” signature and hit *Send*. It was for the best. She'd figure out what “updated Editor's criteria” were later; for now, she was just going to take the day off early. Let the bean-counters sort out the details; she could work from home, and everyone knew it.

...

That evening, as her tall apartment windows heaped the sunset's red gleam onto the throw rug and L-shaped couch, Dawn had just finished editing the day's remaining articles. Fortunately, none of them had been so blatantly lame; on the contrary, the latest submission, “There's No Such Thing as Fake Geek Girls, Bro” (by “Margo Case”), could have come from her own keyboard.

She was about to set her desktop to Hibernate and go make dinner when her phone *pinged* by the Post-it dispenser. She picked it up, and saw two new texts; the first was Lauren's, and it looked like she'd missed it from when she was on the bus earlier that day:

“Chris n me r gonna go a movie this weekend omfg :D”

Dawn smiled; there was no “thank you,” but she could read between the lines. The second message, which alerted her to the first, had been sent right now. It was Ray's:

“Dan's doing great. Sounded kinda shaky on the phone but I came over to help him move his stuff to the new house later and he outshined us all!”

So he was already moving out! Shoot... a new home, new responsibilities. But she always knew he had it in him. Still, if he was going to try to run a web show and a reporter's position on top of his chef's job...

She was about to call Ray back when a new message blipped into her email account on the

desktop. The title was “The Final Course”; the sender was cookebrooke@robotnews.com.

Setting down the phone, she clicked the message. All it said was “I’m ready, sis.” Dawn opened the attached document, and started to read:

Five years ago, if you'd told me that I'd be one of the most acclaimed and respected videogame journalists in the industry, I'd have called you a few eggs short of a dozen. And I'd still do it, because Dan Hsu has more awards, and I can never seem to interview Shiguru Miyamoto without getting fixed up on a date with the sidewalk by security.

In all seriousness, though, I'm here to announce—as you've no doubt heard rumors of on the forums here and there—that this post marks my official retirement as a columnist and reporter for RobotNews...

When she finished, her mind finally felt clear, for the first time that day—if not longer. It wasn't that the piece was so bad she didn't know where to start. It was that it was so good, that it had such a deep and coursing rightness from start to finish, that there was nothing to say. Somewhere on her shoulder, mini-Dawn nodded her bubbly head in assent.