

Americrat: In Another Life

It's a rare sight to see River Market District dark, but it's 5AM and even the Rivierans need to sleep. Ed looks out across the streets of Sky-City from the rooftop of the hostel, hands folded across his knees. A mysterious figure in a dirty trench-coat walks up the ladder and slowly approaches him.

Drez: "Mind if I sit there?"

Ed: "Oh. I- uh yeah, go ahead."

Drez sits down beside Ed and takes out a box of cigarettes and a lighter from his coat pockets. He lights one and places it on his lips.

Drez: "Want one?"

Ed: "I don't smoke."

Drez: "Eh. Suit yourself."

A lone squirrel trots across the tiles. Drez puffs out a circle of smoke. Ed stares into the darkness in silence.

Ed: "You ever feel like you're fading away?"

Drez: "Hmm? What do you mean by that?"

Ed: "You know, like you feel like you're awake, but you know you're not, then you try to wake up and you wake up, but you're still sleeping, then it happens again and again and I-I... I don't know, I don't feel real anymore. Is this real?"

Ed stares blankly at his hands; he looks clearly disturbed. Drez raises an eyebrow, but gives him a sympathetic smile. With a harrumph, he puts his hand on the Ed shoulder.

Drez: "I don't know, man, but *I* feel very real... well, at least my head does! A tip to the wary: don't drink Tequila and Vodka together."

No answer. Drez sighs. He flicks his cigarettes down onto the ground, two storeys below.

Drez: "And you just can't fight it anymore, can't you? So, how long has this been going on?"

Ed: "Every night, ever since what happened. And each night I feel like a little more bit of me fades away..."

Drez: "Sorry, we haven't really introduced. My name is Drez... and I didn't catch your name."

Ed: "It's Ed. Just Ed."

Drez: "Okay, Ed. I know we hadn't started on the right terms tonight, but I did hear everything you had to say, and I believe that you and I, we are similar men. We both shroud ourselves with mystery to hide the darkness, to hide our weakness and we both walk the path of the outsider as a consequence. We're both self-absorbed men who style ourselves as heroes of our own dark novella, conquering all things

standing against us. Most of all, we both can't stand being forgotten; we fear the prospect of fading away..."

Ed: "But that's the thing! Every time I try to cope with this, it comes back to haunt me! The dreams, I just can't conquer it."

With a swift motion, Drez takes his hand off of Ed and stands up, his back facing the streets. A chilling wind billows through his trench-coat.

Drez: "Let me tell you something, Ed. Throughout my life, I have found that there are two kinds of heroes. There are some who develop their character when opportunities stack up one by one on them; a conventional hero, of a sort. They slash out any obstacles placed in front of them, and through experience, develop bonds, obligations and qualities that make them shine in the world. Then, there are those who are become obligated to create opportunities for themselves. They'll never have the circumstances or the heroic qualities to prove their worth; instead, they have to blaze out a path for themselves."

Ed: "-and let me guess, we're not conventional heroes..."

Drez: "No. No, we're not. We fight for our worth, and it's a hard life being that second type of hero, to understand that nothing will come for you unless you come to them first. You begin to feel like you live in an artificial world you've created. You become tired of the forced interactions, of pressing on the NPCs that fill your world as you level up, and you just really wish that some kind of would show up without you being its progenitor."

Ed understands.

Drez: "It's harder to create than to react, and sometimes you just wish you'd fade away... but that's the thing: we know we *won't let ourselves do that*. As we choose the decisions we take, we become proud in the path-blazing we've done, and trust me, it'll be a cold day in hell when I stop and roll-over for someone else to lead me on my journey in life."

Drez lies back down beside Ed, eyes in the stars.

Drez: "I know it might be hard to understand for someone like you, me being the same kind of self-absorbed guy and all, but I just want you to know that everyone's been affected by the Tribulation Crisis, not just you. And I'm not talking about the revolts or the walls; I'm saying something more has changed in America... an attitude kind of change. Back then, we didn't mind being just a cog in the machine. Heck, we relished at being anonymous; it gives us power, confidence and a sense of invulnerability."

Ed: "I've always hated what people become on the Internet. They think no one's watching, but in fact as you write, billions are looking at your words being recorded for the ages."

Drez: "And that's why the Internet was a lie. It always was, and once we realized how vulnerable we were, when the walls of privacy started coming down, we started to revolt against what kept *really* us safe and well, we started to outrage – and that's what ruined us. We couldn't keep it together anymore, not even that veneer of trust that could've been our saving grace. Hell, it's only been three months! I guess part of me is ashamed of what we were and what we've become upon the wake of Tribulation, and that's why I shunned the world around me. That's part of the reason I became who I am."

Another cool breeze reminds the two men that it's almost October, and with a quick zip! Ed zips up his coat.

Ed: "To be fair, the Internet was taken down during the Trib..."

Drez: "And is the Net better? Sure, no more 'spying', but everyone knows your every move is monitored. Don't want another leak starting another revolt, no?"

Ed: "I'm not saying it's bad... I'm just saying – well, I'm who I am because I never really cared for talking to other people. I guess I'm just not as jaded as you are, but I'd say I understand your point of view, and like you said, we're both similar that we were put in a path that needs to be walked alone, but that doesn't seem to be a good enough reason to shun the world around us. Believe me, I'm a very socially inept guy, but I can't live without talking to anyone..."

Drez: "No. You're right. You should talk to somebody, just not *these* people. I've given up trying."

Ed: "Well, now you're just being paranoid again, not to mention a little rude. "

Drez sighs.

Drez: "Have you ever listened to them? All they ever talk about is a bright future, bright dreams and everything bright; bright; bright! Why can't they enjoy the dark for a while? Enjoy the fainter lights of life, like y'know, drinking and smoking and other stuff--"

Ed: "But don't you ever wonder if you could change the world? I mean, that's what I thought I would do, back in the day, and I'm sure all they've been doing is trying to make this world better."

Drez: "HAH! Not unless it's back to the way it was... I'm sure you agree, or you'd be one of *them* too. You see them, trying to make integrated city-states a thing; they're dearly missing what they've broken, but they couldn't swallow their pride to bring it back. Nothing ever comes out of blind idealism, I say."

Ed: "Amen to that."

Ed lies down beside with his hands under his head, his legs still crossed. He turns his head to Drez.

Ed: "You know, it's good to have someone to talk to when you have so much in your mind. My dreams are always nightmares these days, no matter how sweet it might be. I don't know if it's just my subconscious telling me to stop doing nothing, but it's always the same; my dreams keeps compelling me to do something, like a quest of some sort to fix what has been done. I And sometimes I just want to smile and pretend nothing's happening... know what I mean?"

Drez: "Heh. And be one of those yuppies and pretend it's all okay, that America is just as bright and beautiful as it was? Pretend that the Trib never happened? Those tanks never crushed people, and all that shit about Libertans, Equivists and City Wars isn't really going on...? But you know what, sometimes we just gotta face it that these things happened and accept it. I mean, it's not just you, one day somebody up there's bound to realize what kind of mad-shit our world has become, and he's just gonna go: 'I ain't taking this shit no more.' That mindset might just keep multiplying til' everyone feels compelled to go on a quest to get our world back, and I don't know, maybe then I'll find someone interesting to talk to. But for now, it's lonely life of a freedom-fighter for me."

Drez takes a deep breath, and lets out a white, smoke-y sigh. He looks back at Ed, he stifles a smile. The young man is fast asleep.

Drez: "You know, in another life, I'd wish you never have to meet someone like me. But it's too late for that now, isn't it?"

Drez stands up, and from his coat pocket he produces a piece of paper and a small NET-chip from his pocket. With a small pen, Drez scribbles on the paper: "NET-ID: DREZZMAN146", then folds it carefully in half. Together with the NET-chip, he stuffs them into Ed's coat pockets.

Drez: "Well, it's been nice meeting you, Ed. Heh. It's funny, you're the closest I've been to having a friend, and, well, I kinda like having someone to talk to. We should do it again sometime. Anyways, good luck on your quest, buddy."

With that, Drez disappears into the night, leaving Ed sleeping peacefully and soundly into the night.

End.