

THE FIRST TIME I SAW YOU ON NAMEK

by debbiechan

Disclaimer: I don't own DBZ

Description: Rated PG-13 for cussing (the f-word), violence, and references to sex. Humor, romance, and most characters are dead.

I wrote this fic for a contest at Phantomscribe72's B/V group on Yahoo. The challenge was to write an A/U get-together for our favorite pair on the planet Namek. If you know my stuff, you know I'm incapable of writing anything but canon so I came up with this very weird, weird *CANON* get-together on Namek.

Thank you, Sue, for running the contest and coming up with the challenge.

I want to dedicate this fic and its simple message (heh--you have to read it to the end to find out what that message is!) to my best friend, beta, and touchstone of sanity in fandom insanity, LisaB, and to Carla, whose support of new writers in the fandom is beyond generous and whose devotion to the fascinating dynamic of B/V gave me so much to read, think about and dream on when real life wasn't exactly making the windchimes sing. Thanks for all the midnight emails. *They changed me.*

.....

*"If you believe in something long enough, hard enough, it's sure to come true."
~Bulma in Heaven, episode 273, Japanese version of DBZ*

Vegeta's lungs died right before he did.

The scream his body had been spewing for so long turned into a faint puff of air. Then the lungs burst, silently, and the prince's heart followed. The golden aura of the *Saishyuu Saigo no Waza* technique hovered around Vegeta's lifeless form for a moment, but then it too died. Vegeta's body sputtered a little more blood and ash, cooled to a carbon statue, fell to the ground, and crumbled.

Pieces of the Saiyan prince's body blew away. Dust in a breeze.

He was dead again, but... *hadn't the green-skinned Know-It-All in a turban said it would be Oblivion this time around?* Vegeta could still think and feel. He felt the pain of his recent death in the ghostly contours of his shoulders and chest. This death so far was just like his last one; after being killed on Namek, Vegeta had endured terrible physical pain for his entire after-life sentence.

He had also endured a landscape of fluffy clouds. *Maybe, the prince thought, there is no greater Hell than this banality.*

Vegeta's spirit hung in the heavenly atmosphere. A happy little tune whistled across the blue skies. For a few seconds, hope stirred.... Kakkarot? Surely it was cosmic destiny that he and Kakkarot deserved to finish one last battle. Then, with a sinking feeling, Vegeta recognized that the whistler of the happy tune was one of those after-life demons.

"Why *there* you are! I figured a short-tempered fellow like you would be back here before long!" The demon was blue, skinny, and as mild-looking as a human. It was even wearing glasses. "Lord Enma sent me to make sure we don't lose you like last time."

"Last time?"

"You wandered away! You never even made it to the *official line*." The blue demon wagged his finger, and Vegeta felt a faint flashback to another version of himself--the bastard who had died on Namek. *That* Vegeta had been so monumentally pissed off over being murdered that his crazed soul had torn a chunk out of Snake Way and flung a few blue and pink demons into the Pool of Blood. Vegeta remembered stomping away and ending up in some limbo far, far beyond Lord Enma's official triage for the newly dead.

"Now, if you will," said the bespectacled demon, "follow me."

Vegeta stiffened his back and crossed his arms. "The Prince of Saiyans goes where he pleases." Joints in his wrists still ached from having squeezed out that last explosion of ki before dying.

"Now, now, now, don't think you can beat me up with your Super Saiyan self, because I think you're going to *like* the plans Lord Enma has for you."

Vegeta snorted. "Hell? Been there before. It was no improvement on being alive."

The demon smiled. "Oh no, not Hell. Enma's called for a special contingency. Something about a crisis in the universe, and *you*--" The demon smiled a slight smile and his gaze swept the length of Vegeta head to toe. "*You* get to have that magnificent body of yours fully restored."

**

Lord Enma peered over his desk at a trio of tiny human females. What with Buu's killer rampages going on, the Great Roll-Keeper of the Afterlife was pulling a second shift and feeling in no mood to double-check the fine print on any soul's records. These girls were headed straight for Heaven, no doubt there; there wasn't enough vanity, blasphemy or husband hen-pecking on their charts to merit them much time in Limbo. But one detail had given him pause: *Chi Chi, beloved wife of Son Goku*.

Lord Enma boomed the question: "Which one of you is Son Goku's woman?"

The female souls were locking arms. The one in the middle clenched the other two tighter to herself, and her face tensed into a visage fiercer than what Enma usually saw on candidates bound for Hell. “I’m her,” spat the little woman, “but *all three of us* are family of Son Goku, the champion of the universe! We go together to Heaven.”

Enma scratched his forehead. “Whatever. One by one or holding hands like schoolgirls. Makes no difference to me.”

Goku’s woman looked puzzled. She cocked her head to indicate the blue-haired woman on her right side. “Even *her*?”

“*Enough!*” whispered the blue-haired one. “C’mon, he said we’re all going, so let’s *get going.*”

“But Goku-sa said you couldn’t even ride Kinto’un,” said Chi Chi. “I was pure of spirit, so I hopped right on. And Videl here--” She cocked her head towards the black-haired girl on her left. “Well, obviously she’s pure or else my Gohan wouldn’t be interested in her.”

“Just because I had a *vivid imagination* when I was a teenager...” The blue-haired one’s voice was rising from a whisper to a loud hiss. “... doesn’t mean I’m not PURE. I’m a good person. Do you hear that, Mr. Big Horns? Whatever it says on my chart there, I’m a mother, and everyone knows mothers are good people.”

Sounded like a case of protesting too much, so Enma narrowed his eyes in suspicion at the woman and gave her records a quick once-over. “HmMMM. *Bulma Briefs...lying for convenience, outrageous flirting, petty thievery, brazen attempts to seduce judges and officers of the law--*” Enma paused, realizing that he himself was an officer of the highest court, and he looked more closely at the woman before him. When the feathery outlines of her soul stopped wavering, he could see that she was an exceptionally attractive human creature. Nice legs.

“That was all in the past!” The blue-haired one looked indignant. “I’m MARRIED now.”

Lord Enma looked back at the chart. “*Beloved wife of Vegeta, Prince of Saiyans.*” Enma slapped his forehead. He had almost forgotten his appointment with Vegeta! So many dead people, so little time! Today’s schedule was tighter than it had been in millennia.

“Uh oh,” said the wife of Son Goku. “Being married to Vegeta can’t be something in your favor.”

Lord Enma put up his hands in surrender. “Look, ladies. I don’t have time to assign the particulars of Limbo duty for souls right now. An unprecedented number of entrants are waiting outside. All of you go directly to Heaven, you hear? And Ms. Son Goku, I just

wanted to extend a special welcome to the wife of the universe's champion. Please send my greetings to your husband in Heaven."

And so the trio was escorted from Enma's desk and towards the gates to Paradise. Chi Chi clasped her hands to her breast and exclaimed, "I get to see my Goku-sa and my Gohan soon!" But the blue-haired woman's eyes looked watery and sad.

"What's the matter?" asked Videl. "We got the best possible sentence, right?"

Bulma Briefs did not answer. The gates to Heaven swung open, and the others stepped inside. The blue-haired woman lingered before entering. She was overheard by the demons to say a single word before moving towards her destiny:

"*Vegeta...*"

**

Bassoon was one of the very few Nameks in Limbo. Although mortal and capable of grief and failures, Nameks were among the most spiritually enlightened species in the universe, and they were, by and large, sent to Heaven promptly upon their deaths. Many Namekian souls were recycled as Kaios or other deities in the Afterworld scheme of things; they were *that* good.

Bassoon, however, as a Namekian Elder in the wake of the Second Meteor Catastrophe, had committed the foul sin of challenging the East Kai. Defying the pleas of other Elders not to petition for divine intervention, Bassoon had teleported his prayers to the Great Overseer of the Eastern Galactic Quadrant. "Please," he had begged. "The meteors have poisoned our atmosphere, and the Ajissa trees that beautify our planet are all but extinct. The committee of Elders has ruled against using the dragonballs to restore them. Please give us back our beautiful forests."

But, alas, East Kai's argument against Bassoon was that the trees did not serve any practical purpose in nourishing or protecting the planet. "The ecosystems of your planet are recovering slowly and naturally," she had said. "Nameks make their own nutrients via photosynthesis and so don't need trees as a food source. Surely you ascetic and gentle people can do without all those blue lollipops poking out of the ground everywhere." And to that remark, Bassoon made the unfortunate analogy that Namek losing its Ajissa trees forever would be akin to the East Kai losing her lovely blonde hair.

Bassoon thumbed the schedule on his clipboard. "How was I supposed to know the vain bitch wore a wig?" he grumbled. Only one tour before break, and then he could kick back with the demon workers at Enma's place and watch intergalactic fighting on the big screen.

Bassoon looked up from his clipboard. Here was his client now, walking across the clouds from Lord Enma's palace. Bassoon could see that the soul had a fully restored

body--a compact, muscular, angry body it was--and that this masculine figure was accompanied by Baba, the little witch who could shuttle souls back and forth from the world of the Dead and the world of the Living.

The angry soul kept walking until he stood eye-level with Bassoon's clipboard. Dead as any other soul in Limbo but quite an intimidating presence, the small man glared up at Bassoon. "You're a Namek," he said. It sounded like an insult.

"And you're Vegeta," said Bassoon in a deep, serious tone. "Destroyer of worlds. You slaughtered a village of seventy-six on my planet, but numbers don't matter. To end one life is to offend All Life."

"Oh stop it with all the bibble-babble!" came a screechy voice. Bassoon lowered his eyes to the tiny pink-haired woman riding on a crystal ball at Vegeta's side. "These Saiyans don't have patience with philosophical riddles. My baby brother trained Son Goku himself on Earth, and I tell you, Saiyans are stubborn. Dumb as rocks in some ways. If you think you're going to enlighten this one with your fancy talk, we'll be here until Buu--"

"Alright, alright, Baba, I get it." Bassoon liked the little witch; one knew where one stood with Baba. She wasn't pompous and vain like the East Kai. "Just how many past offenses do I have to show this stubborn Saiyan?"

"I don't know, Bassoon. Just be quick about it. Lord Enma said to make it look square on the books. Turn him over to me when you're done because I've got to skedaddle him to the Land of the Living pronto. There's a crisis in the universe, in case you haven't heard."

And the crystal ball spirited away in a flash of glittering smoke.

Bassoon met Vegeta's eyes, glare for glare. He wasn't going to take any attitude from a muscled-up dead Saiyan, no matter how important the guy was to the salvation of the universe.

"You were dead before," Bassoon said. "And you missed your penance."

"So get on with it," Vegeta said. He looked for all the world like he expected a rumble. "Didn't I kill you once?"

"Not me. I died a peaceful natural death under an Ajissa tree long before you ever showed up to terrorize my people."

"Then what business do you and I have?"

“I am an official escort of Limbo, the nethermost regions of your soul’s expanse. I am to lead you through dimensions of past and future, show you how you have sinned against others as well as your own self, enlighten--”

“Stop!” Vegeta’s hand shot up. It was the gesture he used to launch a Big Bang. “Didn’t the little witch tell you that I don’t *do* enlightenment?”

Bassoon sighed. “Don’t worry. We don’t have time for the whole treatment.” He rifled through the papers on his clipboard. “Let’s see... oh here’s something key to your development. I think we’re both going to like it here!” Bassoon tapped his finger twice on the paper before him, and it was as if he had pushed a button to change the scenery.

Bassoon and Vegeta were now standing on a bluff overlooking a meadow of blue grass. Globe-headed blue trees swayed in a strong breeze.

“It’s not--” began Vegeta, and then he was startled into silence. Bassoon noted that a great deal of the tension in the warrior’s face evaporated, and it looked as if the Saiyan was about to smile.

A small figure had walked out of the mouth of a cave and onto the short blue grass.

“Gorgeous, isn’t she?” whispered Bassoon. “Her hair is a lighter color than that of the Ajissa trees, but isn’t it as radiant? A calming, lustrous blue. Oh, even the East Kai does not understand the meaning of beauty.... I do. Simple beauty has no real purpose, of course, none at all. But beauty gets your attention, doesn’t it?”

**

Heaven was a fine place, all things considered. Bulma had thought that the pain of being separated from her family would follow her even here, but as soon as she had stepped inside the gates, the pain had lifted.

The porch swing under her creaked pleasantly with each push of her feathery soul. It was just like the swing in her mother’s rose garden except shinier. And sometimes its creaking was accompanied by tinkling bells.

There was no lack of challenge for Bulma’s mind here. Her mind felt like it was spinning and shooting sparks whenever she tried to configure all the sensory information of this amazing Afterworld. All other souls were blithely busying themselves with the task of locating loved ones. From her porch swing, Bulma watched them scurry about like children on a treasure hunt. For a while, Bulma had followed Chi Chi and Videl in a similar search--*where oh where could Son Gohan be amidst all the butterflies and fragrant blossoms of Paradise?*--but Bulma knew that if they only would stop wandering the golden pathways to sit and reason for a bit that they would figure out how to find the young man. After all, there had to be *some* logic to the pattern of the Life and Death and Inbetween....

It was Videl, that earnest little teenager, who had solved the mystery by suggesting that maybe Gohan wasn't in Heaven because Gohan wasn't dead.

Bulma smiled. *Gohan and Videl. Those two have a connection they won't be able to deny for much longer.*

The smile faded, and Bulma's brow furrowed. Her longing for Vegeta wasn't passionate and painful, but her mind could not stop obsessing. Vegeta wasn't a bad man--Bulma wanted to believe that with all the simple faith that Videl had in Gohan. But one had to look at the facts. Even without all the ... (Bulma's mind hesitated at the word because, after all, this was Heaven)... *genocide* in his past, Vegeta's recent personal history was chock-full of selfishness and bad choices.

An image flashed in Bulma's mind: the deliberate, not maniacal, intent in her husband's face as he raised his arm towards the stadium seats....

A touch on her shoulder startled her before she could relive the rest of the scene. Bulma looked up and saw Dabura, former King of the Dark World. The large bearded demon had a happy, excited look in his yellow eyes.

"Your request has been answered, Bulma my dear! Enma said *yes!* Enma said *yes!*"

"No way! You really did pull some strings with the demon workers for me, didn't you? Way to go, Big Guy! So when do I leave?"

"The emissary from Lord Enma's said you can leave right away. I would love to accompany you, my lovely Bulma--you are the most charming soul I have ever met!--but my sentence is here."

Bulma gazed into the demon's eyes. All things were possible if the formerly villainous Dabura was now picking flowers and tossing compliments. He had been sent to Heaven as a punishment, of course; Lord Enma had figured that the King of Demons would be too cozy in Hell, but Dabura was actually starting to enjoy himself here.

"So I'm really going to Limbo," said Bulma. She remembered the list of infractions that Lord Enma had begun to read from his Book of Souls, and her eyebrows rose. "Is it because I was really bad?"

"No dear, your trip to Limbo isn't a penance; it's a gift. It's because you are very good. It's because--" The former Demon King's eyes clouded with unbridled sentiment. "It's because *you love him.*"

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The sight of his wife in a younger incarnation on Namek had gotten Vegeta's attention alright. But Bassoon had let him watch Bulma for only seconds before changing the landscape again. Not that there had been much to see--a frantic girl pacing the blue meadow and gesturing wildly while screaming into a communications device: "You won't believe the trouble we're in, Papa! Our ship's kaput, there are freaks flying around everywhere looking for the dragonballs, those losers Krillen and Gohan still aren't back, and I'm bored, bored, BORED out of my mind just waiting here!"

The smile had still been forming on Vegeta's lips when Bassoon had shifted their perspective to another scene on Namek. Vegeta had then begun to watch himself--his younger, slimmer, more insane self--step into a Namekian village and incinerate the inhabitants one by one.

The firepower was laughably small compared to what Vegeta could muster now, but... one still had to admire the efficiency and technique. *Grace under pressure*, thought Vegeta. *Frieza himself was hunting me, and yet I killed so many Nameks without drawing attention to my presence.* When the last Namek exploded into black cinders, Vegeta--still wearing the smile born on his face at the sight of his wife--turned to face his guide.

"Your point?" asked Vegeta. "That I killed innocent people? On your feeble home planet I actually killed some non-innocents. I did the galaxy a favor when I disposed of some of Frieza's men on Namek."

"So you are saying you did some good on Namek?" Bassoon was still holding his clipboard. The papers were fluttering in the strong Namekian breezes. Seeing the past this way wasn't like watching it on video; Vegeta felt as if he were standing on Namek again. He felt the bite of the breeze, smelled the pungent blue foliage and the bitter aftermath of his own ki blasts as smoke wafted over the murdered village.

"All I am saying is I killed some bastards who deserved slower, more torturous deaths than the quick ones I gave them."

"Who did you kill, Vegeta?"

"Don't you know? I killed Kiwi. I killed Dodoria." Vegeta felt his bloodlust rising at the very names. "I killed Zarbon. I cut off Guldo's head, and I stepped on Baata's throat--" Vegeta stopped because, all around him, visions of those murders had started to materialize as he named them. A half a dozen or so death scenes playing simultaneously in life-size gore.... "What the--"

Bassoon looked annoyed. "Power down, Saiyan!" he snapped. "You're not supposed to have more than one flashback at a time. Your energies are screwing up my whole presentation...." He thumbed through his clipboard and started pecking his forefinger relentlessly on one page. The death scenes flickered away one by one. "Here we go. That Dodoria fellow set off the highest wattage. Let's watch that interaction, shall we?"

“That one?” Vegeta’s voice was only slightly irritated. He actually liked watching himself fight. “I finished Dodoria easily. If you want to see *strategy* along with a display of power, watch the one where I pushed Zarbon into transforming--”

Mere yards before them, a younger Vegeta wore spotless armor still unsullied by battle and had Frieza’s huge pink lieutenant cornered near a lake. With an expression that seemed almost drunk with arrogance, Vegeta took off his own scouter, dropped it to the ground, and crushed it with his heel.

The voices sounded clear as life: Dodoria was grunting in dismay over the demolished scouter, and Vegeta was saying how, since fighting on Earth, he had discovered another Saiyan who didn’t need a scouter to sense other beings from a distance. “*If he could do it, so could I. It was easy once I learned how. Although it’s probably beyond you. Because all you and Frieza focus on is power.*” The young Vegeta looked at himself reflected in the broken glass of his scouter. “*Until now, I was that way too.*” The piece of red lens splintered further in a tiny explosion under Vegeta’s gaze.

“Whoa!” Bassoon turned to the older Vegeta. “Why did you say that?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You said that you used to focus only on power, like Frieza and his men. You changed on Earth, Vegeta. Why?”

“Don’t even bother, Namek. I changed on Earth, I changed on your planet--I was nearly killed on Earth, and I *was* fucking killed on your planet. Of course I changed. It is the way of all life. But a Saiyan grows stronger each time he fights. That is how I change--my power increases.”

“Oh really? And power is still all you care about?” Bassoon moved his gaze back to the scene before them.

Dodoria had fired a round of two-handed blasts at Vegeta to no avail. Vegeta had grabbed the pink giant from behind with two arms. Frieza’s lieutenant looked panicked; his eyes were bulging. “*Don’t kill me, and I will tell you a secret--a secret about your planet, Vegeta.*”

“And so you listened to his secret, Vegeta,” said Bassoon.

“It was no secret. That it was not a meteor storm but Frieza himself who destroyed my home planet? I already knew this. I wanted to humiliate the pink bastard by watching him bargain for his life with such useless information.”

“There was pleasure in this, Vegeta?”

Vegeta didn’t answer, but the look on his younger version’s face did not show pleasure. That face listened with icy rage to Dodoria’s story, and then, just before speaking, the

Saiyan prince smirked. *“Don’t misunderstand, Dodoria. I don’t care about my planet or friends or parents. I’ve been used by the likes of you since I was a child...and it makes me very...ANGRY.”*

The blast that killed Dodoria cast a blinding light over Bassoon’s face, and the Namek closed his eyes. When he opened them, sparks were raining on his face and shoulders but apparently they were ghost sparks and did not burn him.

“Tell me, Vegeta--what is it like to kill with such anger? How does it feel?”

Vegeta was watching sparks hit his own white boots. “What do you mean? It feels great.”

“How is the feeling of killing for anger different from the feeling of dying for love?”

Vegeta’s eyes snapped up to meet Bassoon’s. “What are you talking about? I have no patience for this nonsense! How many more ghosts are you going to show me before I can return to Earth and fight Buu?”

Bassoon smiled. It was not quite a smirk but it was a knowing, superior smile. “You are not as dense as you pretend to be. You’re an intelligent man, Vegeta. A strategist in battle. The technique you used to destroy yourself and Buu--even though it didn’t work, sad to say, against the Buu monster--was quite a creative one. You didn’t come up with it on the spot, you know. You trained for seven long years on Earth before Buu even showed up, devising this technique and many others. Tell me, why would a man such as yourself--a man of infinite pride with such a fine instinct for self-preservation--conceive of this way to release all your power even if it meant your death?”

“You are a preposterous ghost, Namek! A true warrior trains to understand all his limits. A true warrior is always ready to die. After being killed so miserably on your home planet, I was not going to die again without taking out my enemy as well!”

“Oh,” said Bassoon. “I was under the impression that your recent death had less to do with a brute display of power than...oh never mind. Let’s watch another battle, shall we? You said the one with Zarbon was good. Oh look, there he is. A beautiful man. I always admired his species. Such lovely blue skin and what a delicate demeanor. One would never guess his secret strength....”

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Bulma squinted into the endless fog of the nethermost regions of Limbo. “Dammit, Baba, are you sure you know where you’re going? There are no landmarks here!”

“You always were an impatient girl,” came the screechy voice from the floating crystal ball. “I dropped that Saiyan of yours off not far from here. Left him with Bassoon, an

excellent spirit guide. We should come across them soon--unless, of course, your Vegeta mucked up everything and killed his guide or something like that.”

“You can’t kill people here! You’re just trying to scare me, old woman!”

“Eh, maybe you can’t kill them exactly. It’s all very complicated, but that Super Saiyan power can really muck things up around here. I tell you, Lord Enma’s keeping his eye on these Saiyans. No telling what those monkeys will do next....”

“Can’t we go any faster? Isn’t there someway I can climb on that ball of yours so both of us can high-tail to where Vegeta is?”

“Dearie! There’s no way you’re getting on my ball--a big girl like you would smash it for sure! Oh, look, there they are--at nine-o-clock. I told you we were close.”

“I don’t see a damn thing, Baba! Nothing! Nothing but clouds!”

“Why, they’re plain as day. That Saiyan of yours is a handsome one. A real hot wire, though. Now, that Yamcha fellow you fancied once was a sweetheart. Human at least. I suppose a smart girl like you knew what you were getting into with this Vegeta character, but the way I see it, no good can come of marrying outside your species--”

The scream that followed was so shrill Baba feared it would shatter her crystal ball. Bulma had pulled off Baba’s little black cone-shaped hat and was yelling directly into the witch’s ear. “I don’t see them, Baba! Do something! I’m obviously not plugged into whatever sort of magic you’re using to see people in this place.”

Baba covered her ears. “Oh I forgot. You can’t see them because your own personal penance isn’t the same as everyone else’s here. And please don’t yell like that--you could give an old woman a heart attack. I’m not dead like everybody else here, you know.”

“Baba,” Bulma had lowered her voice and was now speaking in a measured but panicked tone. “Are you telling me that Enma let me come all the way out here, and I can’t even see Vegeta?” Her voice became a treble-pitched whine. “Is it because I yelled at people when I was alive? *Is this my penance?*”

Baba snatched her hat back from Bulma’s hand and rearranged it on her pink-haired head. “I have no idea. I just shuttle the souls around here; I don’t make up the rules.”

**

It was gratifying to watch himself kill Zarbon again. The reptilian fool pleaded for his life just as Dodoria had.

“What a weakling,” Vegeta murmured as a display of sparks fell over his shoulders and death fumes yet again wafted across the horizon. “I looked death in the face many times, and never once did I humiliate myself in such a way before an enemy.”

“True, true,” said Bassoon. “But anyone who values his own life is inclined to bargain for it.” He shot Vegeta a look, but Vegeta wasn’t going to play. The Namek’s efforts to make Vegeta reveal personal information were getting tedious. All this Limbo stuff was an exercise in patience, Vegeta thought. Like sparring with his son when Trunks was very young--all Vegeta had to do was stand there and take punches that felt like the fluttering of insect wings on his flesh and wait until the youngster tired himself out.

Vegeta almost smiled at the memory. Trunks was still alive on Earth. Trunks was Super Saiyan now. Maybe the boy would be battling Buu soon. The boy was tireless, but even Trunks--

“Namek! I demand to see the witch! I’ve seen enough of my so-called crimes already. Just write down that I repented them *all* and assured you that I would cry *rivers* of remorse as soon as I was done fighting Buu again. Get on with it--this Limbo business is finished *now*. Or do you want to turn into fireworks like Dodoria and Zarbon?”

Bassoon did not appear the slightest bit ruffled by Vegeta’s outburst. “That was such an interesting battle with the Zarbon fellow, Vegeta. You were taunting him so. You threw dust in his face, and you danced all around him even though you could have finished him quickly. That’s not like you, Vegeta. I’m serious--if I didn’t know better, I would have to say you were showing off.”

Vegeta stared at the Namek for a moment without even blinking. There was really no stopping this idiot. “Fine,” said Vegeta. He exhaled in exasperation. “I was showing off. What of it? I was trying to terrify the humans with a display of my strength.”

“Oh but there was no need for that, Vegeta. They were terrified the moment they saw you. You said you were going to kill them and take their dragonball, and yet while you were busy fighting Zarbon, they attempted an escape and... *you didn’t kill, Vegeta*. You fired a warning shot in their direction. The little bald human and the blue-haired girl--why didn’t you kill them?”

Vegeta threw up his hands. “What? So I didn’t kill them? Maybe I was bored, maybe I needed an audience.”

“Then you defeated Zarbon, went back to the humans, took their dragonball, and still, you didn’t kill them. Was that the first time, Vegeta? Why would have there been *no pleasure* in slaughtering these innocents? You killed countless innocents before....”

Vegeta was still holding his hands upturned in a gesture of frustration. He looked at his palms. *Countless innocents*. The Namekian dragonball had been small enough to hold in one slightly cupped hand but too big to balance like that mid-flight. Vegeta had flown

holding it under his arm. He remembered the feel of it. Smooth as glass, surprisingly light, and cool to the touch. "I thought I had all seven dragonballs," said Vegeta. "I thought I was going to be immortal. I was in a good mood. I--I didn't feel like killing."

"And so you let the bald human and the girl go."

"Something about them," said Vegeta. He felt as if he was speaking to himself, and his voice was softer. "These humans looked almost like Saiyans...." Vegeta's demeanor stiffened again. "Almost." He spat his next words out with his usual arrogance. "They were worthless. If I was going to be the immortal lord of the galaxy, I didn't have to be bothered with killing worthless--"

A violent rumbling noise through the clouds made Vegeta and Bassoon both look around in surprise. It was a low roar and growing in intensity if not volume. Bassoon's clipboard was jiggling in response to the dense vibrations.

"Uh oh," said Bassoon. "I've been here for the rise and fall of two supernovas, and I've never heard anything like that before."

"Quiet!" Vegeta narrowed his eyes in concentration.

"Is it the Buu monster?" asked Bassoon. "Has he come to Afterworld already? Oh great, I don't know if we're prepared to deal with him at all. Lord Enma didn't discuss this contingency at the last meeting--"

Vegeta felt his face twisting into horror at the realization of what he was sensing. "It's an amazing power... it can't be... it's *Kakkarot!* He's ascended beyond Super Saiyan level two. He's--he's something else quite entirely!"

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The loneliness was more than Bulma could bear. In Heaven, she had not felt it, but here, among all these *stupid fluffy clouds*, where there was nothing to see, no clue as to what she was supposed to do next, and *no Vegeta* as the Demon King had promised (the former villain Dabura! What if he had just been tricking her!?), a desolate feeling clutched at her heart.

The tears had started to rise in her eyes when the rumbling sounded.

"Holy--!" Baba's crystal ball started to tremble from the vibrations, and the little witch slid right off it and onto a fluffy cloud.

There was something in the reverberating power that Bulma recognized. *Son-kun?*

"See! See! I told you so!" The little witch had thrown her tiny arms around her crystal ball to keep it from rumbling away with shock waves that were making even the clouds

shake. “It’s one of those damn Saiyans! One of them has powered up so much that we can even feel it here! Now that’s not right, I tell you. No mortal should have that sort of power. I just hope it’s the nice one, not your Vegeta who’s doing this!”

“It’s not Vegeta,” said Bulma. “And even if it were, there wouldn’t be anything to worry about.” She was suddenly really pissed that she was stuck here in the middle of nothingness with Roshi’s annoying sister. Baba had always given Bulma the creeps, but this anti-Vegeta business was really uncalled for. “Isn’t there some rule against you hocus-pocus people speaking ill of the dead? What did Vegeta ever do to you?”

Baba was now holding onto the ball with one hand and onto her witch’s hat with the other. The oscillating atmosphere made her voice sound even more screechy and distorted than it usually was. “Dearie, just because the man was in your bed doesn’t change the fact that he’s a murdering Saiyan! Tell me, weren’t you ever afraid that he was going to fry you on a whim?”

Bulma was about to retort when the color blue, a deep lustrous blue that was different from the baby blue sky, began to fill her field of vision. The blue condensed into the shape of lollipop-headed trees. The scent of fresh Namekian foliage filled her nostrils.

“Um... Baba?” Bulma began fearfully. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

But the witch was gone. The thundering noise had stopped. Bulma was standing on the long ago destroyed planet Namek.

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Whatever or whoever had been making that awful noise was quiet now, *but* (here Bassoon began to tap his forefinger frantically on his clipboard) *everything was really mucked up*. That incredible energy had rerouted some of the spirit guide’s controls.

“I can’t seem to get this planet Namek scenario to turn off,” Bassoon said to Vegeta. “Bear with me a moment. I may have to call in maintenance.”

“YOU IDIOT!”

Bassoon looked up from his forefinger tappings and saw that the angry Saiyan soul before him was now angrier than ever. The man looked even more murderous than he had in the flashbacks on Namek. “Excuse me,” Bassoon said, “but I’m going to have to ask you to power down. Your energy isn’t going to help me get my controls back online.”

Vegeta slapped the clipboard with the back of his hand, and the little rectangle went whistling away at supersonic speed into the Namekian air. Bassoon watched it fly out of sight and realized--without alarm but with some sense of tiredness and irritation--that his own head could have suffered the fate as that clipboard.

“You don’t get it, do you?” The Saiyan was yelling. “He’s going to do it again! Kakkarot is going to save the whole fucking universe. You don’t need me anymore! No one needs me anymore!”

“You’re jumping the gun,” began Bassoon. “We don’t have all the data yet and....” It was useless to keep talking because Vegeta had stomped away. Bassoon watched as the angry soul marched aimlessly into the Namekian landscape, watched as the steps slowed, kept watching as Vegeta dropped to his knees on the blue ground and buried his face in his hands.

“Lord Enma?” whispered Bassoon. He snapped the fingers of one hand once, and the clipboard materialized in the crook of his arm. “It appears that my client has broken down.... Yes, I don’t expect he’ll cooperate with the Earth mission anymore.... Oh, I’ve seen this sort of thing before, and I don’t want a being this powerful running around the cosmos all upset like this. You better get the soul-recycler ready.... Oh yes, yes, you heard me. I recommend Oblivion for this one....”

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The landscape felt real, looked real and smelled real, but Bulma knew it wasn’t. Namek had been destroyed ten years ago, and the new planet where the Namekians had migrated had lots more trees; Bulma had seen the photographs. No, this was a vision of some sort, a dreamy disturbance in the universe. Bulma walked for what seemed a very long time (although, away from Earth and Life, time was so hard to gauge) across blue meadows, past boulders and green lakes that were achingly familiar, and she had no clue why she was here. No clue at all--that is, until she saw the figure sitting slump-shouldered on the blue grass. He was wearing the light tank top she’d laid on the bed for him the morning of the Budokai. That had been this morning? Years ago?

She wanted to run and throw her arms around him, but somehow the setting seemed to require more solemnity. She kept walking, slowly, amazed that his sensitive ears did not detect her light steps (was all sound muted in this weird world too? She could smell the Namekian foliage but heard no sound), and then when she was standing close enough to him to cast a shadow over his bare shoulders, he looked up.

Vegeta gazed upon the figure of his wife, unsurprised. As far as he was concerned, Bulma was somewhere in the land of the Living, and this was another ludicrous dream.

He had been dead twice now. He knew that the Afterworld was full of visions. Nothing here but ghosts, memories, vague premonitions of what could be, and the sting of regret, regret, regret....

But it was a worse punishment than Hell to gaze upon her like this.

The first time he'd ever encountered her was on this cursed blue planet, and here again, she was wearing some snug outfit that let him see every swell of her bosom, hips and thighs. Was it the little red dress she had been wearing at the Budokai? She had the same dress in so many colors, but it had been red the day of the World's Martial Arts Tournament.

Not that it mattered. She wasn't real.

Then the unreal vision spoke. "Vegeta?" It wasn't an angry or accusatory voice at all, but Vegeta lowered his eyes and expected the worst. Penance. Did he have to bear any more of this? He just wanted it to be over with. Bring on the soul-cleanser. He would throw himself into Oblivion if he only knew where to find the contraption.

"Vegeta, does it hurt or something? You look... *you look miserable.*"

Against his better judgement, he answered her. "I'm just waiting for you to start yelling at me, woman."

"Aren't you glad to see me?" Her voice sounded anguished.

Vegeta looked up again. Tears were standing in her blue eyes. "Bulma?" He was insane; he was about to start a conversation with a phantom.

"Baba told me that you were given another chance, Vegeta. It's all good news. That Lord Enma gave you your body and wants you to fight Buu. Aren't you happy about fighting again?"

"Are you serious? Didn't you feel that incredible power a moment ago? Kakkarot has ascended yet again. He's going to do what I couldn't do. He's going to destroy Buu. All deals are off now, apparently. I am the soul of a dead man about to be erased from all existence. Enma doesn't need me."

"Oh but I need you, Vegeta!"

Vegeta laughed a hollow laugh. "Right. I'm dead. You lived a good life on Earth before you knew me, and you will live a good one there without me."

Then Bulma knew. *He doesn't know I'm dead! He doesn't think I'm real!* Something inside her knew not to tell him, that the news would somehow be a grief he didn't deserve.

But then the immensity of the situation struck her like a curse: *if Vegeta doesn't go back to Earth now, his soul stands no chance whatsoever of being redeemed and joining me in Heaven.* No, she couldn't live without him! No, wrong--she meant she couldn't *stay dead* without him.

Bulma had no words. She didn't know what to do. But before she could think further, Vegeta stood up--and with a blazing look in his eyes--grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her.

Would a mirage press like such a balm against his exhausted soul? Her soft hair, her soft body, the soothing coolness of her palms on his face. Even holding that dragonball on Namek--when he felt mere moments from immortality--he had not felt the excitement he was feeling now. Gods, he felt *alive*. How could he have imagined on Namek that he would ever choose a messy mortal life with this woman over immortality?

But no, she couldn't be real here. That would mean she was--

He wanted to throw her down on the fake Namekian blue ground and take her fake phantom imaginary mirage body right then and there. But he stopped. He was never going to see her--imaginary or not--again. He was going straight to the soul cleanser.

"Bulma," his mouth whispered against hers. "The first time I saw you, I wanted..." Vegeta didn't even know what he wanted to say. "The first time I saw you on Namek, you..."

The terror in her face that long ago day... But the ferocity of those blue eyes! Her body standing there facing a murdering alien, and yet she did not shiver or faint dead away as so many he terrorized were prone to do.... Humans looked almost Saiyan.... *This* human had looked so... so gorgeous.

"You changed me."

Bulma felt the confession on her face where he had breathed the words. She moved her own lips against his cheek. "Vegeta, you have to go back. You have to fight Buu."

"It's over, Bulma. Kakkarot is the champion of the universe."

That he could say such words in such a throaty sexy voice! "You asshole," Bulma said. "I don't love *Kakkarot*. I love *you*."

The hand that was cradling the back of her head slid in one passionate, pressing motion down her back. "It's over, Bulma," Vegeta said, and this time Bulma knew he meant that it was over for *her*--and that he was going to fuck her on the spot, right there on the blue Namekian ground.

Bulma wanted to succumb to crazy lust, but her fear was nagging--was this going to be the very last time? It couldn't be. There would be no Eternal Paradise without this embrace.

“I believe in you, Vegeta,” Bulma whispered. “You have to believe too. You have to go back to Enma and get him to send you to Earth, no matter what.” His fingers were kneading her ass, and he wasn’t paying attention to her words.

No matter--she believed enough for both of them.

Bulma and Vegeta kissed again. They stood shoulder to shoulder, perfectly matched in devotion and desire, her bright red dress crushed against his dark blue shirt, her fingers finding his, and their hands grasping like lovers themselves.

The cool blue-headed Ajissa trees were nodding in a strong breeze over the couple when the crystal ball appeared on the scene.

“Oh my word,” screeched Baba. “Even here they’re going at it like rabbits. Don’t you two ever quit?”

It may have been the first time Bulma ever smiled at the little witch. “Oh Baba, it’s good news, isn’t it? You have very good news?” Bulma felt Vegeta’s face bury itself in the crook of her neck. He didn’t seem to be giving up on his carnal goal just yet.

“I don’t know good news from bad news anymore, dearie. I’m just here to pick up the Saiyan.” The witch let out a deep sigh. “I’m so crazy busy! Not long ago I brought Son Goku away from Earth; now I’ve got to go deposit Vegeta there.”

“What?” Vegeta’s arms untangled themselves from Bulma. “Kakkarot is dead again?”

“I don’t know what you mean by dead *again*. He only had one day on Earth in his angel form, remember? His time ran out. You’re up at bat now, I suppose, Vegeta.”

The joy on Vegeta’s face was such that Bulma didn’t mind at all that he seemed to have forgotten her completely. “He didn’t kill Buu! The incompetent moron! He had the strength of Super Saiyan *three*. It must’ve been a tactical mistake.” Vegeta was not even trying to hide his triumph. He laughed aloud. “The fucking *moron!*”

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Lord Enma was no fool, and that’s why he was the Bookkeeper of Souls. “Score one for me!” he bragged to Bassoon over the speaker. “It was me who restored that Saiyan’s body, and it was me who let his little woman go pay him a visit in Limbo land! Looks like he’s primed for battle now. You have to give a fellow like that something to fight for.”

The great horned demon put his feet up on his desk. It had been a hard day, and the entire universe was still as grave risk, but... things were really looking up with Vegeta back in the game. “Seriously, Bassoon, you’re going to have to change your techniques.

That psycho-enlightenment babble of yours just goes straight over the heads of most of your clients.”

Somewhere in the fluffy clouds, Bassoon tucked his clipboard under his arm. “My shift’s up, Enma,” he said. “Complain all you want about my performance; I don’t think I did all that bad with that last fellow. He was *some case*. Look, I’ve been at this commission for millennia now, and if you ask me, I’m overdue a promotion.”

Lord Enma chuckled. “We’ll just have to see about that. Talk to me after you enlighten a few more souls. Just keep thinking about that little spot of Heaven waiting for you, my friend.”

“Right, right,” Bassoon answered. “You better have an Ajissa tree with my name on it waiting for me there. I plan to stretch out under it for all eternity.”

“First things first,” said Enma. “I’ve got a bet going around the office that Son Goku and Vegeta are going to team up against the Buu monster. Want in on the pool?”

“You’ve got to be kidding! Those two old rivals? My money’s on Buu. I expect the whole universe, Afterworld and all, is going to be chewed up like a gumdrop before any of us can collect!”

“Aww, Bassoon.” Lord Enma was laughing now. “It’s pessimism just like that keeping you up to the neck in clients! Like the little blue-haired human proved--you just have to have a little faith!”

~END~