



Final Apoptosis

I.

“You have to grip it with both hands, you know.”

“Like this?”

“But tighter.”

Her knuckles— surrounded by his guiding fingers— soon turned white.

“C’mon, Cyn: you know what I mean!”

The girl smirked. “If you want to know the truth: I can never really tell what you’re trying to say, Just.”

“You wanna learn this, or not?” He pulled his head away from her fiery locks. The girl’s amber hair reeked of split apples.

God: that shampoo of hers!

He couldn’t stand that scent, but Justin never said anything to Cyn about it.

One picks one’s battles, after all...

“Alright, mister ‘home runner’: what *do* you mean?”

“Ease up on it a little.”

“Don’t hold on so hard, you mean?”

“Yeah: I think you’ve got it.” Justin slid his hands off the girl’s delicate fingers and stepped back. “You think you’ve got it?”

“Just, I think: Just.” She flashed her ivory white teeth.

“Cute.” He playfully prodded her shoulder and stepped away.

“Do you have my licorice stick?”

“Mmm.” Justin stuck the flimsy black cord between the girl’s teeth.

“The machine’s gonna start lobbing ‘em soon, so keep your eyes on the ball. And remember—”

“—don’t hold on so hard. I’ve got it.” Cynthia worked her words around the gummy candy. “It’s not a problem, Just: I can’t imagine this being too hard...”

Justin had never seen a broken nose before— or ridden in an ambulance, either— so it was a day of ‘firsts’ for both of them.

The ball reached the top of its arc a good 10 meters above the tip of Base-10’s skinny central strut. It fell to the earth, glinting in the sunset’s light.

Thwack!

Spinning on his heels, Justin swung the baseball bat with one hand. His pirouetting body added to the massive force of the swing. On connection the ball rocketed out over the ruddy purple seawater, just far enough to make it look like the thing was hurtling into the setting sun itself.

“What the hell’re you doing, Storm?” Samantha’s head peeked out above the strut’s ladder chute. The captain was in her civvys: a tan v-neck top and shorts. Her shift started in ten minutes, and she’d likely just arrived on base.

“Practicing.” Justin answered as he lobbed a ball high into the air. He stood motionless for a few seconds, playfully smirking at the captain and then, lightning fast, he pirouetted on his heels and took another one-handed swing, again connecting with his target. “Baseball’s the only sport I was ever any good at when I lived in New England: it was the only sport where I could put my reflexes to good use.”

“I’m sure you were stellar, Storm, but—”

“I wasn’t the best, or anything. My hits are usually wonky, and I don’t always nail a home run,” He tossed another ball in the air and promptly cracked it out into the ocean. “But my batting average was statistically perfect.”

“That’s not hard for someone who can fly a Raiden, but those balls of yours have triggered two false-alarms in the perimeter grid this morning. Command Ops ain’t real pleased, if that needs to be said. If the Commander knew what you were doing—”

“—I’d be brought up on disciplinary charges, and then Sven Wraith would make them go away and immunize me from any punishment.” He glared at Samantha with hard eyes: “It doesn’t matter what we do in this unit, how we misbehave or who we hurt: our Aryl always manages to whitewash the record and bury almost anything we do.”

“He’s a very good Aryl—”

“Tch! We’ll see, but I think it’s a lot more than that.” Justin set the baseball bat on his shoulder and descended the ladder with the captain.

Sam eyed his bat. “It’s too small, isn’t it?” She read the handle: “‘Little Slugger’? Isn’t that bat made for a child?”

“That, or a young lady.” Justin mumbled. “Or a guy who likes taking high-velocity, one-handed power swings. What time is it, anyway?”

“0630 hours: you’re officially relieved of duty.”

He nodded. “Hey, has the A-shift checked in down at Ops yet?”

“Laura Hayle’s crew? Yeah: they’re all down there, except JG Tabris.”

Justin’s grin darkened. He rolled the bat idly in his hand. “Know where he is?”

“He told the Lieutenant that he was going to help the decon crew scrub-down bay R-A, or something like that. It’s not my job to keep track of the techies, you know.”

The green-eyed man grinned. “If he’s in the *Gazer’s* bay it means he wants to catch Chenine before she comes off duty.” Justin nodded as he flipped the bat around in his hand. He took off for the elevators. “Have a good shift, Sam.”

“No doubt I will.” She called after him, obviously baffled by Justin’s odd behavior.

Of course, if the situation with my Raiden keeps deteriorating my behavior will never ‘baffle’ anyone, anymore: I’ll be the base’s resident nut-job.

That wasn’t going to happen. Justin’s mind was made up: he wanted answers, and he wanted them right now.

Before that, though, he made a pit-stop in his barracks, and then it was on to Command Ops.

II.

The Lieutenant was on a conference call with two very cranky majors. From what Justin could tell, she was getting a rather vicious dressing-down for some kind of security breach.

“Yes, sirs, of course, sirs: incoming protocols should always be double-checked... yes, I understand, but— yes, sirs...” the brunette officer looked over at a nearby technician and, hand above her head, stuck out her tongue and mimicked a hanging victim.

She was understandably cross with Justin. He approached her workstation and mouthed one word. Laura glared at him and cocked her head back twice. Justin saluted in thanks, but the Lieutenant took up her paperweight and turned it over in her hand, menacing.

He wisely darted out of the hot zone and left Laura to suffer the abuse of the irate majors. He really hoped this didn’t have anything to do with his impromptu batting practice.

Who’d have thought a few baseballs could get everyone so riled up, anyway?

The word he mouthed to the Lieutenant was ‘Jen’, and he found the girl in the cold zone. Justin snaked through the semi-private workstations that decorated the cramped corridor outside the command floor. He peered into each cubicle and moved on. Since it was early morning and shift-changing time there were precious few people in the area.

He darted past one such cubicle, its desk littered with stacks of books and the console activated but unmanned. Two steps past this desk, however, his mind suddenly clicked into gear. He rechecked the workstation and, indeed, noticed a small pink tuft of hair rising from the pile of texts.

“Jen.” He spoke softly, and then a little more forcefully when he got no answer. Justin maneuvered to the other side of the desk: the girl’s head lay on its side, her cheek resting on the cushy pages of an open book. A small blotch of saliva graced the text beneath her mouth.

“Jen.” He repeated, shaking the girl lightly.

Jen awoke with a start. Her raccoon-like eyes blinked with sleepiness: the mascara around them was far from fresh. She smoothed back her hair and clasped the textbook shut.

“It’s you.” She yawned. “What do you want?”

“Sorry to wake you. Umm: didn’t you just come on shift?”

“No, I volunteered for graveyard last night; I’ve been here since 0200.”

“Oh, I see.”

Jen Drake and volunteer duty? That’s one of the most unlikely combinations I’ve ever heard of...

Jen tossed the slobbery book in a pile with the rest. Justin eyed the title:

Down the Rabbit Hole: a History of Human Exploration of Dimension 26

“Heavy reading.”

The girl shook her head. “Not really. It’s more descriptive than didactic: that book’s kinda my study break.”

Justin held his lip in his teeth as he took note of this elaborate scene, and all of Jen’s efforts.

“Jen: you know that I’m... well, I’m devastated about what happened to you—”

“So am I.” She cut him off. A nascent snarl underlined her words. Jen ruffled her spiky hair and sat up in her chair: she appeared remarkably more composed.

“What can I do you for, Justin?”

“A little bird told me that you used to work in laser spectroscopy before you came here.”

“I did.”

Justin produced one of his conical spikes: one of the needles pulled from his flesh after the battle at Ganymede.

“So, if you could get into the base’s lab, you might be able to analyze this for me?”

Jen wiped some sleep from her eyes and then took up the spike in one hand.

“Well: I’m not gonna do that.”

“Why not?” Justin sounded genuinely hurt.

What did you expect? Do you think you knew this little Goth-tart enough to get a favor from her? Tch! She could always take you or leave you: you know that. Really: did you actually think—

“Because I can tell you what this junk is right off the bat.”

Justin arched his eyes. He blinked, then shook his head. “How can you—”

“It’s granulated.” She explained, running one finger over the spike’s stucco-like surface. “That means it was set together in layers, kinda like skin. Then there’s the weight...” Jen dropped the spike on her desk: it left a noticeable dent.

“What is it, then?”

“You should know: you sit inside this stuff every day. It’s hafnium-carbide. It’s pretty pure, too, from the look of it.” She scooted the spine toward Justin. He fingered it again, pensive.

“Haf-car...” he muttered.

“Out of curiosity: where’d you get it?”

Justin didn’t take his eyes off the spike. “Surgeons pulled it out of me after Jupiter, along with at least a dozen others. I don’t know how it ended up there.” He looked at Jen, quizzical. “I always figured that a swarm of momeraths stung me through my suit—”

Jen shook her head. “—no, they didn’t: haf-car’s a bitch to cobble together. Truth be told, us humans don’t do a very good job of it, and the Bydo can’t come close to using it.”

“But their Bydo-Tech—”

“—is all based on their knowledge of our technology’s *structural* features, not the materials that go into them: they can’t reproduce most of the fine alloys we use. Actually, a good 70-percent of Bydo-Tech is pieced together with low-grade iron ore: basically whatever the Masses can find in their current environments.”

“They do a shoddy job, you mean?”

Jen shrugged. “That doesn’t really matter when you launch your troops by the hundreds-of-thousands, does it?”

“Quality versus quantity, huh?” Justin smirked.

“That’s about right.”

“So, where else would someone find this metal, out of curiosity?”

Jen shrugged. “The stuff’s strong as all-get-out, but like I said: it’s a bitch to work with. I’d say that about 90-percent of all the hafnium-carbide produced these days goes into the skin of K-Type and R-Type craft. I’ve no idea how a rod with that shape ended up jammed in your skin, though.”

Justin slipped the spike into his pants’ satchel pocket. “Thank you so much, Jen.” He started moving back out to Ops, but stopped on his heels.

“Oh, Jen.” He turned around.

“Yeah?”

Justin paused, then shifted on his feet. “You don’t seem to, well: you used to come by the R-Ring, ever so often. And you haven’t been around in a while.”

The girl rested her chin in her hands. “I know.”

“You’re welcome anytime, just so you know—”

“I know.” She managed a small smile. “And thank you, Justin.”

The techie poked her head out of the cubicle as Justin walked off; she called after him:

“Hey: any thoughts on where that sample might’ve come from?”

“I was just on my way to find out about that.”

Shaking off her sleep, Jen noticed something about Justin for the first time:

“Why’re you carrying a baseball bat?”

He smiled. “The answer to that question is related to your previous question.”

Justin left the company of a very confused Jen Drake, sauntered over to one of the elevators outside Command Ops and gave the computer his destination:

“Call-up computer: R-side of the docking ring, launch bay R-A.”

The elevator doors closed on a very vicious set of emerald eyes.

III.

Chenine unzipped the front of her flight suit down to her sternum. Sweat roiled down her skin and her body radiated heat against the garment like a live fire. The girl slicked back her wet hair and parked herself beneath a hydration station while the ground crew carted her Raiden into storage.

Within minutes the launch bay floor retracted from its ‘genuflect’ position: it moved up and into the struts of the docking ring. The bay doors ground shut, blocking out the light of the rising sun, and for the first time Chenine felt a shadow standing over her. The supine girl removed her lips from the nozzle and looked up.

“Did they send you far, today?” Scott Tabris surveyed the pilot: her mussed hair, circled eyes and sweat-caked neck and shoulders.

Simply put, Chenine looked like hell.

“No: only the Southland Isles.”

“Not too traumatic, huh?”

“One would think...” Chenine reapplied her mouth to the nozzle and gulped the hydration fluid. When she was done the pair walked off through the launch bays’ connecting tunnels. Scott was particularly chatty.

“I’ve been pulling double-shifts on the *Gazer* trying to figure out why the link’s been hammering you so much lately.”

“Who’s to say it’s the link?” Chenine shook her head. “The problem could easily be me.”

“I don’t see how.”

Chenine stared at the ground as they walked. “It’s not just in the *Gazer*: I’m not a very strong person— especially not physically— but I’ve been even less so, recently.”

“Like in your scenario-qualifiers, you mean?” Scott remembered that Spec-Ops’ practical training branch paid the base a visit on Friday. They put every command unit through the wringer, and part of that week’s games involved a coordinated training-operation amongst the members of the *Tears’ Shower Squadron*.

“From what I head the games were rigged, anyway: you’re not expected to run around on the ground during a battle, sneaking to and fro like a commando, are you?” He smiled. “Besides: your score on that test was higher than Storm’s, wasn’t it? Of course, Sam Rayne beat you both out, but she was expected to. No one’s better at commando-simulations than a former commando, after all.” He perched his lips and glanced over at the girl. “What was the test like, anyway?”

“Coordinated mission simulation.” Chenine explained. “We each had three separate missions that converged on one ultimate objective.”

“So, you didn’t get your part done?”

“I was the first to be gunned down.”

“First? But didn’t you outlast Storm?”

The girl shook her head. “The pilot of the *Platonic Love* was not eliminated.”

“Then how—”

“His low score was a result of a poor choice he made in the simulation.”

Scott furrowed his brow. “Choice?”

“He—” Chenine’s voice trailed off. She looked to one side, her sapphire eyes troubled. “He did something foolish; it’s not important.”

The pair reached the docking ring’s rear storage room. This area was set apart from the Raiden bays; the musty air billowed with a moldy-damp scent. Chenine made for the elevator without a word, but she turned to face Scott before it ascended.

“Thank you for your concern.” She smiled. “What’s been happening to me doesn’t make a lot of sense, but I do feel better knowing that you’re focusing your efforts on me.”

“Always.” Scott reciprocated the smile, then he passed a silver-wrapped energy bar through the slits of the cage. “Keep your strength up, you hear?”

The girl accepted the bar and, with a polite nod, disappeared as the elevator ground upwards for the seventeenth-floor barracks.

Scott smacked his forehead as the screech of the elevator faded to a distant echo.

“Keep your strength up?” He shook his head. “Moron!”

“It’s good advice.” A playful voice lilted through the dim room.

“Who’s there?”

A pair of tennis shoes clopped down on the concrete floor. Justin Storm emerged from behind a stack of boxes.

Scott scoffed. “What do you want, Storm?”

“Can I have an energy bar?” He grinned like a little boy.

“No.”

The pilot stepped across the room, moving around Scott in an ominous semi-circle. His eyes burned with green fire and his grin widened.

“You like Chenine, don’t you? I mean: you *really* like Chenine, as in ‘loooove’, am I right?”

Scott crossed his arms. “What’s it to you?”

“Nothing, really: but you’re a real snake, Tabris, you know that?”

The techie smirked. “Are you jealous, Storm? You can’t be serious! You’ve never shown any interest in Miss Chovert: you don’t even like her as a person—”

“—as any human, I do love her as a *person*, but I hate her as an individual.”

Scott looked at him as if he were crazy. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Justin shook his head. “It doesn’t matter: this conversation isn’t about pop-tarts.”

“Then what is it about?”

The Typer shuffled one foot against the dirty cement floor, kicking up a thin cloud of dust. “Jen and I used to have little talks about stuff— just odds and ends, really. You probably know that Jen likes to spout her knowledge-base whenever she can.” He looked down at the floor. “At least, she used to.” His eyes returned to level. “But, anyway: she once told me something about brains.”

“You could use a lecture on that, couldn’t you?”

Justin ignored the quip. “Apparently, when a brain is developing, it starts out by making hundreds of trillions of connections every which way. And I mean *everywhere*: it’s not an efficient way of doing things, but when a mind’s just starting out it kinda needs all those redundant links and connections...” Justin took a step towards Scott, “at least, until it matures. That’s when something really cool happens. According to Jen, the brain literally slaughters all those unnecessary links: all those neurons that form the irrelevant connections actually kill themselves, if you can believe that.” He scratched his chin. “Jen had a really fancy word for that kind of mass-suicide— something that sounded all Greek and smart— but I can’t remember what it was...”

Scott sighed. “You’re talking about programmed cell death. ‘Apoptosis’, specifically.”

Justin smiled. “*Apoptosis*! That’s right. Sometimes I forget that you’ve got a pretty hefty background in the biological sciences, don’t you?”

He couldn’t say why, but Scott was a little unnerved by the emphasis Justin gave the words ‘biological sciences’: he rolled them off his lips in an accusatory tone.

“What’s your point, Justin?”

“My point is that getting rid of all that unnecessary information— all those trivial things that don’t really matter in the long run— it gets a mind in ‘gear’. What I mean is that a brain can finally see the forest instead of just the trees, if you get my meaning.”

“Solidification of thought, you mean.” Scott started walking past the Typer. “It happens quicker in some people than others, doesn’t it?”

Justin extended the ‘Li’l Slugger’ baseball bat and pressed it against Scott’s sternum.

“Well: let’s just say that my thoughts have ‘solidified’ recently, Tabris. Why don’t we forget everything else in play here: the fact that you don’t like me and that I don’t like you, the fact that I’ve been lied to for the past three months, the fact that I’m not remotely qualified to perform the duties given to me, the fact that you’re a piss-head slime-ball liar, your ambition, my anger, our differing ranks, Chenine, everything.”

“What the hell is the matter with you?” Scott stepped backwards.

“You, Wraith and Roont have had us barking up a lot of dangerous trees, you know: I just wanna see the forest, for once. So I’m gonna ask you this one question, Tabris, and I want just one answer...”

Scott tried to avoid displaying his creeping anxiety, but as he swallowed and stepped back it was clear that the tech was writhing like an earthworm on a hook.

“Justin: you’re being—”

The pilot cut him off: “what are the R-H’s, Tabris?”

“I can’t ans—”

“The hell you can’t! You’ve made a choice not to, and that’s all there is to it. Well, here’s another choice you can make.” Justin leaned forward, close enough so Scott could smell his acidic breath: “Either you answer my question, Tabris, or I’ll go straight to Commander Faught with my complaint.”

“What the hell do you have to complain about? Damn it, Justin: you were given everything a pilot could ever ask for, and you’re looking a gift-horse in the mouth. Worse than that: you’re reaching down its throat!”

“Only ‘cause I’ve been bitten by that horse one too many times.” Justin smiled with an evil lilt in his eyebrows. “And my ‘complaint’, by the way, is about that time I caught you and Chenine fucking each other outside the launch bays.” He tilted his head to one side, mocking Chenine’s mannerism. “Do you remember that?”

Scott’s pupils dilated; his face flushed.

“You fucking son-of-a-bitch!” He snarled. “I’ve never touched Miss Chovert and you know it!” Scott grabbed Justin by his collar, which proved to be a disastrous move: the Typer flipped Scot around by the arm and sent him hurtling against the elevator cage.

“Bastard!” He swung around to retaliate, only to be greeted by the tip of Justin’s baseball bat: it rested mere centimeters from his nose. The techie sneered as he wiped rust dust off his cheek. “What’re you gonna do: wail on me?”

“Tch! Not a chance, Tabris: If I started beating you with this thing I’d kill you.”

“Not likely—”

Justin swooped in on Scott. The move was ridiculously swift: the tech barely had time to register the movement before Justin’s hand was on his throat.

He coughed as the pressure on his neck crested: “This’ll be the end of your career, Storm: is that what you really want?”

“Not likely.” The pilot lilted these words with mocking inflection. “We both know that if I beat your brains out right now Sven Wraith and his supporters would do everything in their power to protect me and keep my ass in the cockpit.” Scott’s eyes widened at this assertion, prompting Justin to continue: “Does that seem fair? No: it’s

wrong, isn't it? That's just one of the questions I want answered: why am I the exclusive pilot of the *Platonic Love*? Why're Chenine and Samantha exclusive pilots? What is it about us that makes us so special to the brass, huh?"

Scott struggled against the Typer's grasp: Justin wasn't the most fit person in the world, but he did need to pass his weekly physicals, something that kept him in good shape (much better than a tech like Scott, at least).

Scott forced Justin off him and went to his knees, panting.

"Damn it: Justin! You've never been curious before! Why're you so damn interested in these questions, now?"

"Because, unlike Chenine, I don't enjoy being used! Maybe I didn't care about what happened to me before. And later on I was kinda gung-ho about suiciding myself for the cause— being all 'heroic' and noble— but at the moment I've chosen to live, Tabris, and I don't think I'll survive much longer without knowing the truth about those machines you've got us piloting."

Scott rose to his feet. He wiped some sweat from his brow and sneered: "I can't be scared by your fake story about me and Miss Chovert fraternizing: if you go public with that kind of lie Chenine will deny it, I'll deny it, and you'll be the odd man out."

Now it was Justin's turn to sneer: "The Commander hates the R-H program, Tabris: if I go to him with that kind of scandal he'll be on it like a shot. He's sure to get some investigators out here, at least. And you're right: they'll close the books on the false report in short order, but in the meantime that tabloid story will give our program a whole lot of unwanted attention and scrutiny..."

The corners of Scott's mouth drooped as he considered the point. Justin leaned even closer to the tech and sent warm air billowing over his face: "Now, I don't know who exactly bankrolls our program, Scotty, but one thing's for sure: they'll want to take a pound of flesh out of 'whoever so causeth' that kind of embarrassment. Two of the names in my story would be Raiden pilots— me and Chenine— and they can't very well make examples of us. But you?" He shrugged vindictively.

Scott crossed his arms: "You'd really drag her name through the mud like that just to get at me?"

At this Justin's eyes blazed with hatred and his fists closed. He gave Scott a backhand: it was soft, but sent his head jerking to one side.

"Haven't you noticed that there's something *wrong* with Chenine, you prick? With her energy: the way she's always having to hydrate and sleep, and more so than usual, I mean. If it's connected to her Raiden in any way—"

"It's *not*!" Scott protested. "And I know that."

"Well, I don't!" Justin smacked the tech again, hard enough to send him to his knees. "What are the R-H's, Tabris? Tell me!"

"Experimental Raidens, damn it: you knew that coming in!"

"What's the experiment? What about them makes them so different from all the rest?"

"They've got double the amount of denatured Bydo flesh in—"

Justin kicked the tech in the ribs. Scott cawed like a crow as the sensation reverberated through his rib cage and compressed his internal organs.

"Fuck!" He squealed.

“That’s the cover story: I don’t care about that. God damn it, Tabris: you’re gonna tell me what I want to know or so help me God either I’ll get you, or the people backing this program’ll get you!” He was screaming now: foam bubbled around Justin’s lips as he snarled: “*What are the R-H’s!*”

“You’re crazy!”

Justin let loose with another kick.

“*What are they?*”

“It— it’s classified, damnit!”

A kick.

“*Tabris!*”

“I can’t tell you!”

He raises his foot.

“Stop!”

Scott’s plea echoed through the dingy store room. Everything was silent. He could hear saltwater dribbling on a pile of boxes in the corner.

Drip... drip... drip...

Storm was panting. He raised his body and growled:

“Tabris—”

The water continued dripping in the corner. It was a simple force, pure and unstoppable: to make it cease one would have to drain the ocean itself. Anything less would be a temporary fix: a band-aid on a boo-boo. As draining the ocean was impossible, going against the leak was also futile.

And knowledge flows like water, too, doesn’t it?

He knew that one thing was clear: there’d be no putting the genie back in the bottle on this one.

“I’ll tell you.” Scott rasped. “Damn it: I’ll tell you, Justin.”

Justin leaned down beside the tech: “‘Tell me’ what, Scott? What’re you gonna tell me, exactly?”

“Everything.” He panted. “I’m going to tell you everything...”

IV.

He held his head in his hands.

That was really all he could think of doing: sitting on his ass and holding his head in his hands. It kept his head stable: nailed down and in place. And it seemed appropriate, because Justin felt like his head would up and fly away if he let it go.

“Unadulterated...”

“They’ve done all the tests: it was shown to be safe—”

Justin rolled his head back, a wave of nausea rose up his throat. “Living, breathing Bydo flesh...”

Tabris hung his head. The pair sat on the cold concrete ground, their backs against the storeroom crates.

“How much?”

“How much what?”

“How much of that god-damned tissue is inside the R-H’s?” Justin snarled. “Tell me it’s only 7-percent, Tabris: tell me you guys’ve told the truth about *something!*”

Scott shook his head. “No: that’s a lie. They came up with that number because it’s nice and round— about double the amount of flesh in a normal Raiden.” He eyed Justin, hesitant. “The amount of flesh in the Hybrids is— well, it’s much higher than that...”

“Ten-percent?”

Scott was silent.

“Fifteen?” Justin’s eyes bulged.

“No: closer to twenty-percent.”

Justin said nothing for a solid sixty seconds. “You’re telling me that one out of every five kilograms of those ships is flesh? One out of *five*?”

“They did tests with varying amounts of tissue, and that was the magic number. It was critical mass: the minimum amount of flesh needed for the Raidens to demonstrate ‘transubstantiation’.”

Justin raised his head from between his legs. “Oh, hell: I don’t know why, but for some reason that word scares me more than anything else you’ve said.” He licked his dry lips. “What is it? What does that mean?”

“It has to do with your IF.”

“The Impingement Factor? It’s not a measure of ‘electrical interference’ at all, is it?”

“No: that’s another lie. The flesh we use in the Hybrids is ‘wild type’— that is, it’s alive— but it’s been stunted: prevented from spreading into its environment like normal Bydo tissue would. We know that the Bydo Empire lives to accomplish two things, right?”

“Reproduce and survive, in that order. Yes, I know that.” Justin growled.

“Since the flesh can’t reproduce, it stands to reason that its only remaining instinct would be to survive.” Scott looked away from Justin: “When its survival is in jeopardy it acts to defend itself, just like any dumb invertebrate organism would. Think of the junk as if it were a spongy little clam, or something: when it undergoes transubstantiation—”

Justin shook his swimming head. “No, no, no. I see where you’re going with this, and it’s wrong: you said the flesh was bound inside those ‘shells’, right? It’s like being blindfolded and tied-up inside a dark closet! How the hell could the tissue *know* when it’s even in ‘jeopardy’, huh? There’s no way it could tell...”

Scott let out a heavy sigh: he made no snide comments about Justin’s halting thought process. Given Justin’s current mental temperament, it was probably a wise decision.

In any event, Justin raised his head after a moment, terrible realization dawning in his head: “The link.” His emerald eyes widened. “The link! Son-of-a-bitch!”

“The flesh synchs-up with your latent brain waves.” Tabris explained. “It first picks them up during—”

“—terminal activation.” Justin guessed.

“Yes. That act ‘primes’ the flesh. It synchs the organic tissue to your mental ‘frequency’, if you like.”

“And the consequences? What are the results of that ‘live feed’, huh?”

Tabris told Justin about what he’d seen after the battle for Nash Ultima: how the *Platonic Love* twisted itself from a non-aerodynamic sphere into a deathly sharp javelin in response to Justin’s madcap dash to rescue the *Chaste Gazer*.

“You were never able to see what happened to your Raiden, were you?”

Justin shook his head. “I thought... I don’t know: I knew that I was flying fast—*really* fast— but I chalked the sensation up to adrenaline at the time.”

“Adrenaline? Well, that wasn’t far from the truth, was it? Look: Bydo Labs got all the R-H test flesh from the Midnight Forest at Ceresland and grew it in a metallic medium: they spent over a year with each sample, constantly training the stuff, coating it with spray-on layers of hafnium-carbide over and over again.”

“So that it would adapt, right?”

“In many ways haf-car’s a lot like skin, really. At least, in the way it gets coated to things—”

“So I’ve heard.”

“It was the ideal material to bond with the Bydo flesh. Once the flesh learned how to deal with the metal it could start *manipulating* it, too. And then, well...”

Justin nodded. He crossed his arms over his chest and held his shoulders with two sweaty palms. “Yeah: ‘well’...” he shook his head. “But it can’t eat metal, can it? How does it keep from starving?”

“You’re right: it can’t get nutrients from the Raiden. The flesh is fed a steady supply of—”

Justin looked up: “—sugar, right?”

“How’d you know?”

“I once took a link-dive into the *Platonic Love*; I found that pipeline while I was in there. The thing tasted sweeter than even my antifreeze.”

“That’s raw glucose.” Scott explained. “It’s an okay way to pass on energy.” He shook his head, then snickered to himself.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s not the *best* way to get energy to the flesh. I mean, glucose is what animals use because it’s the best we can do with what we’ve got, but the stuff inside those shells could be trained to eat anything, really. Roont and the Bydo Labs faculty were adamant that the fuel be glucose, and *only* glucose. I don’t know why: just the arrogance of ‘group-think’, I suppose.”

Justin looked up. “That mental ‘frequency’ you were talking about, the one the flesh tunes into: it can’t be changed, can it?”

Scott shook his head.

The pilot scratched his spiky black hair. He smiled, and then he started laughing.

“Now what’s so funny?”

“I can never be replaced as a pilot, can I?” He laughed again. “That’s why only one person can pilot a Hybrid, isn’t it?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like that: but that’s the way things worked out.”

He laughed even more. “Tch! These Bydo ships are a man-made nightmare, and I can’t wake up. None of us can...”

“The thing is, if you stopped flying the *Love*, the flesh would probably start degrading over time—”

“What do I care about *that*, huh?” Justin snapped. He looked away and puckered his lips. “A Diapente...”

“What?”

“I was pulled out of the VR training program to come here: it’s because Wraith wanted to see what a Perfect Fifth would be like behind the wheel, wasn’t it? To see how someone like me would perform in the link?”

Scott shrugged. “I don’t know.” When Justin glared at him the techie relented: “That’s what I’d guess, though.”

Justin rested his head against a crate and closed his eyes. “And my limerence-effects— all those hallucinations: they’re a side effect?”

“No one knows what all the side-effects from this kind of Raiden are: you’re all test subjects, remember?”

When Justin gave him a look that suggested an ass-whooping was in the cards, Scott elaborated on his answer:

“Look: you said that each time you’ve seen that little boy of yours you’ve been in a crisis, yes?”

Justin recalled all of Quint’s visits. “Yes: each time I was kinda dying, I suppose.”

“And each time this ‘child’ coaxed you to survive?”

“You could say that.”

“It’s simple enough, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you get too invested in the link it’s a safe bet that the flesh would rattle your brain a little, especially as it starts altering itself. Do you wanna know what this ‘Quint’ thing really is?”

Justin waited for Tabris to answer. “Yes?” He waved his hands, demanding the techie speed up the dramatic pacing.

“He’s you.”

The pilot blinked. “What?”

“The child probably represents some part of your mind that’s been ‘fractured out’ by the link: your survival instinct, most likely.”

Justin stared at his shoes.

“You don’t seem convinced, huh?”

“Maybe. But, then again...” he shook his head. “I don’t know: Quint’s a very strange little boy...”

“You’re a very strange little man.” Tabris whispered.

Justin rolled to his feet and gripped Scott by the shoulders.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, okay!” The techie waved his hands apologetically.

“These ships are abominations: sins! They’re sins before God! Why’d the brass create them, Tabris? What were they *thinking*?”

“Are you kidding? Just look at them: Miss Chovert has killed more incarnations in her brief career than most pilots do in a lifetime. And you: you took down an Opie single-handed. The R-H’s are ridiculously powerful!”

“And dangerous.” Justin snarled. He pressed the tech against his crate: “What’s ‘Antipathy’, Tabris?”

“What’s *what*?” Scott’s face scrunched as if he’d bitten into a lime.

“Antipathy! What is Antipathy?”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!”

Justin’s pressure on Scott’s neck increased.

“Damn it: Justin! I’ve told you *everything* about the Raiden-Hybrids! I’ve given you the absolute truth: if I knew what the fuck you were talking about right now don’t you think I’d tell you? I’ve never heard of anything called ‘Antipathy’ before: never!”

“You know what your problem is? You’ve got serious credibility issues!” Justin squeezed the techie even harder.

“We’ve a problem, gentlemen?”

Justin released Scott from his grasp as he heard the uneven shuffling of disfigured legs across the concrete.

“No problem: Pyotr.” He growled.

Pyotr Frieze’s dry voice permeated the storeroom: “Mister Storm: I b’leve your shift was up a good hour ago, was it not?” The old deckhand emerged from the shadows, his intelligent, beady eyes glistening beneath the discolored pouches of flesh that cradled them.

“Yes.”

“Then you’re off, aren’t you?” This wasn’t a question.

Justin stared at Tabris. “So I am.” The Typer stepped back from Scott and looked him up, then down, shaking his head.

“You’re pathetic.” He whispered.

“You can believe what you want.” Tabris retorted.

“And what about her: do you think she’ll ever forgive you for this?”

A lump rose in Scott’s throat. “Miss Chovert, unlike you, understands the need for secrets. She’s safer than your average R-Type pilot, anyway. And, don’t forget, she volunteered for the program—”

“You don’t sound like someone in love right now, Tabris.” Justin stared at Scott’s shoes. “But maybe you’re right.”

“It’s not like you care about her, do you, Storm?”

Justin leaned in very close to Scott’s ear: “I care more about myself than anyone, but if she’s is seriously injured because of your dirty little secrets, JG, I’ll kill you myself.” He stepped back from the tech, then turned and started walking down the hall.

“Don’t think you have her best interests at heart! And even if you did: why would you do something like that for her?”

He turned around and looked Scott in the eyes:

“Are you an idiot? Isn’t it obvious, Tabris?” Justin rested the small baseball bat across his shoulders, supporting both his wrists with the wooden instrument. “What other reason could there be? She’s my squadmate.”

“Oh, you’re so chivalrous! Would you still feel that way if it was *your* ass on the line?”

The Typer shot Scott one last icy look.

“My ass was on the line on Friday, and yes: I felt the same way then.”

“Your training op? What’d you do then that was so special?”

“I did something you’ve never done before, and it’s something that you might wanna think about doing at some point. But it’s really your choice, Tabris.”

“What’n the hell’s he talking about?” Pyotr came up beside Scott and eyed the retreating pilot, his bushy brows furrowed. “What’s ‘e sayin’ he did?”

Scott sighed. “Something ‘I might wanna think about doing’...” he shook his head. “He’s talking about the reason he finished in last place during the training op.”

“Why did he? Am I missin’ something here?”

“He went back for her: I think he tried to save Chenine.”

“Nice guys finish last, do they?” Pyotr philosophically opined with a grandfatherly smile.

Justin turned around and glowered at the pair:

“Yeah, Pyotr: and our JG over there is at the top of his field. He’s the cream of the crop.”

Justin left the pair. He was steaming like a turnip, and once he was out of sight he slammed his baseball bat against an unfortunate bulkhead.

Sons of bitches always rise to the top, don’t they?

