



## Cohesion-Tension Theory

### 130 Minutes to Gestation.

A waterfall of rain cascaded down the side of the Great Glass Pyramid at Hamburg. The late afternoon air was crisp and melancholy. A young man with stubble peeking out a bony chin sat huddled up beside a second-hand briefcase perched on the tenth-floor patio. The man was lonely save for the raindrops cascading all around him. A burning cigarette rested in his mouth, protected by the brim of a ratty hat. His cynical eyes took in the sight of haughty men in grand suits and stylish shoes tottering off beneath the pyramid's drab awning.

"Fools." He spits the cigarette from his mouth. "Bureaucratic fools!"

"Such talk, and coming from a Bydo Labs doctor, no less."

He turned to his left and noticed an old codger sitting beside him. The young man scowled unkindly: "What do you want?"

This old man smiled with a warm and grandfatherly glint in eyes, like a department store Santa Clause who's in the habit of sneaking nips from a hidden flask. "What do I want? Why, to make a job offer, that's all." He extends his hand beyond the protection of a large, luxuriously red umbrella. "Could I replace that cigarette, my young sir?"

The callow doctor shook his head. "I'm trying to quit. And just what are you, anyway? Private sector? Are you with Preek Biogenetics, or something?"

"No, no: my expertise is far more limited than that."

He scoffs. "What, then: Gouden & Leer Chemical Engineering?"

"No, again. But then, *yes* again, too. You see, some would say I'm a touch higher on the food chain; others might say different. They might say I'm not quite a part of the chain, altogether." The old man guffawed quietly. "Actually, if my predictions hold out,

someday soon there won't be much of a difference between those two companies you just mentioned."

"Whatever you say." The young man hopped off the patio wall and slunk off. "Anyway: I'm not interested in languishing in the private sector, mister. I didn't claw my way through the Academy of Sciences for that kind of work: I'm Bydo Labs all the way."

"Would you rather waste away amongst your fellow doctor's ranks, then?" The old man raised his voice over the rainfall: the statement made the younger man pause. The elder noted the effect of his words. He waved his wrinkled hands out towards the glass pyramid before them, towards the capital of the Bydo Labs itself.

"Your thesis, Mister Roont: they will not accept it. Don't think they'll ever pay you more heed in the future than they just did in that auditorium."

The young man peered at the elder's face. He squinted to examine the wrinkled lines of the codger's mug through the fabric of the blood-red umbrella.

"You were in my audience, weren't you? Back row, right?"

Another grandfatherly smile. "I'm afraid I *was* your audience by the last ten minutes or so. Your colleagues— those arrogant old men that would mistakenly call themselves your 'betters'— well, let's just say that their hearts are waxed, their ears dull of hearing, and their beady little eyes are closed tight to these blessed, 'unorthodox' methods you profess."

The young doctor smirked. "You should be careful whom you call 'old', Mister."

The codger chortled. "Oh my, no: I'm actually much younger than I look. I've been told that I don't age well."

Roont stepped toward the man. "Well, just who the hell are you that I should care what you think about my ideas, anyway?"

The man hopped off the wall. He moved far more quickly— and with much more grace— than Roont thought possible from a man of such advanced age. "I am a convert to your way of thinking. No, wait, that's not right: it's better to say that I'm a *converter* of people to your way of thinking."

"You believe—"

"—like you, that mankind's salvation can only be achieved through certain—"

"—'unorthodox' methods." Roont smiled.

The old man nodded. That warm grin again graced his aged cheeks. He walked past the younger man and pressed a small white card into his hand.

"If you wake up tomorrow with a surplus of curiosity— or if you've grown tired of eating canned meals out of your dilapidated one-bedroom apartment in Bergedorf..."

Roont squinted at the man.

"Ah, no offense." He held up his hands and waxed grandfatherly again. "But, in any event: if you're so inclined, then there's someone I'd like you to meet tomorrow. Why don't you swing by Base Hamma in the morning? Show that card to a man there."

"Who?" He eyed the business card. "Base Hamma? The military, you mean?"

"Yes, indeed. Ask for a Major Sven Wraith."

Roont squinted again. "Sven Wraith? Sounds like a demented pirate..."

"Oh, he's a very special person to me: one of the charter members of my little clique."

“Clique?” Roont watched the old man totter off. The young doctor inspected the card once again. “But this thing is blank: all it says is ‘T.I.A.’ in one corner. How is this supposed to get me on a military base?”

“Mmmm. Fear not: the card will do in spades, I should say. However, I admit that I’ve been meaning to add a nice little logo to it: something not too flashy, but nonetheless eye-catching.” His smile drooped with melodramatic tragedy. “But, alas: my expertise doesn’t extend to such things.”

“And the letters?”

“Just my personal motto, Mister Roont.” He turned to face the young man. “A little mantra of good news that I’ve been trying to spread around the globe these past lonely years.”

“Mantra? A ‘principle’, you mean?”

The man’s wrinkly grin parted even further: the smile moved out of the realm of ‘grandfatherly’ and into darker, more sinister waters:

“It is the principle *of* principles. It stands for ‘Trust in Antipathy’.” He turned and strode off. “If you truly want your work to be appreciated, Doctor Roont, then the good Major Wraith will initiate you into the fold: in fact, he’ll become your immediate superior in the future.”

“My immediate superior?” Sam Roont smirked. “Right, I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves, aren’t we? What about you, huh? Your name is...”

“Unimportant, Mister Roont. My name is unimportant, as are so many things in this world: things like pride, ego, and even unjustifiable moral codes. Why, a human life itself can be thought of as irrelevant, assuming the loss of one ensures the survival of many, don’t you think?”

Roont stared at the rain-soaked pavement.

“Mister Roont?”

“Well, I believe that, of course: the calculus isn’t too difficult in such a case...”

The old man’s sinister grin returned. “Come around to this project, my good young doctor, and you’ll be crunching numbers like you wouldn’t believe...”

### **120 Minutes to Gestation.**

“...like... I wouldn’t... believe....”

Two bony hands gripped his shoulders; they sent a merciless surge of pain through his head.

“Jesus!” Roont’s bloodshot eyes flew open.

“Doctor.” Jordan Rails stood over him. The young post-doc’s white lab coat was tattered in many places, shorn apart in others. A shiny black goo— most likely motor oil— lay in streaks along his forehead and neck, mixed with the sloppy, sweat-caked lines of his skin.

“What the devil?” Roont shook the cobwebs from his head and wobbled to his feet: he appeared uninjured, short of a massive headache. “How long was I out? Where are the emergency teams and why is it so damn dark in here?”

“*Up* here.” The youth corrected.

Roont took stock of his surroundings: the two were perched atop a thin catwalk bridge. A swift current of water rushed by mere inches beneath their feet.

Jordan Rails motioned to the communication panel against the wall. “There’s no response from anyone, no matter whom I try to call.”

“Where’re the others?”

The post-doc shook his head. “There was nothing I could do: they were swept away.”

“*Nothing* you could do?” Roont gripped the railing with white knuckles.

“I was trying to drag you up the scaffolding: if I’d tried reaching for anyone else...” his voice trailed off.

Roont wiped down his forehead. “Damn it: what kind of nightmare is this?”

“The worst kind, sir.” Jordan pointed down the catwalk. “You’d better take a look at something I *did* save from the current.”

“You got someone out?”

Jordan shook his head: “My colleagues were irrelevant compared to this, sir: you need to look at it *now*.”

Roont walked off down the scaffolding, but slowed as he noticed a vicious yellow pinprick of light at the other end. When he saw the glowing outline of the object before him a lump rose up in his throat: the outline was decidedly spherical.

Roont walked very slowly. He reached one side of the damaged Force Orb and walked around it like a skittish barn-mouse circling a mousetrap laden with cheese.

*And what rotten cheese we grow...*

When he approached the far side of the Orb all his fears were realized: a small crack in the shell— like the hole from a baseball sent through a glass window— marred the surface. The light emanating from this nick was too bright to look at.

Rails watched the doctor examine the sphere. “So, is it—”

“—activated.” He growled. “100-percent. The damage runs all the way down into the Zona Pellucida.”

“So it’s gestating?” Rail’s face drooped. “We have to kill it off: the Orb must be scrubbed.”

“Damn it: we *can’t* scrub the fucker.” Roont snapped. “At least, not from here.” He motioned below them. “The Antibydo pipelines are all the way down there: we can’t get to them.”

“What, then?”

Roont looked back at the sphere; it bled the light of the sun itself out the pinprick crack: “I don’t know, but if we don’t get this thing into an *Ab Ex Mortis* bath soon then we’re gonna have a front row seat to the opening of the gates of hell.”

The two men considered various options available to them, all of which were either impractical or impossible. Rails then suggested the most sensible solution: run like hell and hope for the best.

“We can’t do that!” Roont protested. “Damn it, even if we could get topside and hop a wave-skim vessel to the city it wouldn’t make any difference: you’ve had enough schooling to understand what these things can do when they ‘hatch’. It’ll be Dobkeratops all over again!”

That left the pressing question: what to do, then?

“This is impossible: there’s no way we can get this thing topside in time.” Rails kicked the sphere with his shoe. “It weighs a good 600 pounds, for one thing.”

Rails' kick made the Force Orb spin very slightly on its axis: the fissure in the glassy sphere also moved, casting its almighty inner light on a set of tubes beside the catwalk.

"Wait." Roont pointed: "look at this." He approached one of these metallic tubes: it was like an elevator shaft without the elevator.

"What is it?"

"These are emergency evacuation conduits: assuming the base *had* power these things would use concentrated air pressure to hurl a body up through the base."

Rails' eyes widened: "Where does it go? Is it anywhere near your office?"

The doctor shook his head. "No: nowhere near that high. I think these hit medical: they go to the infirmary." He forced the conduit's panel open and was greeted with a faint gust of air. It did little more than ruffle his dark brown hair.

"Not enough air power to move a mosquito."

"But what if we plugged it with a cork, huh?" Jordan eyed the Force Orb, and then the shaft: they each bore similar diameters.

The doctor grinned "Like a potato in a tailpipe. Nice thinking."

Both men were doused in sweat by the time they managed to wedge the Orb inside the tube. Roont clamped the hatch shut and sighed:

"The air current should push the thing up to medical in a few minutes. Now we need to pray that those pinhead morons in the infirmary can put two-and-two together and make sure this thing gets up to my *AEM* vats; it still has a long way to go from medical."

Jordan squinted: "What? What do you mean by that? There's no need to worry about *that* kind of thing at all."

The good doctor didn't know what to make of this statement until Rails pointed at a rusty lever beside the tube marked 'decompression valve'. He blinked at the sight of it: "We can't pull that: it would flood the infirmary and at least three floors in either direction. The people up there would be crushed to death by the water pressure before they even knew what hit 'em: there'd be no chance for anyone to survive!"

"But it would propel the Orb like a bottle rocket. We could get the damn thing much closer to where it needs to be." Rails grabbed Roont's shoulder in a forceful, if diplomatic, embrace: "Doctor, listen: whatever's happening here is huge, catastrophic even. We should assume that everyone in the infirmary is dead."

"Ridiculous: that's far too big an assumption to make based on what we know!"

Rails ran a hand over his luxurious black hair in annoyance: "Look: even if there are survivors— and that's a *big* if— it's like you say: no one will be around much longer if this Orb doesn't get scrubbed."

Roont crossed his arms: "Which is exactly why we're praying that somebody upstairs gets the hint and drags the god-damned thing up to where it needs to be. Unfortunately, we're going to have to have a little faith—"

Jordan grabbed the decompression lever: "Why settle for faith, doctor, when the numbers are so plain and clear?"

The post-doc faced the tube, and then, with two steady hands, he yanked the lever with all his might.

### **100 Minutes to Gestation.**

Samantha's first thought was that she'd lost her eyes, or at least her eyesight. Then a train of white sparks briefly danced on her periphery.

*I'm not blind, just buried...*

"Urrrrgh!" She strained her limbs and managed to worm out from beneath the soft metal cabinet that pinned her. Her right arm screamed in protest as she did so. There wasn't enough light for her to inspect her arm, but she could feel a sticky film of blood oozing over her shoulder.

Another train of disorganized sparks flared behind Sam, and then a row of brutal yellow emergency floods flared to life overhead. The light they provided was minimal and ugly, but it was better than walking blind.

The infirmary was unrecognizable: the floor was raised up on one side, creating a precipitous slope in the metal floor. It looked like everything that wasn't bolted down went crashing off to one side, including Samantha.

*And the others, of course...*

Sam's eyes flickered in their milky orbs.

"Chovert? Doctor?" She scrambled on top of the junk pile. "Anybody!?"

A groan met her ears. There was movement further down in the junk pile: the doctor dragged herself out from under the clutter. Her disheveled white lab coat was covered in dirt, but free of blood. Rayne then noticed her left leg: the doctor's limb was bent at the ankle. Specifically, it was bent the wrong way.

Sam clicked her tongue. "Oh, lord: don't move! That looks like it's busted up."

The woman glared at the pilot with clenched teeth: "I'm a fucking doctor, Samantha: I can manage my own diagnosis." She collapsed on her back as soon as she was free of the debris. "But I'd rather not end up crushed to death beneath my own filing cabinet." Sweat beaded up on her head as she looked up at the Typer. "What's going on? What just happened?"

Sam looked around: she didn't really have an answer. "Armageddon, at first glance." She shook her head. "It looks like we're boxed in here." She tapped her fingers on a dead console nearby, and then she kicked it with her steel-toed shoe: this was Samantha's idea of 'technical-support'.

"Communications are down, I guess."

"Can we get to any supplies, at least?"

The Typer shrugged. "I don't even know which way is up." The emergency floods, far from being a comforting source of light, provided so little illumination—and cast so many odd shadows—that the effect was closer to a macabre funhouse than anything else.

*Or a mausoleum...* Samantha pulled her mind away from such panicky thoughts.

The doctor grimaced as she palpated her deformity. "Okay, then: time for some improvisation." She looked up at the pilot. "Well, then: if you'd be so kind..."

Samantha followed the doctor's instructions, and in a few minutes she had the woman's wound stabilized and—with an agonizing crack—she re-set the bone.

The doctor passed out shortly after that.

Sam rolled off the floor and sat on her haunches. She took a moment to cradle the rent flesh on her shoulder, but only a moment: it would be 'unseemly' to dwell on that little flesh wound. SPAR had taught this tough young cookie how to deal with her body's desire for coddling.

*Now, if I could just remember those damn lessons...*

Her head rose to level like a startled animal's: there was a figure approaching from the darkness beyond the floods. The figure walked unsurely, awkward and hesitant.

"Chovert? Hello? Goddamnit, kid: is that you?" She hopped up and met the figure head-on, nearly bumping right into Nurse Denise. The brunette woman steadied herself on Sam's shoulders.

"Denise, hey." She looked the woman in the eyes: the nurse appeared to be rather disoriented.

*Aren't we all, though?*

"What... happened?" The nurse struggled to brush the cobwebs out of her head.

"Dunno: maybe the reactor went psycho on us. That, or we're under attack..." her yellow eyes blinked in discomfort. "Uh, is there something wrong, Denise?"

The nurse stared at her own hand, the one that just touched Samantha's shoulder. A streak of blood marred her fingernails. Denise's mouth trembled in horror. Her fingers—and soon her whole arm—shook like a leaf.

"Hey, there, Denise..." Sam tried to clutch the shaken woman's shoulder with a reassuring touch, but the nurse recoiled in horror.

"N— no! Oh, god!" She bawled hysterically as she gaped at the blood on her hand. "Oh, god: *no!*" She ran off in the opposite direction, wagging her limb as if a rattlesnake had just sunk its fangs beneath her flesh.

"Hey! Don't do that! It's dark over there: watch out!"

Denise didn't get far before she ran into another shadowy figure: Chenine Chovert emerged from the darkness, apparently none the worse for wear. The little pop-tart did, however, sport a nice column of crimson down one nostril. Despite the horror of the moment Sam nearly laughed at the sight of her: she was intimately familiar with nosebleeds from her time in the commandos (given all the 'lively discussions' she and her troop-mates would have in their barracks) but with Chovert's bean-pole frame and delicate features it almost looked like the girl could pass out from the blood-loss.

*She's only got a few liters to spare, after all...*

Denise, however, didn't find this sight comical at all. The woman took one look at Chenine's dripping schnoz before screaming like a child. She jumped backward with almost instinctual terror. The hysterical woman waved that bloody hand of hers back and forth as and— babbling incoherently— shuffled backwards down the dark incline of the floor.

"Damn it, Denise! What the hell is wrong with—"

That was as far as the Typer got: a violent cascade of sparks exploded around Denise's feet. The nurse's body contorted in a violent spasm. Her eyes glazed over, she fell to her scraped knees and then landed on her face. Her body lay prone in a pool of black water, greasy with oils and contaminants.

This water also bristled with current, courtesy of a nearby power cable that wormed out of the ceiling and danced over the water like a bucking snake.

Sam cursed and quickly retrieved a busted wooden pole from the pile behind her. She jammed the stick against Denise's shirt collar and, with surprising strength, dragged the woman's body out of the deadly water. Chenine stood and watched this effort, her sapphire eyes wide; the girl carefully pulled the cord out of the water as Samantha inspected the unconscious nurse.

“She’s arrested: her heart’s quit on her.”

Chenine stared at the smoking body in disbelief. “We don’t have access to any working medical equipment in here: everything appears to have been damaged or buried.”

“Son of a bitch!” Sam returned to her haunches and cradled her head. “Alright, fine: we have to consider her dead, then. Our priority right now is to defend the base, or what’s left of it.”

“Defend it from what?” Chenine tilted her head.

“We need to assume that we’re under attack.” Sam shuffled over to the dark water’s edge. “Is the infirmary exit through there?”

“Yes. Well, it’s *down* there, anyway.”

Sam about-faced: the doctor regained consciousness. She sat up on her side and motioned to the floor. “We’re on such a slant, here. This water probably goes down about five meters or so at its deepest. The door should be at the bottom of that, if it’s intact at all.”

“Well, let’s see.” Samantha produced her utility knife and cut her khakis apart at the upper thigh. She discarded the bulk of these thick-sewn pants: they’d act like a huge sponge in the water. She sidled up to the liquid’s edge before the doctor warned:

“It might still not be safe, you know.”

“Is there any other way to find out?” She looked at Chovert: “You wouldn’t happen to have a potato we could hook wires up to, do you?”

Chenine looked at Samantha, then the water, and then Denise’s body. Without a word she retrieved Sam’s wooden pole and jammed it against Denise’s shoulder, sending the corpse tumbling back down into the water.

Sam gaped in horror: “What the hell is wrong with you, Chovert?”

The lithe girl pointed at the body: the muscles in the dead nurse’s arms and legs twitched in clumsy spasms. The body ‘shivered’ on the black glassy water even as a small tendril of sparks rose off the silver heart-and-teardrop bracelet on Denise’s pale white wrist.

Chenine shrugged: “Rigor mortis has yet to set in, so her muscles are still sensitive to electrical stimulation.”

Samantha blinked.

“She means that the water’s still juiced.” The doctor shook her head. Disgust was evident in her voice. “Chenine: that’s possibly the most callous and disturbing ‘biological experiment’ I’ve ever seen.”

“Have you no respect for the dead, Chovert?” Sam alleviated her own discomfort with a quip. She noticed a second wire dancing on the water, retrieved it from the fluid, and watched as Denise’s body came to a sudden rest.

*Make that an eternal rest...*

Chenine crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s hard enough to have respect for the living, isn’t it? Consequently, you’re *not* actually going down there, are you?”

“Why not?” Sam kicked off her shoes and dipped her bare toes in the sludge.

“The water’s safe, and I don’t see any other way out of here, do you?” She drew a breath and plunged beneath the murky brine. Samantha managed to navigate down through the muck and locate the door, but it was jammed shut. A few kicks from her naked legs provided enough leverage to crack it open.



“Right,” she addressed Chenine as the girl helped Samantha out of the water, “looks like we can get up into the main corridor through there.”

“But what would we do we do after that? It’d be better for us to stay put and wait for rescue.”

“That’s what the tell you to do if you’re lost in the woods, at least.” The doctor shrugged. “I don’t know what they’d say about a place like Base-10, though.”

Sam glared at Chenine. “We’re not a bunch of cowering civilians, Chovert, or even techies: you and I are soldiers, and we’ve got a duty to protect this base. I don’t know what happened, but until we find out we have to focus on getting to the Raiden launch bays: otherwise we’re of no use to anyone.”

The doctor nodded. “I agree with Sam. Assuming this disaster is base-wide there’s sure to be casualties in need of treatment.” She hobbled up onto one foot with Samantha’s assistance. “Treatment is where *my* duty lies, gimp leg or no.”

A drop of sweat beaded over Chenine’s brow as she stared at the black water. “I understand that, but there must be another way out.”

Sam shrugged. “This underwater route isn’t particularly easy, but I don’t see any alternatives...”

Chenine quickly leapt atop a pile of overturned desks. With the agility of a small cat she took hold of a bent iron bar sticking out of the ceiling. Swiving her body like a gymnast, Chenine flipped herself over the rod and set down on top of it.

“Vents?” Sam peered up at the girl with curious eyes. “That doesn’t help us: climbing around in those would be even harder for someone with a busted ankle.”

The doctor shook her head as she watched the Typer disappear into the darkness. “Those vents are all sealed with rivets, Chenine: you can’t—”

There was a series of banging noises. They began softly, but then grew increasingly louder. Next came a grunt, followed by a scream.

“Clutz.” Sam sneered as she dove beneath the black vent shaft; Chenine came crashing down to the ground, but thanks to the ‘padding’ of Samantha’s body she didn’t hit the metal floor outright.

“Damn it!” The captain cursed as she pushed the girl off her. “That’s enough monkey business!” She glared at the chastised girl with hard eyes, then returned to the doctor and helped her back to her feet. “No more debates: it’s time to make like a seal and swim. Got it, Chovert?”

Chenine’s gaze wandered between her squadmate and the water; her breaths became progressively quicker and she crossed her arms over her chest once again.

“I’m not going.” She declared. “I won’t go in there.”

Samantha didn’t think she heard the pop-tart correctly, so she asked Chenine to repeat that little declaration. She did, and Sam was not particularly amused. She gave the mousey little girl a choice: she could either swim through the doorway under her own power, or be dragged through it in a chokehold.

“That’s not very practical, and you’ve got the doctor to look after, anyway.” Chenine motioned to a series of cylindrical tubes lining the far end of the floor. “Those emergency medical chutes are a pipeline up here from the lower decks, but they need to be unlocked from our side. If I were to hear any banging I’d need to open them—”

“Yeah, well you’re not Florence Nightingale, Chovert: you’re an angel of *vengeance*, not mercy. Besides, those tubes are all flooded! No one in the lower struts could have survived a hull breach!”

“We don’t know that for certain.” Chenine disagreed.

Sam growled at the girl: “Chenine: until we know otherwise we have to assume that everyone in the rest of the base is dead. Either that, or incapacitated. We only had skeleton-staffing as it is, so there’re only a few dozen people around here, anyway. It’s possible that no one else survived this wonderful little roller-coaster ride.”

“That’s unlikely.” Chenine shook her head. “And I think it’s important that I wait for any possible signs of life, Captain.”

Tensions mounted, and Samantha came quite close to kicking Chenine’s ass. The Brass Ring was saved by the doctor’s intervention: she explained that it would be difficult for Sam to carry the Ketoni girl’s unconscious body under the water without getting liquid in her lungs.

“I could always tape her lips and nose shut...” Sam grumbled as she positioned the doctor on her back. “I’ve wanted to do that ever since I first met her.”

“Manners, Sam.” The doctor whispered. “There’s no need to lose your head for diplomacy.”

“Of course not.” Samantha sneered as she trudged into the water. “But ‘duct-tape diplomacy’ is so much more satisfying.” She glanced back at the Brass Ring one last time. “Not to mention it’s ‘complaint-free’.” She looked at Chenine with cocked eyes. “You better not die in here, Chovert: I don’t want my insubordination charge against you going on your record *posthumously*, you hear?”

Chenine gazed at Samantha and nodded. “Take care of yourself as well, Captain.” The girl pulled a small case from the back pocket of her khakis: a little compact mirror.

“I’m not that interested in fixing my hair at the moment.” Samantha hesitantly plucked the case from Chenine’s outstretched hand.

“You’re a commando, Captain, not a cat: there’s a vanity light inside.”

“Tch! I always thought vanity was a sin.” She nodded at the girl with appreciation, but scowled again: “I guess you prove that pig-headedness is more problematic, don’t you?”

Sam gripped the doctor’s ankles, holding the woman in a tight piggy-back. She drew a long breath, bent her knees, and then disappeared beneath the murky brine.

As she scrambled through the dark water Samantha could’ve sworn that she heard a loud ‘thump’ rising from the far side of the ruined medical bay: that was very near those emergency transportation chutes. The noise was violent enough to jostle her body through the black water.

*Please, god: don’t let that be a survivor...*

After all, there’d just be no living with the pop-tart if it was...

### **87 Minutes to Gestation.**

Scott was on the verge of tears as he shimmied up the last stretch of elevator cable. His hands were raw, ten kinds of oils constantly dripping on his mottled head and there was absolutely no light to speak of inside the hollow shaft. That, and it was at least

a ten-story drop if his fingers gave way, depending on how many floors below him were actually in one piece.

Just when he thought he couldn't take anymore Scott noticed the walls of the shaft reflected a ruddy red light from above: the warning light constantly flashed on and off.

*I know that beat...*

Struggling with the last throes of his effort, Tabris clambered up to the top of the shaft and mantled up the elevator platform. The shreds of his uniform pants (his makeshift 'climbing gloves') slipped on a streak of oil and he nearly went flying off the edge. With a wild scream Tabris managed to grasp the edge of the open elevator door: he clung to this secure fixture for a good three minute before screwing up the courage to let go and get to his feet.

"Mary Magdalene..." he gaped at the hot zone of Ops: this spacious command center used to be one long, hexagonal room with a view. It was now about a dozen 'rooms', each separated by an avalanche of rubble. He called out for survivors:

"Jen!"

There was no answer.

"Ramirez!"

Still no answer. He called for Jen again, but with the same result.

Tabris felt like the proverbial last man on earth as he wandered the ruined commander center. Half of the place was now open-air, and Scott clambered atop a pile of ruined workstations and scrap metal. He stepped forward. In the schematics of his mind he reasoned that this would've been the inner railing of the panorama window, and sure enough Scott emerged from the rubble at the top of the world: the area in front of him was totally exposed to the sea. He stood face-to-face with a 25-story drop.

*Well, given that the central strut's been compromised, that might only be a 22-story drop, or so...* Tabris wasn't particularly interested in this point, though.

The sky was moody and cold. There was no rain, though Scott noticed a peculiar smoke tail curling up on the horizon at Perimeter 1-0.

*Even that little island was affected, was it?*

What the hell could have caused all this devastation?

Then he noticed a peculiar noise rising over the wind and the sea breeze. Scott spent quite a bit of time hanging around the base's scaffolding, and he was familiar with the normal noises of the ocean.

This didn't sound normal.

He gripped the ruined steel wall to his left and scrambled up to the next ledge: from this vantage he could see the entire northern section of the base. Scott's first thought was that the central strut looked a little bigger than normal, but then his blood froze:

The central strut was fractured clean down its side. There was something *layered* along it, though: it was white, mottled, and burgeoned with organic blood vessels beneath its bleached skin. The sickening body spanned the lengths of several rugby fields, and at its thickest bore the diameter of a small house. Three of the most hideous things Scott had ever seen—like the bloated heads of a trio of demonic cats mutilated with sulfuric acid—were feasting on the central strut!

That wasn't right, though. The central head, which loomed as large as a Korang fighter, was the only one feasting, as it was the only head bearing any useable teeth.

*But teeth sticking out of its forehead?*

Tabris had never been in the physical presence of an OPI before, and he wasn't thrilled about this meeting. The young tech's black dress-shoes scuffed on the uneven surface as the unbelievable scale of the behemoth gave him vertigo.

One of the OPI's toothless heads glared idly into space while the dominant central head chowed down on the base's superstructure. Tabris' scuffling drew its attention, and it suddenly craned its neck in his direction. It gaped with a toothless maw and emitted a devastating shriek. Its burning yellow eyes exploded with renewed vigor. Scott fell from the perch clutching his ears in pain. He landed hard on the Ops balcony just as the gigantic hydra whipped through the air above him.

One of the demon's ratty paws clipped the ruined wall beside him, raining debris upon him. Scott frantically backpedaled on his rear as chunks of concrete the size of cinder blocks landed all around his body and his fragile human limbs. He made it to the shell of Ops' hot zone, and cowered beneath a workstation. The tech curled into a tight little ball.

Ops rattled, and then shook outright as the hydra-demon buzzed overhead. Scott could see the monster's shadow as it darkened the glass-studded floor. He bolted upright as he noticed a scrunched-up leg peeking out from the workstation across from him.

"Ramirez!"

It was difficult to see the black pant leg and polished dress shoe beneath the shadow of the console: getting close would be even harder.

Scott crouched low as the lethal shadow above him waxed and waned; he timed his sprint to occur immediately after one of the hydra's passes. The tech scrambled across the floor—cutting his palms on dozens of glass shards as he did—and tumbled beneath Ramirez's console.

"God in heaven, man! What's up here? Do we have any systems online at *all*?" Tabris felt around the dark space, looking to put a reassuring hand on the duty officer's shoulder.

To his horror, he found that the duty officer's prone body stopped at the neck: the only thing beyond was a chunk of caved-in console and a terrible, sticky mess all around that. The nascent smell of death and decay permeated the air.

Scott recoiled and tumbled out from under that messy tomb. The hydra made another pass over the ruined metal ceiling as he did. The shock of air accompanying the monster sent Tabris hurtling end over end across the floor. He came to a rest prone on the floor, and when he looked up his heart leapt into his throat.

"Oh, god: Jen!"

Drake lay huddled in the corner of the room, crouched low under the shattered Plexiglas barrier between the hot zone and the cold zone. Ops' blaring red strobe lights reflected off her pale white legs: they were curled up to her chin and the black skirt of her uniform dress lay hiked-up and disheveled around her thighs. The techie was covered in blood from her black pumps to her crushed pink hairdo, but none of it appeared to be hers.

When she looked up at Scott the private's eyes bore no trace of that trademark Jen Drake cynicism or wit. In fact, they bore very little rational thought at all: the girl's expression was glazed, and her pupils fully dilated. She didn't look right at Scott, but instead stared straight ahead and shook her head back and forth very slowly. One of her

blanched arms supported her head against her knee. She cupped one of her breasts in the other hand and quietly squeezed and relaxed the flesh in regular motions.

“Didn’t see it.” She shook her head more vigorously. “Liesle, I couldn’t find it: the plushie... my plushie. I don’t know where it went off to. Oh, god, Lees: I’m so sorry...”

“Jen.” Scott got to his feet and took two steps towards her. A loud cracking noise sounded all around him and he stopped moving. He looked down at a series of venous fracture in the floor: fractures that grew in both length and width.

The floor gave way less than a second later.

Tabris flailed his arms as he fell into the darkness below: he cried in pain as his cut and bruised hands grasped a power cord in front of him. His lower body dangled over a black void: a deadly well of no less than several floors, and no more than the entire vertical length of the entire base loomed beneath him. He writhed in agony as his bloodied palms slipped down the length of the cable, which cut into his tender hands like a cheese grater.

“Jen!” He screamed. “Jen!”

The shadow of the hydra darkened Ops once again. Jen yelped like a puppy and curled up even tighter.

“I’ll get it for you, Lees! Don’t worry... no worries: I’ll find it! I can...” She squeezed herself more vigorously, as if her flesh were a stress-ball.

“Jen!” Scott cried again. His legs pumped all around as he squirmed to find purchase on some ledge or crag: there was none.

“Jeeeen!” His hands slipped even further. “Snap out of it, damn it: Ramirez is dead, but you and I *aren’t*! You’ve gotta help me get this place working again before everybody—”

He cried as the black cord slackened: his body jerked downward before the loose cord caught itself on a serrated piece of concrete. A quiet tearing sound rose into the air as the jagged rock tore the black cord apart at the seams.

“Uh— uh!” Jen grabbed her head in her hands and buried her face between her knees. “Nun-nuh!” She wagged her head to and fro in mad jerks.

Scott’s desperation peaked. His heart froze in his chest as he heard the last loose threads of his lifeline snap. He looked toward the psychotic girl with calmer eyes. Desperation fell out of his face, replaced with a philosophical tranquility, and when he parted his lips his words were surprisingly smooth:

“Jen. Jennifer.”

The girl stopped bawling for one brief moment and looked up at him with her bloodshot eyes. Her lips quivered as she surveyed him, at the moment uncertain about who she was, let alone who he was.

He smiled.

“You’re the smartest person I’ve ever known, Jen. I think you should know that.”

The hydra screamed from afar; its roar shook the ground itself. Tabris followed that terrible sound with his eyes, and when he looked back at Jen his smile was even wider: “When I watch you working up here I’m always thinking to myself: ‘is there anything she can’t do?’”

There was a loud snap. Tabris cemented his teeth on his lip and drew blood.

“You can damn-well do *this*, private!”

The rope lost all slack. Scott Tabris flailed at the floor with both hands. The young tech's body instantly slid backwards.  
He disappeared into the darkness below.

### 80 Minutes to Gestation

Samantha and the doctor made their way down a ruined corridor outside the auxiliary infirmary. The pair managed to stumble up a set of intact stairs and they were now well-above the main medical floor. Both of them were still soaked, and the pilot bled sweat from her forehead as she struggled to support the injured doctor.

"She's a prissy little bitch if I've ever met one." Sam panted.

"Don't be too hard on her. Chenine's somewhat well-known for her—"

"—cattiness."

"I was *going* to say 'obstinance'." The doctor panted along with Sam as they trudged down the corridor like a duo in a three-legged sack race.

*Minus the sack...* Sam rolled her eyes.

"And, if you'd noticed things a little more closely, you'd have seen that she wasn't simply being a 'bitch': she was afraid."

"Of what?"

The doctor sighed. "Chenine has some issues with water: in fact, she hates it."

"That's 'catty', isn't it?" The pilot smirked. "Well hell: if you knew that she was just stalling to keep herself dry, why didn't you speak up? I'm not in the habit of encouraging phobias."

"What good would that do? We still couldn't get her out of the infirmary if we wanted to, and you were right when you said that we need to take care of our duties. No one can be forced to do something that's against their nature, Sam, especially if they'd rather die than do it. And you can't just make someone spring into action when it involves facing an extraordinarily deep-seated fear like that: it's up to them to choose how they'll act, and what they're willing to face. It all boils down to what type of person they are, not how hard someone else is willing to push them."

Samantha growled with indignation. "What 'type', huh? We're supposed to be soldiers. 'Fear' is inconsequential."

"But it's part of being human, isn't it?"

Samantha didn't answer, and for a time the pair trudged on in silence.

"Why the hell would Chovert be afraid of something like *that*, of all things? Ocean water I could understand, but a puddle like that?"

"Tch! Try getting her to take a bath sometime." The doctor smiled. "I was curious about that myself, and it actually makes sense. Confidentially, Sam, I checked her personnel record one day and found something very interesting under her parental history. It seems that her mot—"

The doctor's feet shuffled to a stop as quickly as her speech dropped off: a giant slab of fallen metal lay in their path. It lay evenly on the rusty floor. A deep crimson spatter radiated from under it in all directions. One adult limb, pale and lifeless, peeked out from beneath that horrible mausoleum. That was the only sign of life lost in the structural collapse except for one other thing: an article of clothing.

It was, in fact, a very tiny article of clothing.

The sunny pink toe of a child's shoe glistened with a coating of blood and water. It just barely jutted out from under the mess, enough to reveal its untied laces and the image of a shiny flute with musical notes beaming out the side. The doctor fell to her knees and gripped the tattered sole of the little girls' shoe with delicate fingers.

"Piperel... oh, no. Oh... oh god..."

Samantha swallowed. "But she's supposed to be at the Nash."

"Today's the start of her two-week vacation from kindergarten." The woman choked up and slid down against the slab. "Oh, g— god!"

Try as she might, Samantha couldn't get the doctor to continue through the base with her. In all honesty, she didn't feel like trying very hard anyway. She was forced to leave the woman, weeping and cradling the dead girl's shoe, and after she'd made some headway down the corridor the haunting echo of a mother's open bawling met her ears: it chilled Samantha's metal spine to its core.

She came to a porthole, its glass fractured apart. She scrambled over a dozen shards of busted pipes and debris and put her face against the hole. Sam could see only a small sliver of purple water beyond, but the smell of the fresh sea air and the reassuring gust of wind were pleasant. As she rested her face against the cracked window one thought played through Sam's head over and over again:

*What in the hell is happening to us?*

A massive row of teeth darkened the window; the lethal choppers clamped down mere inches from Samantha's head. She leapt backwards and landed on her backside. The gigantic fangs rose up in the air and instantly the corridor was bathed in yellow fire as a humongous eye loomed before the window. It gazed at Sam with smoldering hatred; the hollow, dead slit burned with an intense yellow flame.

People are 'shocked' by different things, by and large. The things that a person is shocked by are mostly dependant on the type of person receiving the shock. For Samantha, the death of little Piperel was much more of a 'shock' than this development. In fact, as a former marine commando and current Raiden pilot, this situation didn't mess with her nerves at all.

To the contrary: this was a dull-as-dishwater job for the girl's muscle memory.

The pilot flipped over onto one knee and reached for a nearby pipe, which lay shorn apart on the floor, its end sharp as a razor. Sam screamed— not in fear, but like a discus thrower winding up her swing— as she brought the lethal projectile to her shoulder, steadied her legs and then sent the pipe hurtling towards that giant evil eye.

The pipe hit its mark. It struck the sinister organ dead-center. Curiously, the pipe seemed to 'drift' into the living flame of the eye like a bullet sailing through a sheet of gelatin as it tore into the vaporous flesh. A bright red hue blossomed in the object's wake, making the OPI's eye ruddy and discolored. This color almost immediately degenerated into that midnight black oil associated with the 'blood' of the Bydo.

A deafening peal of anger and pain rose above the corridor. Sam gripped her ears as the floor was set alive with tremors. The eye retreated, leaving a large train of black blood oozing around the edges of the porthole in its wake.

"Right: scratch that last question, at least..."

She now had a fairly good idea about what was happening to them. There were still the questions of 'why' and 'how', but at least the 'what' was settled.

The monster's abrupt attack did manage to jog Samantha's geography a bit: she recognized that the corridors she'd been wandering through were somewhere above the main infirmary level. She muddled through this dark, leaky area, often relying on Chenine's compact mirror to provide any light. The only other source of illumination came from ruined windows, staggered a good twenty feet apart as they wound down the otherwise pitch-black corridors.

*Bless the light, at least. I suppose that in the end she's a fairly thoughtful girl: the little tart deserves my help, pig-headedness aside...*

After nearly fifteen minutes of aimless wandering Samantha lost her way. She wandered around a series of anonymous corridors bearing ugly gray ventilation shafts. Soon, however, she came upon something encouraging: shafts bearing ridiculously oversized rivets. Sam struggled with the strap around her shoulder and pulled out the little 'item' she'd borrowed from the ruined armory.

The girl leveled the Aegis handgun at the vent shaft, narrowed her eyes into protected slits, and then vaporized the tough outer casing with one of the devastator slugs. She clambered into the dark little shaft and wormed her way through: this was one situation where that the pilot found her muscular frame to be a disadvantage.

*This'd be much smoother going with a little less clothing and a fresh coat of grease...*

Eventually she came to the other end. Sam tried to peek through the thick grating of the vent: all she could see was the pale, ruddy rays of emergency floods; in all her travels through the crippled base Samantha had yet to see any working lights outside of the base's infirmary. That gave her a pretty good idea of where she was heading into.

She leveled the Aegis at the slit, careful to position her cramped body a good three meters back. Even at that distance the resulting explosion sent a molten flare of cordite back in her face. The smelly plume irritated her nose and burned her lungs like all get out. Coughing like a sick badger, Sam slid the front of her body out of the vent; she wiggled her cramping shoulders and arched her stiff back, relieved to be at least halfway out of the stifling vent.

*A sure-fire change for the better...*

The infirmary below her, however, had taken a turn for the worse: the floodwater had risen to cover the entire slanting floor. Sam herself was only about five-feet above the black water's surface. A train of sparks caught her eye, and she noticed another errant power cable dancing on the risen water. They'd pulled that one out earlier, but in its rising the water had found it again, and again it graced the liquid with an invisible—yet supremely deadly—power.

“Oh, my god.” Sam's eyes swam around the scene. She confirmed that every inch of available surface was waterlogged. It was true, then: there was nowhere left to stand, and there was nothing to see but black water all around.

*That, and the electrified corpse of a little Ketoni girl somewhere in that water...*

The pilot alternatively mourned for her lost squadmate while simultaneously cursing that mysterious monster that was ultimately responsible for her demise.

“Fucking murderer!” She hissed.

“Who is?”

Sam nearly fell from the vent as a voice sounded beside her. She swivled her lower body and craned her neck up: a support beam rested mere feet from the shaft,



around which a lanky pair of legs were tightly wrapped. Chenine's body hung upside-down from this perch and her sapphire eyes glowed in the darkness, much like a large and curious bat's.

For an instant Samantha was dumbstruck.

"Y— you reckless, silly little bitch!" She managed. "You nearly got killed down here! If I hadn't decided to— well, if I hadn't *needed* to come back—"

The girl smiled. "I love you too, Captain, but we have a rather serious problem on our hands."

"Problem?"

Chenine pointed down into the water and Sam followed along. She saw it almost immediately: bobbing on the water like a child's blow-up beach ball, but glowing like a demented disco light.

She gritted her teeth: "Is that what I think it is?"

Chenine bobbed her head up and down. "Yes. Actually I'm pretty sure that it's mine. But seeing as how I don't have a Raiden to interact with it at the moment, I'd just as soon put some distance between us, alright?" She struggled off the beam and prepared to clamber into the vent with Samantha. The captain, however, didn't move. When the white-haired girl grunted for Sam to start moving up the shaft the captain shook her head.

"Look there: it's cracked at the side. That's not particularly good. Besides, do you think it's an accident that the thing came all the way up here in the first place?"

"What are you implying?" Chenine's face drooped at the notion that her rescue was no longer Samantha's primary motivation.

"It was sent here, and probably by someone who knew what to do with it."

"Pawning it off on someone else, you mean?" Chenine almost crossed her arms over her chest, but then thought better of it and kept her hands firmly cemented to the support beam.

"Be that as it may, we've got to get this thing into Antibydo as soon as possible."

"It's a long way to Dr. Roont's vats." Chenine shook her head. "Given current conditions, what if we can't make it up there?"

Sam narrowed her eyes. "Simple: we'll just pawn the fucker off on someone else."

### **65 Minutes to Gestation.**

"Mmmm-hmmm..."

Laura grunted in dreamy pain. When her senses returned she was greeted by the well-manicured face of Sven Wraith.

"Don't try to move around too much, Lieutenant."

"Am I banged up?" Ignoring Sven's advice, the Lieutenant lifted her head up, fell backwards with dizziness, and then plopped her noggin right back down on Wraith's uniform jacket: her impromptu pillow.

"No broken bones." He reassured her. "Unless your skull counts as a bone, and I think it just might."

"A fracture?" She carefully ran a finger along her head and felt a turban-like material wrapped around her brow. The material was soft, yet firm, and when Laura noticed a tear along the lower length of her uniform skirt she could see why.

*I've always been fond of that cushy material in the female-officer's dress uniform, but I never thought it'd be a lifesaver...*

Wraith explained that Laura had suffered runaway bleeding in the aftermath of the crash. Whether this was due to superficial skull damage or something more ominous he had no way of knowing. Apparently the elevator fell at least five floors before catching on a backup clamp; this saved their lives but tossed everyone about like marbles in a sack.

"From what I can tell," he shrugged, "we appear to be at the inferior deck level."

Commander Faught, ever stoic, sat against the opposite wall of the lift. The left leg of his usually immaculate white dress pants was stained with orange rust flakes and a dried train of blood along the inner thigh. Sven Wraith's black cane was bound along the length of his leg with three handkerchiefs knotted at intervals.

Laura looked the subcommander up and down: "You weren't injured, then?"

"Oh, no, no." Sven shook his head. He smiled ironically: "Your head was good enough to break my fall, and the Commander's leg provided further cushioning for my delicate frame. Incidentally, he's the one with a bona-fide compound fracture."

"A nick!" Faught grumbled. "It's merely a nick. And the sooner we get out of this blasted tin can and onto my Ops the better!"

Laura nodded. "What happened, sirs?"

Sven's brow furrowed into a dark wrinkle. "Enemy action."

"The Bydo?"

He grunted in the affirmative, but Laura noticed that there was no working communication system in the lift. She inquired as to how the hell Wraith could know such a thing. In reply, the subcommander motioned to his cane.

Laura eyed the makeshift splint girding the Commander's thigh: the cane's head—normally a dreadful somber black—sparkled faintly. A tiny whirlpool of dirty light eddied in the center of the palm-sized orb.

She blinked: "I don't understand..."

"The head of my cane is a scrubbed and preserved Bydo embryo, or at least part of one." He explained. "It can still express miniscule chemical reactions in response to high-level AS-Scans."

"You mean it's some kind of 'Bydo-detector'?" Laura marveled.

"Not for mere incarnations." He shook his head. "It's more like an Opie-detector."

"Disgusting thing." Faught scoffed. He shifted his injured leg in discomfort. "I'd sooner walk around with a mad raven on my shoulder than wield such a thing."

The subcommander smiled: "Be comforted by the fact that this cane is easily the most expensive piece of 'medical equipment' you'll ever have the pleasure of using."

"Where'd you even get something like that?" The Lieutenant asked.

"It was a given to me by Meri—" Wraith paused, bowed his head and then continued: "It was simply a gift from an Acquaintance of mine."

"Tch! Some gift!" Laura made another effort to get up, and upon her success took stock of their situation. "If we've been hit by an OPI and it took out all our defenses then why are we all... well, not dead?"

"That is a valid question." Faught nodded.

Wraith provided an answer: “I cleared the *Platonic Love* for launch a few minutes before the attack: Justin Storm must have engaged the target in battle.”

The Commander snarled. “Yes, but from what we know so far it appears that the boy lost.” Faught grunted a warning, then tossed Laura her little operator’s headset. The Lieutenant gazed at it dumbly until she bobbed her head to one side and realized that the thing had, in fact, been removed during her unconsciousness: she was far too accustomed to wearing that clunky little thing at all times. It wasn’t that the gold-hued trinket was much of a fashion statement (as a matter of fact, with its supposedly ‘ergonomic’ design— which Laura always claimed looked like a bent ‘Jesus-fish’— it certainly wasn’t) but it was support for the idea that a person can get used to something— *anything*, even— and get a little put-off by its loss.

*Though how such a philosophy could possibly apply to something like this uncomfortable metal ‘carp’ is beyond me.*

Nonetheless, Laura instantly felt better after wedging the operator’s headset back around her ear.

“Don’t bother scanning frequencies,” the old man cautioned, “there’s no response at Ops, or anywhere else for that matter. Ramirez is either dead, or unable to operate his consoles: the result is the same.”

Laura grunted with frustration. “Not that we’ve got a lot of people on hand, anyway.” Suddenly, she looked back at Wraith: “Have we tried Jen?”

The Commander scoffed half-heartedly.

“Private Drake?” Laura qualified her statement.

Wraith rubbed his forehead. “That’d be a little like asking a janitor to present at a board meeting, wouldn’t it? She was with Ramirez, and if he’s dead, then she’s—”

“Just as a matter of course, sir?”

The subcommander shrugged. “No, I didn’t try her: I don’t know her personnel-code offhand, and the Commander’s not in the habit of memorizing those codes, either: that’s your job. And stop calling me ‘sir’ every other sentence...”

Laura tapped her headset: “Call-up computer: patch me into headset number 6-15-18-205.”

Garbled noises flooded the Lieutenant’s ear: a soft, low pitch boom echoed across her tympanum, courtesy of the headset’s simulated ‘one-ear’ surround sound. Beneath all this she heard another sound: it was a cry, loud and very human.

And— to put it simply— utterly terrified.

“Jen!” Laura called. “Jen: what’s your status?”

A pop sounded, followed by a snakelike hiss: the static drone of dead air.

“What did you hear?” Faught demanded.

“Private Drake is alive, but I don’t know what her condition is.” She bit her lip: “Also, there was something else...”

“What ‘else’?”

“I think I could hear the OPI moving in the background.” She glanced at Wraith. “It sounded...” she shook her head. “Well: it sounded big.”

Faught growled again. He retrieved his white cap from the ground beside him and clapped it over his grey, disheveled scalp.

“That’s it, then: if the only thing standing between the safety of my base and a Bydo incarnation’s wrath is a frightened little girl with bubblegum on her lips and a nail

in her tongue then I'm sure as hell going to do what I must to get to Ops!" He dragged himself across the lift and came to a rest before the broken doors.

"I wouldn't be so gung-ho, Ronny." Wraith held up one hand, itself bloody and wrapped with another shard of Laura's skirt. "If I can't do it, surely—"

"Surely someone who knows the meaning of manual labor and the taste of his own sweat *can!*" The Commander grasped the doorframe with two gloved hands, then slipped the dress gloves off and roughly grabbed the frame with his massive, venous fingers.

Laura stumbled to his side: "Commander, sir! At least let me—"

"Rrrrrr-aaaagh!" Faught screamed with effort. Sweat almost instantly beaded along his wrinkled brow and arms: the old man's limbs bulged with a surprising girth of muscle. The veins of his arms writhed, then engorged to the point of bursting.

"Commander!" Laura cried again.

With another loud scream, Faught ripped the doors apart, and held them with writing arms.

"Laura— Lieutenant: the *cane!*" He rasped.

The Lieutenant quickly understood his logic, and within seconds she had Sven Wraith's cane unbound from the commander's busted leg and wedged between the magnetically-driven doors: the black stick instantly began bending at the middle as it strained to hold the doors apart.

"Everyone *out!*"

All three officers lunged through the doors and landed on the inferior deck outside the elevator in an undignified heap. Seconds later Wraith's cane snapped at the middle and disintegrated into dozens of splintery pieces. The subcommander sighed quietly, shuffled back towards the elevator and retrieved the cane's head: the preserved Bydo embryo.

"A shame," he sighed, "that was a very good cane..." He turned around to see Laura ministering to the commander, who lay gasping on the floor holding his leg in pain. "But I suppose that was also a very good effort, wasn't it?"

"Benefits of weight-training, right commander?" Laura smiled.

"Mine is simply a heartier generation, Miss Hayle: we always have been."

"With the benefits of arrogance, too, huh?"

"And the benefits of being a hero." Wraith sighed into his black glove as he wiped a train of sweat from his dark lip. "There'll just be no living with him after this..."

### **60 Minutes to Gestation.**

"I have to admit that your early papers advocating a theoretical 'Bydo Coefficient' struck me as ludicrous, but only at first. See: I replicated some of your old experiments during my studies— and even improved on some of your methods— but I think you were really on to something. I mean, the idea of bridging the gap between adaptive flesh and adaptive computer systems is revolutionary! With some additional work—"

Roont cut the babbling youth off with a hiss:

"In case you didn't know, a whole bunch of people just lost their lives back there."

“Better them than us, eh?” Jordan noticed the good doctor’s sour disposition. “What, are you still put-off about the decompression lever? Come on, doctor: we both saw that it obviously wasn’t working at full power: it wasn’t even strong enough to raise the water level by more than a few feet in your precious infirmary.”

“You didn’t know that at the time: you were ready to kill an unknown number of people just out of convenience.”

Rails crossed his arms and chewed his lip: “You almost make me wish that I left you down in the water.”

“Do I, now?”

The young post-doc smiled: “No, not really: that’s not true. Doctor, just let me start over, okay?”

“Start over?” Roont balked.

“I extended my residency three times just so I could finally have a chance to come out here for my field orientation: I’ve wanted to meet you for a long time now, but I suppose you already guessed as much.”

“And why is that?”

The callow doctor smiled and smoothed down his black hair: “I want to work with you.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding...”

“I know that you don’t even have a proper assistant out here: you rely on some shit-for-brains lieutenant who doesn’t even have a degree in an applicable field!”

“I rather like Scott Tabris.” Roont snarled. “He possesses a few endearing qualities.”

“Like what?” Rails laughed. He motioned for the good doctor to precede him into the airlock: once this door was sealed the outside water-level was sure to rise, but they were assured salvation from a death by drowning.

“For one thing, Scott Tabris is...” Roont stopped: he heard a noise buried under the sound of rushing water.

“What was that?” He looked all around him.

“It’s nothing.” Rails muttered as he pulled the lock shut. The air vents went to work, and soon the water level on the other side of the glass rose like a kite: it engulfed the catwalk in seconds, and the ceiling soon after that.

To Roont’s everlasting horror, two pale hands suddenly gripped the glass airlock from the other side: a face appeared. It was one of the other post-docs. The woman thrashed in the water before coming to a rest, her eyes vacant and lungs full of brine. Far behind her another lab coat-clad body writhed in agony before falling still.

The doctor glared at Jordan with contempt:

“*Swept away?* What the hell is wrong with you? That right there was obviously *not* swept away!” He grabbed the young man by his collar.

“I didn’t know that anyone survived!”

Roont shook him: “No: you only assumed that people *probably* survived! You piss-headed little prick!”

“Cut the sanctimonious crap, doctor!” Jordan yelled back. “When push comes to shove you gotta do the math and do what’s right by *you*. You damn well know that...”

Sam Roont whipped out his fist in a clumsy punch: it was enough to send Jordan down to the floor. When he spoke to the ailing kid again his voice was calmer:

“I think you need to know that I would *never* consider taking on a son-of-a-bitch like you, Rails. Oh, and didn’t you ask me what I liked most about Scott Tabris? Let me give you an answer:”

He kicked the post-doc’s head, hard enough to knock Jordan out cold.

“What I like the most about Scott Tabris is that he *doesn’t* remind me of me!”

### **55 Minutes to Gestation.**

Chenine struggled to push the two-meter wide sphere another few inches along the slanting floor. She tripped over a fallen support beam, nearly sending the Orb tumbling backwards right over herself, Captain Rayne and the doctor. Luckily, though, the wily marine commando took up Chenine’s slack.

“Watch yourself!” She admonished. “This thing doesn’t need another crack in it.”

The base doctor pushed right along with them, though her sweat-caked face and glassy eyes bore an ashen, dead countenance. Chenine herself was quite taken aback by little Piperele’s death. Her reaction might be one of shock more than true feeling for the little cherub, but it was a genuine feeling nonetheless, and Chenine thought it terribly unfair. And by ‘unfair’ she didn’t mean that someone in the universe was actively fucking them over with this turn of events: she didn’t believe in a powerful, sadistic god like *El Shaddai*— like the pilot of the *Platonic Love* did— but the *Love’s* pilot was correct in assuming that Chenine bore romantic notions. Maybe it was simpleminded, storybook-inspired ideology on her part, but Chenine felt better when things played out according to their conventions: kings should marry queens, knights should rescue damsels, soldiers should fight other soldiers, and children should be shelved and left to stew in their schoolyards and dormitories.

*And certainly not wind up buried beneath a pile of rubble...*

Behind all this is a very important point: the Ketoni girl was *not* bothered by Piperel’s death in and of itself, because she could really care less. Well, of *course* she could! It’s just that the child’s death itself didn’t follow her storybook formula, and that bothered the girl. That was all. The script— as it were— was not as it should be.

*I suppose this kind of aberration isn’t the fault of a ‘writer’ so much as a sign of our royally messed-up times...* It was all very un-storybook-like.

“I suppose they just don’t write them like that anymore.” She whispered.

Samantha— struggling with a fresh coat of sweat on her brow as she pushed the heavy orb— gave Chenine an odd look, but didn’t ask her to clarify that little monologue. She did inquire about her wellbeing, though:

“Hey: are you okay, Chovert?”

Chenine wiped her eyes: “I’m sweating so much that it’s hard to see where I’m going.”

“Tch! I hear that.” Sam nodded and gave the girl a good-natured slap on the shoulder.

Eventually the doctor asked the two lady pilots how much time they had left, and just what would happen if they didn’t make it to the Antibydo. Sam provided her with a short answer:

“Basically, we’d be talking about the end of the world.”

“I know you want to make sure the embryo dies by scrubbing it in *AEM*, but why can't we just put the thing in a furnace?” The woman motioned to the Aegis handgun bouncing up and down on Captain Rayne's back. “Or why don't you shove your barrel inside that gaping hole and empty your magazine into it?”

She shook her head. “That'd be like stabbing a titan with a toothpick. You remember the Dobkeratops Conflict?” Samantha struggled to speak: the spunky girl was handing the bulk of the Orb, so Chenine offered to take-over the explanation:

“Bydo flesh comes in three forms: basic incarnations, full-fledged Cores, and germinal embryos. The reason Earth was caught so off-guard by Dobkeratops is because we didn't understand how an embryo actually works: *all* embryos born in the Bydo Empire germinate into Cores eventually, but only if they develop within the Great Communion at Dimension 26.”

“And good old ‘Dobby’ didn't.” Samantha broke in. “He— well, ‘it’— got caught in the flesh of the False Moon when it shifted into our dimension. The little bastard survived the Cataclysm itself: it rode the False Moon all the way down to Earth and didn't get a scratch on it.”

“And it lay dormant,” Chenine continued, “until humanity regrouped and started to sterilize the newly-formed Gulf area. Then it was awakened and took off into the Solar System with the rest of the ‘Moondust’. Earth's Perimeter-Defense Network couldn't touch it. You see: the thing was confused because it was forced to develop away from the Great Communion. As a consequence its cells didn't just fritter around in a totipotent state like a normal Bydo's: they coursed through its body much more quickly, and with far more violent shifts and mutations in its DNA.”

“‘Practical Omnipotence’.” Sam explained, “the ultimate power of adaptation, be that in growing a new heart in the blink of an eye, developing lungs to breathe any conceivable gas in mere seconds—”

“—or rapidly reorganizing its cellular structure to pass straight through the most powerful projectile weapons without *any* actual damage. It could even descend into molten liquids unharmed because it could calcify its epidermal cells and create an instant organic shield.”

The doctor stopped pushing and slid down against the sphere, resting her back on the polished surface. She was either too tired to continue, didn't care to continue, or both. Chenine followed suit and— with an annoyed grunt— Captain Rayne did, too.

The Ketoni girl continued her dissertation: “The Dobkeratops was isolated from its kind. Unlike raw incarnations, Bydo embryos don't operate completely on instinct: they're far too complex, and possess too much potential to be wholly left to their own devices. Dobkeratops never had a ‘guide’ that told it how to grow, or how to use its cellular powers. Think of it as a child left to fend for itself in the jungle, like a person who grows up using their teeth as fangs and their nails as claws to survive. A person *can* use those things in such a way, but they're not designed for that: they'd soon find their teeth falling out and their nails worn and broken.”

Samantha interjected: “And that little jungle imp could be using his hands and teeth to build deadly weapons so he didn't *need* to claw and bite stuff. The bottom line is that Dobby was cruising around the Solar System in 6<sup>th</sup> gear with a broken clutch, and there was no way he could keep up that kind of pace.”

“And that’s where humankind first discovered the one true weakness of a Bydo’s cells: Dobkeratops’ body was riddled with mounds of bubbling black flesh: they were tumors. For the first time ever humans actually saw a *cancer* develop inside a Bydo. And then— um...” Chenine scratched her dripping chin, pensive.

“—then the R-13A *Cerberus* blew the motherfucker apart, the Labs collected its tissue, learned how to harvest that bubbling black flesh, called it Antibydo, and then called it a day.” She spread her hands and grinned demonically. “Simple.”

Chenine nodded. “And when the Dobkeratops’ regenerated flesh popped-up at Venus the Allied Military already had several Raiden units using Antibydo in their weapons, most notably the *Songoku Squadron*. That battle was not difficult.”

“It was a joke.” Sam smirked.

The doctor lay on her side. “But neither of you can tell me why it looks so much like a mammalian embryo: a human embryo, even. Explain that one...”

Sam looked to one side. Her words bore a definite hint of unease: “The *Cerberus*— the R-13A— went on a mission that took it deep into Bydo territory. It went deep, deep, deep in, and into very close contact with the enemy. When...” She took a long breath: “When it was finally lost, the *Cerberus* had managed to infiltrate the Great Communion much more thoroughly than anything before it, or anything ever since. There’s no telling what the Bydo were able to rip from that pilot’s mind before... well...”

Sam wouldn’t go on about the subject: discussion of the R-13A’s legacy was a very touchy subject amongst Raiden pilots, to the point of being taboo in normal conversation.

The doctor was in no mood to press the women, either. She cradled her wounded ankle with half-hearted interest and tapped the Orb’s glass. “So ‘junior’ here has ‘omnipotent’ DNA, eh? Nothing short of *AEM* can do him in, then?”

Chenine sighed. “Nothing’s indestructible. Theoretically you can kill an embryo by superheating its body into a plasma state. After all, an organism can’t remain intact if its own atoms are torn apart.”

“Yes, but unfortunately we lack the power of the sun at the moment...” Sam ordered the women to their feet and they continued with their back-breaking task.

Chenine’s mind began to wander, and after a moment she came to realize that this was, in fact, a ‘Sisyphian’ task as well.

*One so seldom gets to use that word in a sentence... But I never thought I’d get the opportunity to use it literally.*

Samantha soon resorted to open panting. Chenine glanced in her direction a few times, mostly to see if the woman was on the verge of passing out, but the captain kept up the pace, and even tried to lighten the somber mood.

“You know what I want most right now?” she exclaimed, “chicken strips. Yeah: those crusty little chicken strips they serve in the cafeteria. God: when I first came here I hated those, but they really grow on you...”

Chenine smiled: “I suppose they’re edible, assuming you’ve got Tartarus sauce.”

Rayne shot her a glance: a very puzzled countenance bled through the layers of sweat and freckles on her face.

Chenine cocked her head. “You know: Tartarus. It’s the Greek underworld. Where Sisyphus was sent?”

The puzzlement on Sam’s face did not abate.



Chenine motioned to the sphere they were pushing and cutely arched her brow: “The rolling rock? Come on: Sisyphus!”

There was still no abatement of the captain’s puzzlement.

The doctor slumped down on the ground again: “Look: I can’t keep up this pace, girls. And what the hell are you two going on about, anyway?”

“Something about Chovert having syphilis, I think.” Samantha shrugged. She took stock of their surroundings: all the rubble on the floor was beginning to make the corridors impassable. “Hey: aren’t there some empty plumbing ducts up here, or something like that?”

Her squadmate shrugged: “Base-10’s blueprints were never on my required reading list, unfortunately.”

As it turned out, Sam was right: when the two pilots scouted ahead they found a bank of rusty pipes, some just barely wide enough to allow the Orb safe passage.

“But with precious little room for a human body.” Chenine observed.

“It’ll be dangerous going.” Sam reckoned. “Even if the pipes are intact all down the line, there’s still about a dozen ways to get hurt in there.”

“And there may be ‘pools’ of toxic gas in the compromised sections.” The doctor warned. She came up behind the pair. “But, if that’s the best way to get \ to the *AEM* vats, I suppose you’ll need a volunteer...”

“Leave this to the soldiers, doc.” Sam rapped her fist down the line of riveted ducts, searching for a loose latch.

“You and Chenine have a more useful role to play.” The woman pressed. She stared down at the floor. “As long as the pipe runs straight, I think I can manage.”

Sam glanced back at the woman: “Doc, I gotta say that this is likely to be pretty friggin’ dangerous. Damn near suicidal-dangerous, I’d think.”

“That doesn’t matter.” She shook her head: “My daughter’s dead, Sam: I’m not inclined to put a premium on my own life at the moment.”

Chenine was inclined to counter the despondent woman’s attitude, but thought better of it and held her tongue.

“C’mon, Chovert.” Samantha ordered. The pair went to work inspecting pipe after pipe. They came to a slope in the ground and descended into the dimly-lit area beneath the deck. There were dozens more pipes down here, and it didn’t take long for them to find a likely candidate.

“Gotcha!” Samantha cawed in triumph as she yanked the door off one prospective pipe. She glanced back at her colleague and— with a professional gesture— politely gave an order: “Right, you go on in.”

Chenine looked at Samantha, then into the pitch black tube, and finally back at Sam:

“Lady commandos, first.” She declined with equal politeness.

“Don’t be a pansy: you’re a rake compared to me, and if there’re any tiny nuts or bolts that need unscrewing in there then you’re delicate little fingers are perfect for the job. Get in.” She flashed Chenine’s compact vanity light into the tunnel, after which the reluctant Ketoni girl slid inside and down the tube. She slid beyond the light’s influence, and Sam called out for her: a loud bump noise and several French curse words flew from the girl’s lips:

“There’s another seal.”

“What? Can’t you get through?”

“A midget couldn’t get through.” She answered. “And the bolts...” the sound of small fingers fumbling across metal echoed through the tube. “The bolts are all on the other side.”

Now it was Samantha’s turn to curse.

“Ballpark?” Chenine queried, “just how long do you think we have?”

“Maybe an hour, but probably a hell of a lot less.” She sighed. “These god-damned tubes were the best chance we had!”

A tiny scraping sound arose in the tube: it was the sound of small fingers working on rusty wing-nuts.

“Hey: Chovert! Did you find a way through? Are you on the bolts?”

Chenine didn’t answer for a second. “No: wait just a moment—”

A rusty squeal drowned her voice out, then Chenine cried in surprise. Absolute silence followed that, as if the girl was voluntarily holding her tongue, or someone else had taken hold of it for her.

“Chovert? Chovert!” Sam called. “Goddamnit: what happened?”

There was no answer.

Samantha cursed again. She unslung her Aegis and went to her knees. Before she could dive into the pipe, however, something else darted out:

Two pale, slender arms emerged, holding a soot-covered little bundle by the armpits. The figure was so dirty with sludge and ash that Sam didn’t know what to make of it until the child opened her big brown eyes.

“Pipkin! Wha— where the heck have you been?”

Chenine dropped the child in a messy heap and emerged from the pipe bearing a look of shock and incredulity to match Samantha’s. The little cherub at their feet coughed quietly and rolled up to her feet. Her big scared eyes softened into happy pearls; she looked back at Chenine— in particular— with a reverent smile.

“Well?” The Ketoni girl queried with a tilt of her head.

“Well what?” The child tilted her head in what Chenine severely hoped was a case of childish mockery and not some kind of ‘hero-worship’. “Oh, yeah: our wave-skim just came in here, and one of the nurse-ladies was bringing me down to mommy’s quarters when the earthquake happened. I got scared and ran off; there was no one around, and I thought I’d be safe in here.” She then looked up at the adult women uncomfortably. “An’ ... I’m really sorry.”

“For what?” Chenine cocked her head back to level.

The little child wiggled the bare toes of one foot. “I lost one of my shoes, and they’re brand new.” She looked up at Captain Rayne: “Please don’t tell my mommy!”

Samantha looked at Chenine, who returned the captain’s gaze for one brief moment.

Then both women broke out in a hysterical fit of laughter.

### **30 Minutes to Gestation.**

The roar was much more distant, now.

Jen slowly clamped one hand down on her ruined workstation. She pulled her body off the floor. Stray droplets of Ramirez’s blood fell from her blood-spattered dress.

The private glared through Ops' shattered panorama window: she saw the massive hydra worming through the air over a mile away, dancing like a white snake through the cloudy sky. She folded her hand over her chest and gasped in fear.

Then— slowly, but surely— Jen's frightened gasp devolved into a loose snarl.

"Who the *fuck* do you think you are?" She screamed. Her eyes narrowed to slits.

*This piece-of-shit OPI doesn't look like much to me, but with that fancy way it's sashaying through the air it must think that it's a fucking Luckdragon...*

She noticed the collection of paws studded throughout its spindly body, as well as the freakish teeth jutting out its central forehead.

"Hodgepodge? You're a chimera, you bastard!" She audibly snarled: "and you ain't even close to being Falkor..."

Jen leapt over her console and bounded to the workstation she'd jury-rigged before the attack: Ops had suffered a cataclysmic power surge during the strike, and from the look of things the whole base had, too. But, miracle of small miracles, Jen was rerouting the power cables at this errant little workstation just before the strike: it was disconnected from the main system and— she prayed— still in working order.

It was.

The techie grinned.

*Let's put an end to this stupid fucker's story...*

"Call-up computer: disable all ties with the hydroelectric plant and start drawing energy from the back-up fusion reactor. Will that give us enough power to run the car-gars?"

The computer's voice sounded scratchy and garbled, but it was just barely audible: "Sufficient energy can be harvested to release charged rail-gun rounds from a maximum of three batteries."

Jen's grin turned dark. The girl wiped her bloody hands off on her skirt and slid her fingers beneath the manual cannon controls. She watched the hydra as it cavorted in the distance.

"Time to win me a plushie." She sneered at the behemoth: "*Dwae-ji-kkum; kku-se-yo!*" Jen took up the car-gar controls and grit her teeth: "Call-up computer: I'm ready when you are!"

"Affirmative. However, please note that the contamination seals around the torus-reactor are compromised."

She frowned. "'Compromised' by how much?"

"During reactor startup the radioactive waste will contaminate each strut and the inferior decks."

"And by 'contaminate'—"

"The probability of survival for mammalian-type life is zero: exposure would be universally lethal, with tissue necrosis leading to death within—"

"Shut up." Jen growled. She kicked a stray piece of glass across the floor.

*No one's gonna help you on this one, Jenny: you're basically the 'acting commander' now, if you can believe that...*

"I always thought it'd take a freak plague to bring us to this point..." She paced back and forth, pensive and very rushed. Could anyone actually still be *alive* in the struts? Maybe, and maybe not. But certainly someone had to be alive on the inferior decks, right?

She shook her head: “No: someone would have jogged up here and relieved me.”  
Then what about the commander? Laura? The subcommander? Were they all dead?

“And you already know what happened to Ramirez, not to mention Scott....” “  
Jen flinched as the massive hydra buzzed the base once again: her teeth rattled from the shockwave.

*Think like a CO: what would a commander do in this situation?*

“I’m not a fucking officer.” She shook her head and took a fingernail to her teeth: “I’m just a glorified little gopher—”

*Shut your big, fat mouth and start using your god-damned head!*

She turned and faced the shattered window. For one brief instant Jen thought she could feel a strong, powerful arm on her shoulder. She closed her eyes and tried to lose herself in that pleasant daydream.

*Do me a favor, will you, Jen? Stop being such a pussy.*

There was no worming out of this: she had a decision to make. Either she flooded the base with radiation, killing any survivors, or she did not, in which case that glorified garter snake out there would have free-reign to rip the base apart at its leisure.

“Be like a commander,” she reassured herself: “choose the course of action that you *know* can protect the most lives...”

*What do you think the meaning of life is, Lees?*

She watched the hydra perform another elegant loop-de-loop in the air outside.

“On the one hand we’ve got the guaran-fuckin’-teed destruction of the target and the *assurance* of no more killings...”

*Well: the meaning of life is to find people who are special to you...*

“And on the other hand, we’ve got the *possible* lives of any survivors, if there even are any...” Jen bowed her head, “like the Lieutenant, or the commander...”

... ‘kin’ ...

She blinked with hesitation, but then returned her eyes to level: Jen knew enough of the Allied Military Handbook to understand the opinion the Brass had in such a matter.

“There’s no need to crunch any numbers on this one: the answer’s quite clear.”

...and to protect them at all costs...

“Call-up computer: is the torus reactor ready for activation?”

“Affirmative.”

Jen gripped the console before her.

*It all depends on your survival strategy. You need to know what type of person you are...*

“Call-up computer...” her voice did not waver.

“Standing by.”

*You need to ask yourself: ‘what’s my type’?*

“Is the reactor still functioning with ambient propagation?”

“Affirmative.”

The girl spat on the floor, wiped her chin, and gave her order:

“I want you to cut-off all connections to the reactor: do *not* activate it. Chill the core, seal all vents and perform a full shutdown.”

During the next five minutes the central computer literally killed Base-10’s fusion reactor. It would take an engineering team a week to get the plant up and running again.

*But we'll be dead in an hour, unfortunately...*

But even if the crew of Base-10 was fated to die, Jen would not be their murderer.

*What a comfort...*

And—strangely enough—it actually was, in a way.

The tech went to work on the computer. No matter how she coaxed the console Jen could not access the majority of base systems, nor could she establish any communication with personnel. It'd be smoother going if the flippant little goth-tart had been more observant when she tweaked the hardware earlier. Jen cursed herself for the shoddy workmanship: why hadn't she been more careful with the rerouting?

A light bulb went off inside the girl's noggin:

*'Cause I was distracted by Justin's launch! The Platonic Love is somewhere out there!*

Jen smiled: "There's more than one way to win a plushie!"

She tried to communicate over Justin's frequency and found nothing but dead air. Then she tried *all* frequencies, and still nothing. Jen knew that the protocol for a duty officer at this point would be to hone in on the Raiden's kindred signal and use that to establish a dialogue with the ship's computer. If someone wanted to do that they'd not only have to know both the 'Atelier AI' computing language used in Raiden-tech, but they'd also need enough education in Bydo-tech to find the Raiden's tiny latent impulse.

Jen Drake possessed sufficient knowledge on both scores.

Her first surprise came when Jen realized that the *Platonic Love's* computer system was offline: it needed to be booted, and she obliged. Soon after came the second surprise: a deafening peal of beeps. The alarm speakers hammered Jen's brain, and then her monitor turned blood-red:

"Emergency, emergency: operator vital statistics are not compatible with life. Asystole confirmed; hypothermia confirmed; sub-threshold neural activity confirmed. Clinical death of operator is confirmed: biological death is in progress."

"Oh, my fuck." Jen's eyes followed the screen, which put out over two-dozen vital statistics in graph form, almost none of which she understood. One thing she did know, however, is that those stats shouldn't be static, straight lines like they were now.

"Holy fuck."

Jen fell to her knees. Ever one of the tears she'd shed today were really for herself: tears of fear and of terror. For the first time the girl shed different tears: tears for a real, actual person. This wouldn't be the first time Jen Drake would cry over a fallen colleague, and they weren't the last tears she'd shed for a fellow combatant.

That didn't make those tears any less bitter, though.

## **25 Minutes to Gestation.**

"Ulmp!"

Samantha took a shot to the chin, courtesy of the Brass Ring's errant elbow.

"Sorry."

"Damn it, Chovert." She rubbed her face.

"I—"

"Never mind: it's about break time, anyway."

The pair lay side-by-side in the pitch black tube, the only light coming from the sinister sphere before them. There was just enough room to prod the Force Orb through the duct, and as the floor was curved like a half-pipe, it wasn't that hard going. The sloped floor, however, also forced the ladies' bodies towards the middle of the duct, and allowed very little in the way of personal space.

Sam deposited Piperel with her mother, who was understandably beside herself with joy. When she left the pair the doctor was literally smothering the girl with a barrage of overzealous hugs. Then again, it's tough to call any reaction 'overzealous' when the dead are— in effect— brought back to life.

*Or at least when reports of their demise are greatly exaggerated...*

The pilots lay on their sides for awhile, panting with the sweat of their efforts. Samantha was clear on her course of action: she was to be the one who would venture into the plumbing, bearing all the risks of this less-than-sane course of action. Chovert was supposed to watch over the doctor and her daughter.

Her squadmate, however, nixed that plan and demanded to follow Samantha. As near as she could tell, the Brass Ring was doing this out of some warped sense of obligation: Samantha had come back for her in the infirmary, after all, and apparently the pop-tart didn't like the idea of being in debt to someone.

*Either that, or she just wants to be at 'ground zero' when the embryo hatches: she'd be assured a much quicker death that way...* Judging from the girl's other very unsoldier-like mannerisms, Samantha guessed that this explanation was more likely.

As she lay up against the Ketoni's warm body— with her aching muscles burning for rest— Sam decided to indulge a few curiosities.

"Humid as a sauna in here, isn't it?"

Chenine sighed: "These are exhaust vents: that's kind of the point, isn't it?"

"Mmmm. Hey, Chovert: do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

The girl blinked in the darkness: "I suppose so. We have grown quite close, haven't we?" She twisted her leg to one side; Sam could feel the motion from her calf to her thigh.

She smiled: "Cute."

"What do you want to know?"

"What's the deal between you and Justin Storm?"

When the girl didn't respond, Sam qualified the statement: "If you don't mind me asking, that is..."

"Deal?" She blinked.

"The story: what's your 'history'?"

"We don't have a history."

Sam arched one brow. "Really?"

"No, we don't." The pilot's sapphire eyes glowed under the rising light of the Orb. "Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity." Sam quickly realized how her question could be misinterpreted. "Oh, it's not that I'm interested in having a go at him, or anything like that: I'm spoken for. I've got a significant other out in Patagonia..."

"Your interest in the *Love's* pilot doesn't concern me one way or the other." An electric undercurrent ran through Chenine's soft voice. "And I still don't understand why you asked me that question."

“Forget it, forget it. Sorry.” Sam shook her head. “But you two kinda behave like an old married couple, in case you didn’t notice.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Well, you do. That, or unhappy exes.”

“Ridiculous.”

Sam smiled. “Know what all the techies in Command Ops call you guys?”

Chenine merely blinked into the darkness once again. Samantha took this as a sign of curiosity:

“They call you the ‘bitter almonds’.”

The girl did not seem to be amused by this wordplay. “Why? She asked after a pause.

“You’re both very thorny people who can’t seem to stand each other’s company, and yet you’re inseparable. That is to say: you’re both ‘nuts’.” Her grin widened.

“We hang around each other for different reasons: the pilot of the *Platonic Love*— for one— doesn’t want to be totally isolated on this base.”

“What about you?”

Chenine narrowed her eyes: “I *prefer* to be isolated— to a certain degree— and as long as I’m seen with him it’s much less likely that a gaggle of male ‘suitors’ on base will try to chat me up...”

Sam scoffed. “So you’re just using Storm, then?”

“Call him a ‘wingman’, if you like. And I’m only using him as much as he’s using me: we just happen to have different needs that have to be fulfilled, that’s all.”

“But aren’t those ‘needs’ mutually exclusive?”

Chenine’s countenance darkened considerably; Sam could tell as much even with the scant light available to her: “What?”

“If Storm really hates being ‘isolated’ then— no offense— his first choice for a shadow shouldn’t be you.”

“I’m a target of convenience.”

“And if you really don’t like having people chat you up then you’d want to avoid a person like him, wouldn’t you? He’s a sucker for nervous conversation, you know.”

“What’re you implying?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Sam shrugged. “Just that it seems like there might be another dimension to that relationship, that’s all.”

“There isn’t.” Chenine glared at the Force Orb before them, a pout on her pale lips: “Nor could there be.”

“Why not? Don’t you like Storm? He’s not totally objectionable, after all...”

“I don’t respect him.” The girl answered.

“He’s got some serious credentials for a pilot— newbie status aside— so how can you say—”

“Not as a pilot.” Chenine shook her head. “As a pilot I suppose he can move mountains, but that doesn’t matter to me: I can’t respect him as a person.”

“Can’t, or won’t?”

“Take your pick.” The Ketoni girl practically bled fire between her teeth.

Sam rolled her eyes. “Ouch.”

She decided to drop the subject. The Brass Ring, it seemed, was just as happy to do so. They continued their mole-like work: dutifully rolling the giant ball before them.

*Moles, or dung beetles: take your pick. Little Miss Chenine—for one— certainly seems to be able to shovel her weight in shit...*

They reached the far side of the pipe: by Sam's estimate they were two stories below Sam Ront's offices.

"Two stories." Chenine mused. "I don't think our little plan works as well if we're forced to go vertical like that."

"Mmm. I agree: verticality's not optimal. In fact, I do some of my best work in the horizontal position..." Sam felt around the duct to get her bearings, and her fingers met a tough, grated surface beneath her chest.

"Hey: is this a control panel down here?"

Chenine lyrically grunted the phrase 'I dunno'.

"It is." Sam confirmed. "They use these to boost the pressure in the pipes..." She ran a hand above her and, sure enough, a long shaft rose overhead.

"What do you intend?"

The captain smiled in the darkness: "Time for that little handoff I was telling you about: you ever put baking soda in a water bottle and then cap the lid?"

"I must have been sick that day in school..."

"We don't have the time to think up a safer alternative: this thing's getting a one-way ticket upstairs whether it likes it or not. Now, the only question..." Sam rooted around beneath the grating, and in a few minutes managed to bust open several conduits, most of which bled a foul-smelling goo.

Chenine wrinkled her nose as she watched Sam work: "You want to cause a controlled explosion using the base's own chemicals?"

"I'd like to." Sam ran a finger over the goo and then—to Chenine's visible disgust— stuck her finger between her lips.

"That doesn't taste right..." The captain brought her Aegis handgun up to her face, uncovered the little heads-up display on the butt of the firearm and smeared her sample over the base of the screen. It soon flashed with a rudimentary chemical analysis.

"Oh, hell: if we light this stuff we're liable to vaporize the whole glass casing around the embryo... and ourselves, coincidentally."

"Comforting. Can the chemicals in the pipe be—"

"Diluted. Yeah, or at least neutralized a little, but I don't know how we could..." Samantha paused as the little heads-up display fed her more information.

"What is it?" Chenine asked.

"According to this, I think we could brew up our own batch of semi-stable explosives if we had some really strong amide compounds to play with." She held up the cords: "And there aren't any in here, so the next best thing..."

"Strong amides?" Chenine blinked in confusion. Then— as the girl slowly remembered her introductory chemistry— she clucked her tongue. "Amides?" She repeated: "You can't mean— as in—"

"We're kinda down to the wire here, Chovert." Samantha adopted a much more forceful tone. This was no longer a friendly coop effort: this was a captain issuing orders to her lieutenant. But that's not to say that Sam was happy with the situation, either:

"Alright: here's what we're gonna do..."

### **10 Minutes to Gestation.**



The Commander was very heavy. The splint he'd worn— Sven Wraith's black cane— was gone, and so the going was quite tough.

After they found the broken vending machine, however, the 'tough' didn't seem to have much interest in 'going' at all.

"Ridiculous." Faught growled. He lay against a slanting pile of rubble, once the last set of stairs up to Command Ops. They were just outside the 'cold zone', and unfortunately they didn't have a chance of getting any further.

"We should be deep at work getting this rubble out of the way!"

"With a forklift and three days at our disposal? Perhaps." Wraith and the Lieutenant sat across the way, near enough to a crack in the wall that they could feel a delightful sea breeze drifting into the stifling hall that confined them.

"We're currently deep in *thought*," the subcommander argued. "And besides: the Lieutenant here can't possibly be expected to think straight without a sizeable blood-sugar content, can she?" Both he and the brunette techie munched on the spoils of an overturned vending machine. Sadly for the Lieutenant there was not one can of cola in the pile. But a number of rather sugary snacks served her just as well.

"He thinks I'm not pulling my weight, I gather." Wraith made this remark after Commander Faught took it upon himself to slide down the corridor, all in a vain attempt to reach his precious command post.

*Or what's left of it...*

"I suppose that physical labor just isn't my style." He admitted. The RL adjusted his white dress gloves as he spoke. Noticing a hole in one, and multiple rust stains on the other, he sighed in resignation, pulled them from his hands and tossed them to one side without ceremony.

"Administrators *administrate*, I guess." Laura noted. "Besides: you more than pulled your own weight when you were a Raiden pilot, didn't you?"

The man scoffed. "Did I, now?" Eventually he turned to face the girl: "have we been doing our own after-hours research, Lieutenant?"

"It was just curiosity, sir: that's all. We don't have to talk about it—"

"Curiosity I can understand: but stop calling me 'sir'."

"Weren't you awarded the fleet-defense medal of valor six times in a row?" Laura smiled: "*that* was a record, wasn't it? How many other people can claim to have that many Silver Kestrels to their name?"

Wraith sighed: "It was *four* times in a row, the award is called the 'Parahawk', not the Silver Kestrel, and yes: it is a record to this day..."

"You really can't fault my curiosity about you: especially with the way you act in Ops."

Wraith looked at her nebulously.

"Act?"

"Yeah, that's right. Uh... sir."

"Don't do that, girl." He warned.

"Sorry." Laura tried to recover: "What I mean to say is the way you *try* to act— well, much more snarkily than you are."

"Snarkily?" He almost smiled, but ultimately resisted the urge.

“Jen calls it an overdeveloped case of ‘hard-assery’.” Laura, for one, did smile. “She thinks you’ve got a heart of stone, or something.”

“Maybe she’s more observant than you give her credit for, hmmm?”

“If anything, the research I’ve done into your career *deflates* those ideas: all the consideration and loyalty you showed during your career with the *Songoku Squadron* shows that you’re a very compassionate—”

“I was a child.” Wraith interrupted. “My Raiden was underpowered compared to the rest of the squad.” He snickered quietly. “Yes: the good old *Owl’s Light*. It wasn’t the prettiest R-Type, and it doesn’t hold a candle to the models around today...” he shrugged. “Still: I suppose I would’ve been happy enough to die inside it, if that was my destiny. I couldn’t often handle ‘point’ position, and I had no desire the fly in the ‘cradle’ of our flight formations, so I often chose one of the outlying wing positions, or I would head-up the tail of our group.”

“And that put you in a great position to play defense.” Laura nodded.

“It was all I *could* do, really. And yes: I did it very well. Again: I was a simple child, and I had that lovely naïveté about protecting my senior officer’s rear ends like a mangy little terrier.”

“And what’s really changed since then?” Laura shrugged. “Now you’ve got the rear ends of your little ‘hatchlings’ to protect, right? They certainly think you’re a good ‘Aryl’.”

“Good for me.” Wraith murmured in annoyance. “And bad for them...”

“I think that you don’t really want people to like you.”

“Really?”

The woman smiled. “Yeah: but you’ve got a problem.”

He eyed the Lieutenant out of his periphery: “And what’s that?”

“You’re playful.” She smiled. “And not in a sadistic sense...”

“Most would disagree with that statement.”

“I don’t.” Laura declared.

Sven considered this declaration and the adamancy with which the Lieutenant made it: “Tell me: does QM Plinshine know about this ‘fascination’ of yours?”

“We’re not really a pair, anymore.” She shrugged: “‘Irreconcilable differences’. Things started falling out between us after he was furloughed to Mount Olivier for his recovery.”

“After his accident with the *Platonic Love*, you mean.”

She nodded. Then the Lieutenant suddenly picked up her head:

“It’s Jen!” She declared. The Lieutenant contorted her face as the private’s panicky voice rang in her head. “Jen, Jen:” she waved her hands, “slow down, please! Say that again?”

Laura blinked into the air as she listened to the flustered girl. She repeated the situation to Wraith:

“There’s one bogey, and it’s a massive OPI. Ops doesn’t have any power to speak of, there’re no available weapons at hand...”

The girl paused again, and then sighed. She mustered the courage to look Wraith in the eyes: “Sven: R-H-AGP is outside the base somewhere, but it’s inactive. Justin Storm is dead.” She flicked the ‘reply’ switch on her earpiece: “Jen: describe his vitals for me.”

Wraith flicked Laura's earpiece with one finger, sending her head bobbing to one side like a blow-up punching clown. The headset's external speaker blared Jen's voice throughout the corridor:

"What do you mean? His 'vitals' *aren't*, and that's all there is to it!"

Wraith broke into this conversation: he demanded that Jen read verbatim from her monitor. She did, and the statistics were not encouraging.

"He's been gone for over an hour," Wraith calculated.

"There's no way to save him, then."

The RL sneered at Laura: "Raidens don't just let their pilots die without a fight: check the boy's oxygen saturation."

The Lieutenant didn't know what Wraith was after, but when Jen came back with a blisteringly low number— around 12-percent or so— she changed her tune:

"That number *should* be zero." Laura mused.

"And yet, for some reason, it isn't, is it?" Wraith smiled.

"Justin's chemical support system must have kicked in before he wrecked!" Laura quickly got back to Jen: "Alright, Jen: you need to listen to me very closely. Justin *did* die in that wreck, but the ship's been forcing nutrients into his body with a positive-pressure medical tube: not only does it have a *few* vital gases and fluids in it, but hopefully the pressure it's exerting on his carotid has managed to keep his blood moving just enough..."

Wraith could hear the private sniffing on the other end of the line. "Really? What does that mean, then?"

"It's a long shot, but there's a chance he can be revived. Jen: his heart isn't working, and it's almost sure to have suffered major tissue damage. There's a slim chance that we can force his dying cardiac cells to work, at least for a little while. I want you to go under the emergency-medical file at your workstation."

"I'm there." She answered.

"Look for the procedure called 'Kittim Charge'.

The private's dexterous fingers were audible over the headset: "Kittim... got it."

"Activate it."

"Okay... now what did I just do?"

"You just made the *Platonic Love* ram a bunch of leads through Justin's breastbone and into his heart: it's gonna analyze the extent of his tissue damage, okay? Now, there's a very slim chance that the computer will determine that he's 'shockable': if it does—"

Jen broke in:

"Oh, my god." She muttered.

"What is it?"

"I've just finished the analysis, Lieutenant—"

"I didn't even tell you how to do it, yet!"

"Trust me: I'm a quick study, and there is *not* significant damage to Justin's heart."

"Jen, these analyses take several minutes to perform correctly. The computer can't possibly know if—"

"Goddamn it, Laura!"

The Lieutenant snapped her head up at this outburst.

Jen continued:

“Listen to me: I *guarantee* that there’s no cardiac damage!”

“How can you be—”

“You don’t understand: Justin’s heart isn’t even a rea—” she paused. “Lieutenant, just trust me: there is *no* damage.”

Laura blinked at Wraith, who appeared just as miffed.

“Never call a lady a liar,” he gestured, “although I don’t know how she qualifies for the distinction...”

“Should we really—”

Wraith set a finger to her lips: “Just bring my pilot back to life, alright Laura?”

“Jen:” she called into her headset, “activate the Kittim Charge.”

“Way ahead of you.” She answered. “But I can’t get it to work...”

“It’s password-protected: you’re about to slug Justin with a set of lethal shocks, so we keep a ‘trigger-lock’ on the procedure—”

A dull pain suddenly rose along the subcommander’s gimp leg: he cradled the limb, but then he realized his arms were shaking. His whole body soon shook as well, and then a loud rumble sounded across the floor.

“Oh, shit!” Laura pressed the headset close to her ear. “We’re getting some turbulence down here, Jen, so listen up: the password for the Kittim Charge is ‘H—”

The floor erupted beneath them in a shower of metal and concrete. A large chunk of slime-coated pipe bust forth like a volcano’s shaft. A two-meter wide ball of broken glass emerged from that pipe. It was also bathed in filth, but even with the coating of slime on its façade a great sun-like glow radiated from within, and the slimy mold on its exterior bubbled with heat.

Wraith gazed at the orb dreamily, and then a searing pain startled him back to reality: the small head of his cane glowed with an equally brilliant luster. Even the resin coating around the glass ornament bubbled as it melted.

A stray shard of debris clipped Laura’s head: it spared the girl any significant injury, but shattered her earpiece as if it were a clay pigeon. The Lieutenant cursed:

“God damn it! I don’t think Jen got the code!”

“Forget that.” Wraith barked. The RL tossed the glowing head of his cane to one side and pointed at the sphere: “That’s Miss Chovert’s Force Orb, and we’ve got less than five minutes before the embryo inside completes its gestation and comes out to rip us apart.”

“How do you know—”

“I just *know*.” He snarled. “Whoever sent the thing up here must’ve thought that we could break into Sam Roont’s office and scrub it.”

“They were mistaken.” Laura muttered.

“Docking bay.” Ron Faught dragged himself out of the darkness. The explosion destroyed their only floodlight. Wraith and the Lieutenant sat beside the only source of light: the tiny crack in the base’s frame. The commander was uninjured in the blast, but his uniform was rather singed.

The old man pointed at his subordinate: “Remember: you ordered my quartermaster to stuff the vacant Korang bays with useless knick-knacks from your own program. Tch! Power grabbing fool...” He looked between Wraith and the Lieutenant: “It

so happens that QM Plinshine was loading up over fifty barrels of Purity Solution in the bay this morning.”

The RL snapped his fingers: “Yes! I’d nearly forgotten. Right, that was a power-grab on my part— if you like— but it has the potential to save our bacon, now.” He glared down the way they’d come and looked at the broken elevator. “This shaft begins at the superior docking bays...”

“K-Ring, specifically.” Faught twirled his moustache with one finger. It was quite a site in his current state, with a dust-covered uniform, shorn cape and fractured leg, but the movement was a subconscious gesture of the old man’s, especially when he was gloating over his younger officer: “Assuming you two can manage that oversized abomination, it might just fit in the elevator. If you unlock the safeties on the carriage you should be able to send it straight down to the bay.”

Laura followed Wraith to the giant sphere: the light within was slowly changing, ‘melting’ into a sickly ochre hue. “Sir: can Karat Slurry actually kill these things?”

The subcommander put his back to the sphere and pressed his body against it: he didn’t make much headway until Laura came up and rather sensibly dug her shoes into the ground, finding enough purchase to make the ball wobble to one side.

“No.” He answered. “But if you flood a germinating Bydo embryo with a ton of slurry it gets irritated enough to put up a rocky seal around it. It’s like a grain of sand trapped in an oyster: the embryo becomes locked up tight and dormant. Then it can be scrubbed in Antibydo at our leisure.”

Laura noticed the troubled tick in Wraith’s brow:

“But it’s not that simple, is it?” She guessed.

He smiled: “No: that’s *one* way an embryo can react to the Karat Slurry. The other way is a bit more... destructive.”

“And when you say ‘destructive’...”

Wraith grunted as he pushed the Orb across the floor: “The embryo can also try to disinfect itself: it can make its own body get very, very,” he grunted once again: “*very* hot: even hotter than Purity’s boiling point.”

“And Purity is unstable above a certain temperature.” She nodded.

“‘Unstable’ like nitroglycerine mixed with plastique.” He sighed. “We think of Karat as something nice and soothing, bit it’s actually a nasty, volatile sludge. And it’s worse than TNT when it starts boiling. If the embryo tries to disinfect itself— and we’re talking about a 50:50 chance on this— then the slurry will blow.” The RL eyed Laura somberly: “It’d kill us all, to be sure, but it would also bring down this whole damn mountain of metal on top of the embryo: that would keep it under wraps until someone finally shows up with a cannon full of *Ab Ex Mortis*.”

“Small comfort to us...”

The Raiden Leader scoffed: “No matter, because we’ll wind up just as dead if the embryo gestates and goes all ‘Doberatops’ on us. Compared to that possibility I’d much rather end up sharing a tomb with this motherfucker then wind up as the first thing it sees when it hatches, wouldn’t you?”

“That’s a good point, sir.” Laura forced a tough smile on her lips and assisted Wraith with the sphere. All around them the flood started quivering.

Then it started to give way.

Wraith cursed to himself as a large section of the floor between then and Ron Faught fell apart. He looked between the immobile old man and the Lieutenant: “Keep pushing this damn thing like you’ve got a barracuda on you ass, Laura.” He ordered.

“Sir: let me go back for the Commander. You can’t do that, not with your leg—”

“*You* keep pushing!” He barked.

“Wraith!” Laura grabbed the man’s uniform sleeve before he could move off. “I know that this Orb is our priority, but you’ll never make it! Whether you like it or not that leg is—”

“There’s nothing wrong with my leg, Lieutenant.”

For a moment, Laura reeled as if she’d been slugged. “What?”

The coal-eyed RL glared at her with black flames in his pupils: “You heard me: my leg is *fine*. Physically, I can walk as well as you. I can run, even.” He glared back down the corridor at the Commander, “And right now I intend to.” Looking back at the duty officer, he snarled with animalistic rage: “Now shut the hell up and keep pushing this thing!”

Wraith drew a breath and bounded across the collapsing corridor. He finally reached then commander, and the old man was less than impressed with the effort:

“Are you a fool, Wraith? The priority here is that glowing ball of evil that *you* are responsible for. After all, I suppose that this is the way you’d have preferred things to turn out, isn’t it?” The old man grimaced and took hold of his injured leg once again. “My death, after all, would make things much easier for you...”

The subcommander drew another breath, and then hoisted the old man onto his back”

“Don’t temp me, you old goat.”

“Are you mad, man? The Orb, Wraith! The Orb—”

“Believe me that I say this with no due respect: shut the hell up, sir.”

As soon as he said this Sven Wraith dove into one of the most impressive games of hopscotch possible: he bore 160 pounds of premium, aged commander on his back, and the less-than-coordinated man was forced to dance across a rapidly deteriorating floor. Sven’s right leg burned with an unbearable fire: he felt that at any minute the limb might snap right off his hip.

If he had one saving grace it was that he bore the reflexes of a Raiden pilot. If that little assertion counted for anything at all, well, Wraith would find out soon enough...

### **7 Minutes to Gestation.**

To Base-10’s computer system there was no such thing as a dignified moment of silence.

“Warning: clinical death of operator confirmed: biological death in progress.

Warning: clinical death of operator confirmed biological death in progress, Warning...”

The symbol for the ‘Kittim Charge’ was illuminated on Jen’s console. Beneath that was a line of text:

Please authorize this activity: \*\* \*\*\*\*.

“*Gaaaah!*”

Jen brought her foot up against the computer once again; she beat the disobedient console with her bare fists, to the point of drawing blood out her knuckles.

“Piece of shit!” She cried.

“Warning: clinical death of operator confirmed: biological death in progress...”

Jen slumped down against the workstation and spat on her keyboard.

“Piss out your ear!” She whimpered.

“That’s funny, ‘cause it looks like *you’re* the one who needs to be relieved.”

Jen’s body tensed and she swung around to face the speaker: his left cheek was marred with a deep gash and his right arm bled freely. Dozens of bruises studded his scrawny, un-toned body.

Other than that, though, Scott Tabris never looked better.

“Oh, Scott!” She exclaimed. “I saw you fall! How—”

“I’ve been told that sons-of-bitches always rise to the top.” He smiled. “And that’s true, at long as they land in a pool of water and then spend over an hour mountaineering up a concrete cliff in the dark. So, what’s up?”

Jen grabbed his hand and motioned to her console: “It’s Justin: his heart stopped beating, and I’m trying to make the computer take over for it.”

Scott surveyed the monitors, first with a sign of dread, and then disbelief.

Then, his face took on a different countenance altogether.

“Scott: do you know the password?”

The techie could hear Dr. Roont’s voice echoing in his head:

*‘At this point the best thing you can hope for is that Mister AGP gets struck by lightning! It’d be better to nix the Diapente Test Subject altogether than let this information get out...’*

Then another phrase came to mind:

*‘Think about what you’ll say to Sven Wraith when he comes for your head!’*

Scott’s eyes flashed with the luster of opportunity.

“Scott! Listen to me: we don’t have much time!”

Tabris was guilty of a crime against the R-H Project, but a crime is only a crime if the witness lives to testify.

*With Storm gone I can start over fresh as a daisy: the slate would be nice and clean...*

“Scott!”

He licked his lips: “...a whitewash...”

Jen grabbed his shoulders. Her soft, velvet eyes bore into his:

“Please tell me that you know the password!”

Behind her— way out in the distance— Perimeter 1-0 smoked like a volcano.

Somewhere in that hot wreckage the cold body of a Raiden pilot lay: a pilot that Tabris never particularly liked, and whose death would be of no small benefit to him.

Tears welled up in Jen’s eyes:

“Please, Scott!”

Doing nothing was not murder, after all: it was allowing nature to take its course.

The fact that it was going to save his own ass in the process was strictly a coincidence.

Besides: Tabris didn’t owe any of those pilots a god-damned thing, did he?

*Yes... I think I would very much like this whitewash...*

He turned away from the sniffling girl and stepped back a few paces.

Jen again slumped to her knees: “That’s it, then: there’s no way to save him...” She rested her head in her hands. The girl’s sobs echoed through the ruined control room like the mewling of a pathetic cat.

Scott waited an entire minute before responding:

“He Wept.”

“Huh?”

Tabris turned to face Jen and pointed at her console: “*He Wept*. The password for the Kittim Charge is ‘He Wept’. Type that in right now.”

Jen wasted no time, and instantly the screen flashed with a green luster. Nothing happened for a moment, and then a lone word appeared on the screen:

‘Priming’.

---

It really felt like a Karat Pool.

White mist swirled around his legs. Blue tendrils of sparkling liquid wafted through the air like a billowing gas. Justin felt as if his body were cocooned in a delightful glass casing: his vision was distorted, and a shimmering whiteness met his gaze in all directions.

It was colder than a Karat Pool, but not unpleasant: the trains of air and water that brushed his limbs did not burn him with frost, but instead *infused* him: he felt comforted by the chills, as if the pilot’s weary nerves were being dunked in a delightful sedative.

He felt like he was at the top of the tallest mountain, or lying upon the most sheltered, tranquil field. Then again, another feeling overrode all these other sensations:

*This... this feels like being underwater...*

He drifted through this plain of unending light, growing more pacific as the time passed. And what was time? That kind of notion didn’t have any sway over him, here.

At one point a few minutes later— or hours... or days... or years... or eons— Justin no longer felt the cool embrace of the frosty liquid and gas that encircled him: his environment wasn’t getting any warmer, and he wasn’t getting any colder.

*We have reached equilibrium...*

The case of glass around him dissolved, slowly at first, then much more quickly. A radiance stronger than any earthly light exploded before him with all the power— and a thousand times the beauty— of the most impressive sunrise.

*The sun comes up... and it shines all around me...*

Justin felt his limbs slacken. He regained all motion in his body, but didn’t move to rub his aching muscles: they weren’t aching at all. There was no pain in his body, nor apprehension in his heart.

*...I’m lost in space...*

The light faded to a lustrous shimmering wall, as if the place before him were a sea of boiling spring water. The outline of a body appeared, and then the boiling wall of water vanished.

“And this is my home...” Justin’s eyes swelled with cold tears. He stepped forward once, twice, then three times, until he stood before the girl. Her white skin glowed like a translucent nightgown, and her deep brown hair danced under the influence of some undetectable wind.



“Oh, Cyn!” Justin’s voice broke like a child’s. He stepped forward and embraced her, burying his forehead against her swan’s neck. He cried, and the slender girl cradled his ratty black hair with one hand as he did, resting her own sharp chin against his head. The girl whispered in his ear with that beautiful, docent voice of hers:

“You hold on.”

“I never forget.” He declared. “Never. I know—I know I haven’t been out to see you at Pine Hill for so long, but it wasn’t ‘cause I didn’t care. I— it was too hard for me, Cyn... it’s always been too hard...”

She spoke again, and Justin’s heart nearly exploded in his chest as he smelled the trace of licorice on her breath:

“But I never scared you, did I? And I am, now? That’s not what I want to hear, Just.” She smiled. It was a soft and melancholy smile.

“But I dreamed of you, too!” Justin held the girl by her shoulders and looked her in the eyes. “I’d have dreams, and those weren’t bad things. I’d imagine things: things that could’ve been, the way things might’ve happened.” He rested his forehead on her shoulder: “The way things *couldn’t* have been...”

She stroked the back of his head with almost motherly affection: “It was never easy for you, was it Just? You have so much trouble making it work with other people, don’t you?” She scratched the nape of his neck. “It was your skin. You just had that ‘rosy’ skin of yours: with all those prickly little spines...”

He smiled: “You know I hate it when you say that, Cyn.”

“Hmm: boys don’t like to be compared to flowers, do they?”

Justin brushed a finger over her clavicle: “But your skin was always so soft, though: you made everything work out with everyone, always. Things were easier for you, but you still didn’t let that many people in.” He trained his finger down the sleeve of the girl’s radiant white kimono: “I mean *really* let them in: you were thornless like an oleander, but you always kept yourself closed up.”

“Out of choice, you think?”

He stared at the girl’s bare feet. “You had more of a choice than I did.”

“But you still think you have a choice?”

Justin shook his head. “Look: that doesn’t matter anymore. I had a go at things, and now that’s over. I want to be here, now.”

The sky overhead darkened. Ever so slowly a few very small pinpricks of light emerged in the soft twilight. They were joined by more, until the sky was filled with them.

“Stars.” He mused. “That always knocks me out.” He smiled at the girl. “That they’d be here at all, I mean, because there’s really nothing above us, here.” He sighed, and then gripped Cynthia in another comforting embrace: “But, then again, I suppose you couldn’t have paradise without them, could you?”

“You hold on...” the girl repeated.

“Yes, Cyn: of course I do. I *can*, with you. I always could...”

The girl’s melancholy smile diminished: “Don’t hold on so hard, Just.”

The Typer looked the girl in the eyes: “Am I hurting you?”

“You’re hurting yourself.” She shook her head.

“No, I’m not: your memory was so good for me. It was the *only* thing that kept me going. I—”

“But it’s wrong to behave like that! There’s more to life than just the shadow of a memory: you can’t blindly cling to something that’s not there and ignore the flesh and blood around you. It’s a—”

“Cyn, I couldn’t *stand* losing you!”

Cynthia gently pulled away from Justin. Her melancholy smile returned: “You have to, though.”

Justin stepped towards her again.

“No, I don’t!”

“Don’t hold on so hard.” She repeated.

Justin felt a tough object come between them: Cynthia raised her hands, and she held that wooden baseball bat: the ‘Li’l Slugger’.

“You *can’t* hold on so hard, because there are other things you still need to do.”

“No.” He growled. Justin took hold of the girl, another mess of cold tears on his cheek. “I don’t need to do anything else, not now I don’t.”

Cynthia shook her head and ran her fingers over his cheek: “Oh, Just: you haven’t even *started* yet.”

“But you can’t make me leave, Cyn!”

“No, I can’t. I could never make you do anything: I could only make you *not* do things.” She blinked and lowered her head. “I don’t regret the way our relationship worked, though.” Her big eyes bled sorrow: “Just: you have such a long way to go, and I know that you’re already so tired. But isn’t there anyone— or anything— back there that’s worth protecting to you? Can’t you think of a reason to get up?”

“No, Cyn: there’s only you.” He embraced her again. Tears welled up in the melancholy girl’s eyes. All at once, though, Cynthia’s expression changed: it went from sorrow to shock, but then from shock to reluctance:

The girl stared over Justin’s shoulder at a new arrival.

“Are the stars beautiful to you, Just?”

“Yes.”

The girl stepped back. “They’ll look even better when you see them with your own eyes. But it’s not time for that, now. Right now, it’s time to get up. There are other things for you to do, and people to protect.”

The pilot blinked in confusion.

“I told you before, Cyn: there’s *not*. There’s no one for me but—”

Suddenly two skinny pale hands snatched up the baseball bat from Cynthia. A petite figure pirouetted on two dexterous feet and darted before Justin’s body with uncanny reflexes.

The pilot started: “You—”

He didn’t get another word out. At that instant the figure swung the baseball bat into Justin’s chest with all its might. Heat exploded in his trunk and radiated through his head: it suddenly felt as if Justin’s brain were on fire.

The scene around him exploded into nothingness as quickly and as violently as a stained glass window would disintegrate beneath a sledgehammer.

Justin screamed.

“Gaaaaaaa—”

### **Five Minutes to Gestation.**

“—aaaaaah!”

“Ops to R-H-AGP: respond, goddamnit!”

Justin coughed a tarry sludge from between his lips. His first sensation was one of numbness, then blistering cold. His limbs trembled violently as he examined the half-dozen cords sticking out his chest.

“Christ.” He spat.

The monitors in his cockpit were a stark and blinding red. Soon, that color changed to yellow, and then to a cautious orange as all Justin’s vitals began to stabilize.

“Justin!” Jen Drake’s voice echoed in his ears. “Is that you? Are you alright?”

“None the worse for wear.” He gripped his forehead, turned to one side and then vomited like a sick yak. “Or at least not *too* much worse...” he fingered the cords that studded his chest. “Do I want to know why I’ve been turned into a pincushion?”

“I really don’t think so.” The private’s tone became much more serious: “Justin: we’ve got to drop this OPI!”

Justin looked back at the base. He put his teeth on edge.

“Oh, this son-of-a-bitch is going down!” He primed the *Love*’s engine, got his Raiden in the air and sent his engines into a squealing fit.

Scott Tabris came on the line:

“Umm, we’re gonna try to provide support from here and keep you from getting gunned down again, but we don’t have a lot of resources—”

“We don’t need them.” Jen countered, “Listen to me, Justin: this hydra-demon uses pure electricity to survive: it lives on energy, and that includes energy *weapons* like your wave cannon.”

“Tch! That explains quite a bit: so when I attacked that thing I was basically shooting lasers at a mirror?”

Tabris sounded a tad amused: “You’re the first Raiden pilot in history who’s ever managed to shoot himself with his own cannon. It didn’t even destroy your ship, did it? So much for that vaunted ‘Striker-grade’ cannon of yours...”

“The OPI eats electrical energy, too: if you go after it with any conventional weapons then it will electrocute you again. Justin, what’s the status of your airframe?”

“I’ll need a repair job soon, and a fresh coat of paint, but other than that it doesn’t look too bad. Look, guys: how am I supposed to fight something that just *eats* my weapons?”

Scott struggled for an answer: “You could cut down the power to your photonic cannon bolts. Maybe if you set them to half their normal charge—”

“Negative.” Jen overrode him.

Justin blinked: “Say again, private?”

“You need to do exactly what I tell you to do, Justin. Of course, that’s only if you trust me...”

He smiled: “I trust you as far as I can throw you, Jen: and you’re a pretty light girl, aren’t you?”

“First: kill off power to *every* nonessential system in your Raiden.”

Justin did. The air soon grew stale as his ventilation system ground to a halt.

“I’ve got twenty minutes before I start getting dizzy.” He warned.

“Okay: the OPI can best conduct electricity though liquids, so you should expel all the *Love’s* coolant tanks if you want to last more than ten seconds against that sucker.”

“You mean I need to make my *Raiden* anhydrous in order to make the *base* anhydrous?” Justin smirked. He flipped a switch and sent a train of water out the back of the vessel.

“Now,” Jen instructed, “deactivate your reactor.”

Justin paused. Scott Tabris cried out in the background:

“What the hell are you trying to do?”

“Jen,” he finally asked, “you don’t mean my fusion reactor, do you? I need that to fly...”

“Your solid-fuel engines will keep you afloat for at least ten minutes, and that’s longer than we need, so do it!”

He weighed his trust for the girl against his better judgment, and it didn’t take too long for him to arrive at a decision: he disabled his *Raiden’s* torus reactor.

“Alright: the *Love* is flying with practically *zero* energy output, and the clock is ticking. What now, Jen?”

“How are your arms?”

Justin flexed his digits. As he did so his two spike arms flexed to either side. The *JHAB-III* on his left billowed with steam from the slits in its frame.

“They’re fine.”

“Then you’re ready for combat, pilot.” Jen was all business on the other end: her voice simmered with hate, and no small measure of venom.

Justin nodded. “Still: an *Opie* that feeds directly off wave cannon energy. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Jen answered: “I can’t do a full analysis with *Ops* like this, but I’m smart enough to recognize little things when I see them. This incarnation is a real freak, but you’ve seen it before: we all have. It just didn’t stay buried after our first encounter...”

“I suppose you’ll explain that cryptic little after I’ve taken care of business, huh? Well, any other advice?” The *Typer* smiled.

“Yes, Justin: there’s something I’d like you to do.”

“And what’s that?”

“I want you to rip that motherfucker’s head off!”

### **Gestation Minus Zero.**

The afternoon sunlight was blighted with clouds. It struggled to illuminate the ruddy sea. *Base-10* stood against this depressing backdrop, a silhouette of broken metal and exposed power cables.

That might be the most remarkable thing about the base at this point. The murderous three-headed hydra spent the last few hours greedily lapping at these massive cables, ripping them from the base’s exoskeleton by using the disgusting set of teeth that jutted out its central forehead. The burning yellow eyes on the other two heads watched with lustful desire.

There was precious little power in the base by now. The demon could sense that massive well of energy: the base's fusion reactor, but it refused to feed the monster, and there was very little the hydra could do about that.

But there were other places to go: it fully intended to find its share of food. A hundred miles away, on the purple horizon, the creature noticed a great host of spires and buildings that were barely visible from the base's vantage point: surely there was something good for it over there. All in all, the hydra didn't know itself, but it certainly knew what it needed to do in order to survive.

And this incarnation fully intended to do it.

All its heads suddenly pricked up: the monster sensed a disturbance behind it. It swung around and followed a train of photonic cannon bolts with its eyes as they stung the water behind it. It could feel the energy of these rounds even as the bolts traveled through the water. That little silver ball was there again, buzzing around in the air like a pathetic little dragonfly.

However, the energy from those bolts had piqued the demon's interest, and the *Platonic Love* now had the hydra's undivided attention...

The demon's central forehead opened up, exposing its misshapen, teratomatous teeth.

The silver ball made a squeaky, scratchy noise:

"Are you ready for round two, you stupid son-of-a-bitch?"

The hydra screamed with rage. It removed its little paws from Base-10's exoskeleton and leapt up through the air. Likewise, the little silver ball dove down from the heavens. The pair met head on: the hydra gripped the *Platonic Love* between its paws. Its body blazed with golden fire as it siphoned off all the energy it could from that little silver ball. Then the blazing yellow eyes in its three heads glared triumphantly:

The monster unleashed all its stolen energy in one fell swoop.

The *Platonic Love* wobbled between the hydra's paws as all that energy cascaded back into it, however this time there was no explosion of light, no backward motion by the vessel, and no screams from the human pilot inside it. That is to say: the hydra's attack was not a bang, but a whimper.

The annoying little silver ball made some more noises. This time the sound was deeper, and even the unthinking monster found the intonation to be a little sinister:

"Thank you: that was most soothing. Now, if you're finished, then I think it's *my* turn..."

The Raiden's small right spike arm suddenly plunged into the hydra's belly, and then the ship's engines roared to life. The *Platonic Love* skyrocketed up the hydra's body, all the while tearing the incarnation's insides apart like a paper shredder. Furious, the hydra banked in the air and lunged at the Raiden with its shorn body: one dozen paws flailed at the vessel.

Shortly thereafter a dozen stumps oozed with black blood.

Insane with pain and rage, the demon opened its central mouth and lunged at the *Platonic Love*. The Raiden extended its arms to either side and spun through the air. The hydra's lips were shorn apart at the cheeks. Its misshapen teeth were shattered into pieces like glass rods.

With its limbs and teeth gone, the monster swiped at the Raiden with its tail. The Raiden then flipped through the air, came down on the appendage with both arms, and severed it. The cut was as clean as that of a fishmonger's knife.

The mangled monster fell into the purple seawater and flailed about, its heads thrashing with hatred and its bloodied limbs writing across the water. The yellow flames in its many eyes roiled until the charred slits of flesh around them began to bubble away.

Now more than ever the murderous hydra bore a resemblance to that mythical bane of seamen everywhere: the stereotypical sea serpent. In fact, it looked just like that mysterious creation of true ferocity, power and mystique.

But now— more than ever— this helpless alien incarnation bore none of those qualities.

The *Platonic Love* descended upon the beast, its blood-caked arms glistening in the afternoon light. The ship descended on the creature as a matador carrying his broadsword to a flayed and crippled bull whose fate is sealed: the Raiden's pilot was ready to deliver his coup-de-gras, but it would be nowhere near as clean as that of a respectful bullfighter in the ring.

During the next five minutes the *Platonic Love* went to work on the hydra. There is little reason to elaborate on everything that it did, or the ways in which it did them. The word 'brutal' doesn't do it justice, nor can any words truly convey the terror inflicted by that Raiden. If one is eating, if one has just finished eating, or if one is thinking about eating in the near future then it's probably good not to dwell on this work of butchery.

At last, the *Platonic Love* approached the hydra's decapitated central head. The vessel's massive JHAB-III arm pressed against the toothless creature's temple.

A snarl rose from the ship's speakers:

"Listen to me very good, you ugly freak: *no one* fucks with me with impunity!"

The air around the ship crackled with a shockwave as the spike arm shot forward: it bored straight into the hydra's head. The high pressure forced a geyser of 'brain' matter out the far side of the incarnation's head.

The demon's last thought was of a swirling whirlpool (curiously like the one from Justin's noggin, if only in appearance). The dying incarnation thought of the thousands, of the millions and of the trillions swirling together in the black whirlpool of its paradise. It's very common thing for a Bydo incarnation to dream of Dimension 26— especially at the point of dying— and the hydra did so now.

Then the spike arm blew out its head and the monster lay still on the water. Its fiery slits cooled from yellow to orange, then to pink, and finally to black: the eye slits decayed into cold ash cinders, most of which blew away in the calm sea breeze.

There were no more dreams from the demon after that: there was only darkness.

### **Gestation Minus Zero.**

Donald Plinshine stood on his tiptoes upon a large wooden crate. Above him the black elevator shaft yawned like a giant's mouth. The sound of limbs scuffling over metal met his ears, but the quartermaster couldn't see a damn thing.

"Pyotr! What can you see up there?"

"As much 's a fool can see up his own asshole, Sir Quartermaster." The old deckhand's voice drifted down to Plinshine's ears.

The elevator cables beside the quartermaster's head suddenly clicked, and then they dropped in a freefall.

"Pyotr: those cables you told me to watch..."

"Yeah."

"They're moving, now."

"Which direction?"

"Uh... down..."

"An how fast?"

Plinshine hesitated a moment: "As fast as gravity can pull them, I suppose."

A very loud curse word rained down on the quartermaster, followed by frantic scrambling. Frieze emerged from the shadows and grabbed Plinshine by the collar.

"Bloody friggin' *move!*"

The pair made it a few feet before an explosion rattled the ground around them. Plinshine looked back to see an elevator car disintegrating under the force of impact with the floor. Metal and wire flew everywhere. But for the grace of God the men were not injured. As soon as this elevator car 'arrived' the men returned to gape at the wreckage.

"What 'n the hell?" Pyotr marveled.

Another item fell from the heavens, nearly landing on Pyotr's head. It was one of those sawn-off shotguns used by the Raiden pilots: an Aegis.

Plinshine returned Frieze's baffled expression, but then Pyotr suddenly understood. He cursed again and, looking above him, stretched his arms out wide.

"What're you doing, Pyotr?"

The quartermaster's question was answered when the old deckhand was nearly flattened by a slender female body clad in a turquoise shirt and cut-off khakis. Though Pyotr fell to his knees with the effort, he did not drop her. The woman's head fell back limp: a nasty little gnash marred her forehead, bleeding freely down her face. The woman also bled from a wound on her shoulder.

"Samantha Rayne?"

Pyotr felt the unconscious girl's heartbeat through her back: she moaned quietly.

The old man smiled: "It's lit'rally rainin' Typers, isn't it?"

A loud bump sounded overhead, followed by a female's scream.

"And I don't think it's finished." Plinshine peered up at the ceiling, blinking through his thick glasses.

"Crap!" Pyotr threw Samantha's unconscious body at Plinshine; the quartermaster didn't catch the body so much as crumble under her weight, though in the process he broke the pilot's fall.

The next body that came down the shaft suffered a less dignified entrance: Pyotr dove for her but stumbled. As a result, this particular fallen angel glanced off his shoulder and landed hard on the crate beside him.

Chenine Chovert rolled to her feet and snarled like a small tiger:

"What the hell was *that* all about?" She cried. "Do you have *any* idea what I had to do to get that thing up there!?" The girl pumped her fist towards the ceiling, but quickly recoiled in pain. Then she noticed that her elbow was bent the wrong way; her exposed tendons flapped freely in the cold air. Upon surveying this unexpected development Chenine made a strange grunting sound. Her eyes glassed over.

Then she fell back on her heels; the girl was out like a light even before her body hit the ground.

Pyotr crouched down beside the pilot and wiped his forehead: “Ah, now that’s terrific...”

Donald crouched down as well. “A genuine *Tears’ Shower*, huh? But what do you think she meant by ‘that thing’?”

The elevator wreckage behind them bust into flames, and then melted clean away. Within a minute all that was left of the wreck was a giant pulsing orb of light bearing a thousand fractures along its frame.

Pyotr was about to let loose with another string of profanities, but he didn’t have time:

The glass casing of the Force Orb blew apart. All the light immediately faded. It was replaced with a noise. It was a soft noise: a strange chirping.

A pulsing sac of what appeared to be gelatinous pus boiled up above the wreck. The black skin of the organism twisted and writhed, as if it were trying to turn itself inside-out, but didn’t quite know how to go about it.

“Oh, we’re dead.” Plinshine whispered.

Pyotr’s ears pricked up as another noise lilted through the bay: this one was a scraping sound, and it was quite different from any other sound around him, mainly because it was coming from *outside* the bay. They were only dull scrapes, but like a father recognizing his own children, Pyotr could instantly tell what was making that ruckus.

He eyed all those vats of Karat Slurry that ‘Sir Quartermaster’ had him store for the past week: dozens of them lay all around the bay, and several barrels lay against the closed docking bay door itself. This place was vacant, after all, and therefore it could stand the obstruction. Piling the barrels up against the door as well as all around the walls was Plinshine’s idea of an ‘orderly process’.

The gnarled old man smiled as he surveyed their handiwork. He picked up Samantha Rayne’s battered Aegis and fumbled with the safety.

Plinshine’s nasally whine was rife with panic: “What’re you doing, Pyotr?”

“Improvising, my good Sir!” He leveled the handgun at the barrels against the bay door and smiled even more: “As you know: I prefer to make up a plan as I go.”

The gun discharged, sending the gnomish old man hurtling backwards like a spend shell casing. The devastator slug hit its mark and blew one of the Karat barrels apart. Two dozen other barrels exploded in similar fashion, sending pieces of the shattered bay door raining down on the two men. Both of them tried to shield the unconscious women from the debris, and then from the unbearable shock of heat and light as the *Platonic Love* roared into the bay. The Raiden filled the place with smog and ash.

In the chaos that ensued Donald Plinshine managed to climb atop the rubble and scream at the ship. There was no way Pyotr could hear the quartermaster’s words, but with his spiffy little Sensations Link the *Love’s* pilot must have had no problem, because instantly Justin Storm pushed Plinshine’s body out of the way with one of his Raiden’s arms. He then speared the greasy black blob with his bigger spike arm: the JHAB III.

The Raiden quickly turned on its axis and sped out of the bay, carrying a lethal and omnipotent payload on stubby shoulders.



### Abortion.

Justin made it about two miles from the base before the gooey ball of slime began to change: the first vestiges of an eye, then a tooth, then a demonic little nose took shape. A large, spiny protrusion began worming through the ball: a spindly black tail.

*A tailbone extension... well: now you really are Dobkeratops, aren't you?*

Tiny explosions rocked the gooey ball's surface; strange vents of what looked like super-heated steam billowed from the holes. It wasn't steam, though: these massive energy vents were the visible tails of the embryo's unbelievably powerful Active-System Scans.

He couldn't wait any longer: Justin twirled his Raiden through the air and then fired the JHAB-III. The slimy ball sailed far out into the sky like a bottle rocket. It arced in the air, and then started falling back down towards the waves.

By this time Justin already had his fists wrapped around his chest. He trembled in his chair as electricity flowed all around him: there was only one way to generate enough heat to vaporize this hell spawn, and to do that he would have to perform an 'organic fuse'.

His eyes burned with energy. Justin's link devotion skyrocketed. He pressed his back against his chair as blue spindles of electricity foamed up around his body. His breaths came in quick, short bursts, and panic quickly set in.

"Quint!" The flustered pilot cried.

"I'm here!" The child answered. Justin could feel the boy's breath on his ear.

Two childlike hands grasped Justin's shoulders: an overwhelming calm fell over his body as soon as those small fingers touched him. That terrible surge of electricity stopped; for one instant there was calm in the cockpit.

"You ready, Quint?" He snarled.

"Let's do it!" The boy replied.

The Typer slung his arms out to either side of his body. The cannon discharged: it was messy and haphazard since there was no Force Orb on Justin's nose. The pilot's seizure was tempered by Quint's cool, steady hands. The child's influence was strong enough to keep Justin conscious and to keep the nose of the *Love* dead-on target.

The wave cannon discharge sailed through the sky and connected with the pulsing sac of black evil as it fell. This terrific pillar of fire carried the emerging embryo with it as it cascaded across the sky. Much like a meteor passing into the atmosphere the embryo quickly turned white hot as it streaked across the sea. It broke up, slowly and surely, until there was nothing left in that fiery column but raw energy. It was raw energy in the absence of anything even remotely organic.

Justin sunk back in his chair. The *Platonic Love* gave him some very welcome verification: bogey eliminated.

The pilot sighed and rubbed his temples. Eventually Justin detected a weight in his lap, and when he opened his eyes he was greeted with the pale, callow face of Quint. The boy was panting himself, and a tear of sweat rolled down his pale cheek.

"We did it, kid." Justin smiled.

Quint flashed a pearly white smile. His royal blue eyes shimmered like diamonds upon his young, androgynous face.

“Yeah, we did.” He agreed.

“How’ve you been, anyway?”

The child answered his question with another one: “How’ve *you* been?”

The Typer smirked. His smile faded as he remembered his vision:

“Tell me, Quint: that vision I had...”

“Cynthia Airas.” The boy rolled this name off his lips with overbearing reverence. He sounded like a worshipper verbalizing the name of his god.

“Yeah, Cyn. Tell me: was that you?”

The boy blinked at him.

“Were you trying to keep me alive by showing me that kind of vision?” Justin found himself changing his tone to make it clear that he wasn’t ‘mad’ at the boy—treating the apparition as if he were a real child. It was impossible *not* to behave in such a way, given the vividness of this particular little hallucination.

“If course I did.” He nodded. “The only way I could think of reviving you was to appear like that.” The child’s eyes flittered to one side: “Although I had no control over the other one... I can’t understand why she appeared like that...”

“Huh?”

“It’s not important.” The boy waved him off.

The pair sat in silence for a moment, both panting with fatigue. Justin finally broke the silence:

“Scott Tabris tells me that you’re a manifestation of my ‘survival instinct’. What do you think of that?”

The corners of Quint’s lips drooped, as if in sorrow. He smiled with conciliation: “Yes: that seems logical to me...”

Justin lulled his head back: “Born from a wish, huh? Tch! The feedback I get from this flying abomination is unbelievable: the damn thing scrambles my mind and creates something as cool as you, little guy. Tch! Isn’t it strange?”

The child leaned forward, hesitant: “The flesh...”

“Ugh! Let’s not talk about it: I’m liable to start vomiting again!”

Quint’s face sagged. He sat back down on his own ankles and bowed his blond head: “Because... because you hate the flesh, don’t you?”

The pilot snickered. “Christ: of course I do! This ship is a disgusting piece of shit.” Justin then noticed Quint’s change in demeanor: he’d never seen the boy cry before, but the child looked as close to it as Justin could remember.

“What is it?” He asked.

Quint slid his skinny little legs out from under his body, curled them up against his chest and rested his chin on one knee. He said nothing. Soon, though, he motioned out the *Platonic Love*’s starboard and mumbled:

“Your people are here. They’ll help you, now.”

Justin looked out the side of his cockpit: ten points of radiant blue light flared on the horizon. With his link-devotion as high as it was he could use the power of the *Platonic Love* to zoom in on the group: ten Raidens, nine of which he did not know, but one with which he was intimately familiar:

“The *Principalities*?” Justin sat up and grinned. “Thank God: Connor brought the cavalry! How about that, Quint?” The Typer looked forward again, but this time he was

greeted with empty air. The only things inside the cockpit were himself, his shattered consoles and the electrodes dotting his bare chest.

The ethereal little child was gone.

### **Abortion Plus 36 Hours.**

The ship's doctor eyed Jen with suspicion, but granted her access to the infirmary's recovery chamber. This room— complete with faux-leather chairs, tables and a lamp— was severely cramped and designed to maximize space, a good idea for a small warship like the *Olives*. Ingeniously, the ship's Karat Pool was built into the far wall: a plate of glass separated the roiling liquid from the plush chamber.

Jen sauntered over to the glass and peered through the bubbles: Justin's erect body bobbed around in the pool, a facemask clamped over his mouth and nose and a pair of black swim trunks around his waist. Smiling, she tapped the glass a few times, prompting the pilot to open his eyes. He appeared disoriented, but soon noticed the private on the other side of the glass and grinned with his eyes. Justin pulled his legs together and cemented his fist over his chest, directly mimicking Jen's 'Airen Salute'.

"You making fun of me, wise guy?" She helped him out of the pool and the pair descended back down to the carpeted floor.

Justin sunk down into one of the chairs and towed off his hair. "No: that was for giving me the gift of life, private." He smiled. "How long was I in there?"

"10 hours." Jen answered. She pointed at his chest: "And they, uh, performed 'maintenance' on your ticker."

Justin traced his fingers around the scar tissue above his left nipple. "I should thank you for keeping your mouth shut about that."

"You never told me you had an artificial heart."

"It's not something I want advertised."

Jen nodded. "Roger that. But, if you don't mind me asking..."

"How'd I get it?"

"It's metallic." Jen noted. "And that's pretty damn ironic, since it saved your life, but that means you got it when you were still a civilian, right? Otherwise you'd have a full-organic prosthetic, wouldn't you?"

He nodded. "They don't just hand out 'fops' to civilians, and especially not to little kids."

Jen's brows arched at this.

"I was on a riverboat when I was very young. This was up in Vladivostok; my family moved there for a few years right after the Cataclysm. The boat was churning along a lake in the dead of winter. It was friggin' freezing, especially in the water, and I happened to fall in. My little limbs turned to lead as soon as I hit. I guess they call it 'flash hypothermia', right? Anyway, I went ahead and drowned."

"You did? How long were you under?"

"I've been told it was about 40 minutes. They pulled me out, put me on ice and rushed my ass to the ER." He continued tracing patterns on his chest. "They revived me, of course, but they also did a full-body diagnostic looking for tissue-damage. Everything was kosher, but they found my cardiac muscle was 'compromised'. It wouldn't have

bothered me then, but it could have been trouble a few years down the road, so they cut the thing out of me and fitted me with nice little metal ticker.”

“How many times have you upgraded?”

“I’ve gone through three, so far. And you’re right: the next one’s gonna be a ‘fop’ for sure.”

Jen was called up for her shift soon after that. She left Justin to towel off and change into some real clothes. As she walked through the doorway Justin called to her one last time:

“Jen, I just wanted you to hear it from me: you were terrific up there. You were *really* terrific.”

The girl smiled. “You weren’t too bad yourself, ‘Fiver’.”

She trotted off, but Justin barked at her heels soon enough:

“What the hell? Have you been talking to Plinshine?”

Jen didn’t answer, and as she disappeared through the door she could hear Justin shouting:

“Just what the hell is that supposed to *mean*, goddamnit!?”

The private moseyed over to the warship’s battle bridge. The usual crew was all there. Their borrowing arrangement with Mount Olivier allowed Base-10’s crew full use of the mighty *Olives* (as long as they didn’t move the vessel one inch from where it was currently positioned). The shell of Base-10 dominated their view; the broken monolith was crawling with Razor automatons.

Jen slid into a chair beside Laura Hayle. “Strange as it sounds, I think I’ll feel a little better once they get that rusty little bucket up and running again.”

“I know what you mean.” The Lieutenant answered.

*Click... click... click...*

“Ladies.” Sven Wraith approached the women. The dead black head of his cane glinted atop a brand-new staff.

Laura had told Jen about the RL’s dashing heroics, and his near-suicidal effort to protect Commander Faught. Hidden beneath all this was the truth about Wraith’s gimp leg and the reason for his shame about it: it *wasn’t* a gimp leg at all. When the RL’s old squadron was ambushed over the Himalayas all those years ago he survived the fight with a badly busted leg. Surgeons were able to fix him up in no time, but Wraith found the pain persistent: nothing was *wrong* with it, and no nerves were physically strained, so the problem was diagnosed as a psychological one. For a man like Sven Wraith, such a problem was a very real source of shame.

The private was very deep in Laura’s confidence on this fact: if Sven Wraith knew that *Jen* knew then both she and the Lieutenant would likely be taking a trip through the warship’s torpedo tubes. Still, Jen wondered why the RL would confide in Laura like that at all.

She was about to get a partial answer.

“Everything status-quo?” Wraith asked.

“Yes, sir.” Laura smiled up at the man. “It’s actually much easier to handle operations on a warship. I could get used to this.”

“Don’t.” He warned. “After all: this is no place to conduct proper business.”

The man wandered closer to the Lieutenant’s workstation. He gazed out the warship’s window at Base-10, and his eyes never left that sight while he spoke:

“Lieutenant, the ship’s mess hall closes in fifteen minutes and I was on my way to get a bite to eat. Would you care to join me?”

“Join—” Laura swiveled around in her chair. “Dinner?”

“Tch! A *meal*. We have to eat sometime, don’t we? If you’d prefer then you can always wait for your shift to change, but I know that you’re due for a break, anyway.” He turned and walked off, casting a gloved hand to one side in disinterest. “It was only a suggestion, but I know that *I’m* hungry, at least...”

Laura stood up. “I— well, so am I, sir.”

Jen’s eyebrows flickered.

The Lieutenant approached the subcommander.

He nodded at her: “Shall we, then?”

“Yeah, lets.”

Jen was left to her own devices in the command center. It slowly dawned on her that she wasn’t supposed to be the only person on the bridge. Apparently, the subcommander and the Lieutenant had either overlooked this fact, or chosen to ignore it. Someone didn’t, however, because Jen was called up to the Commander Faught’s office just moments later.

Ron Faught glowered at her from behind the tiny desk in his temporary office.

“They left you alone, did they?”

“Yes, sir.” The girl nodded and licked her lips.

Faught spent quite awhile looking her up and down. He spent a great deal of time scowling at Jen’s freakish pink hairdo, as well as the stud in her lower lip. Today she wore a clear stud—Jen’s idea of ‘conservative’ dress— but that didn’t temper the Commander’s displeasure.

“Private: your ‘services loan’ agreement is set to expire next week, is it not?”

“Yes, it is. Uh— sir.” Jen thought it safe to add as much formality to her words as possible.

Faught absently rotated a small blue box on his desk with two fingers: “And, curiously, you’ve applied for an extension on that contract?”

“Yes, sir.”

“At *this* post, no less?” He scowled.

Jen nodded.

“Are you aware, private, that after next week you’ll lose the rank you currently hold?”

“I am. And I’m hoping that, well— possibly, that—”

“And,” he continued, “that if you wanted to stay on, you’d have to formally enlist? And that *no* regular enlistee can serve at an Allied Military base without completing the six-month long training academy?”

“I... I am, sir.”

“So you see, Miss Drake—” Faught rolled those words with sadistic pleasure: this was a nasty foreshadowing of Jen’s civilian life to come, “it’s all quite impossible. Besides: you’re of no benefit to me or to this base as a private. I want to make that very clear: do you understand?”

During the recent weeks Jen had wondered how she’d react to this inevitability, for it *was* an inevitability to her: the rejection of her service-extension request. She thought she might cry, or at least leave the room with a quivering lip. What she felt at this

moment, though, was anger more than anything else, and the girl grit her teeth in annoyance.

However, when Ron Faught flipped open the lid of that little blue box Jen literally bit her tongue: a set of white shoulder patches rested within, each bearing two dark blue stripes. A gold line ran through each of them.

“Are you familiar with that decoration, Miss Drake?”

“Those are an EFC’s patches.” She whispered.

“Specifically, they’re yours.” Faught growled. “I have no use for smarmy civilians masquerading as privates. But there are times— rare times— when I determine that such a person may not be entirely useless to me.” He nudged the box across his desk. “But I do *not* indulge civilian contractors, so *this* would be the price you pay. The decision is yours, of course.”

Jen picked up the patches, awestruck: “But what about the academy, and all that?”

“The ‘Commander’s privilege’: I have some leeway as to how closely I follow the rules: bending them sometimes, if not breaking them altogether.” He looked the girl up and down once again. “No matter how foolish that decision may be.”

Jen gaped at the patches in her hand: she didn’t know what to say. The Commander broke her silence:

“Was there anything else, Miss Drake?”

“Um... no. No, sir.” Jen retreated from the room, too lightheaded to remember to salute. The commander caught her at the door:

“You need to be quite clear with me, Miss Drake: at this moment, are you walking out of this room with my patches in your hand?”

“Yes, I am.”

The old man smoothed down one side of his moustache and returned to his paperwork:

“Carry on, then, ensign.”

As soon as Jen came off duty she made for the ship’s labs. They were located in the lower decks, quite close to water level, and the afternoon sun glanced off the purple seawater just right, leaving a beautiful aura around the ship’s windows much like the stained-glass effect of some ancient cathedral.

Samantha Rayne stood outside the labs, watching through the window as a tech handled a sample retrieved from deep beneath the base. The sample was a chunk of Bydo coral, but it was more reminiscent of a plant than an animal.

“Are you helping out with the lab work?”

Jen nodded: “They need all the help they can get, and I need to learn.”

She stayed there with Samantha for a few minutes, simply watching the tech as he worked: at one point the man stuck the Bydo tree into an oblong tube, and then he pierced its skin with a needle.

Jen recognized that apparatus, and she had to laugh.

“What is it?”

“It’s a Scholander Bomb.” She snickered. “I never thought I’d see one of those outside of my biology lab at the university. The guy’s trying to measure the strength of that Bydo plant’s innards: how well it can move liquids through its body.”

“And you need a ‘bomb’ for that?”

“The only function of the Scholander Bomb is to put a strain on the plant so there’s something to measure. That is, you can find out whether the thing can transport fluids at certain pressure, or if it’ll crumble under the pressure. Each kind of plant has a different ability to transport stuff through its system— all against gravity, of course. The phenomenon itself is something that *shouldn’t* even happen according to physics, but it does. They call it ‘cohesion-tension’.”

Sam looked at the girl out of the corner of one eye. “So you’re saying that when some external force brings enough ‘tension’ to a system we’re able to see how ‘cohesive’ its internal structure really is?” She smiled. “Measuring its grace under pressure, right?”

Jen Drake’s the kind of girl that can breeze through a technical manual in about ten minutes, but she can’t for the life of her make it past the first few lines of a work by Shakespeare: it took her a moment to understand Samantha’s analogy, and when she did the girl was dismissive of it.

“What happened to us was terrible, Captain, but there’s no need to read too much into it.” She smiled. “Anyway, as soon as the base is repaired we’ll most likely forget all about it, at least I’m sure we will eventually.”

Sam walked off behind her, all the while shaking her head: “I don’t think so. See, Drake, you saved my squadmate’s life out there, and I’m afraid that’s something I won’t forget. I can guarantee you that much.”

### **Abortion Plus 96 Hours.**

Justin sent another baseball sailing out over the green park landscape. The ball clipped a distant bicyclist’s wheel, sending the rider wobbling down the road.

Justin couldn’t help but smile mischievously. He geared up to take another swing, but then stopped.

Down on one side of the sloping hill a group of children played basketball on an asphalt court. Butterflies danced amongst wildflowers to his right. From somewhere close behind him the softest of footfalls disturbed the park grass.

“What’s a working girl like you doing in a place like this?” He asked.

“How did you know it was me?”

“I smelled the *Chaste Gazer’s* exhaust tail twenty minutes ago.” He turned to face Chenine. “Where the hell did you park your bird?”

“A group of schoolchildren are guarding it for me on the other side of the park.”

“Tch! It’s nice of you to let little *Generation Abel* pitch in like that.”

“No,” the girl pulled a small black box from the breast pocket of her *Liefde*-class suit, “it was nice of me to drop the *Gazer’s* security system down to 50 volts.”

“That’d just throw the kiddos back a few feet instead of giving them a seizure.” He took the box from the girl’s hands. “Your compassion is really quite commendable.” Justin opened the container: inside was a silver medallion. The outer ring of the trinket was tastefully adorned with elegant designs. The inside section depicted a bird of prey with its wings folded far behind its back as it streaked down from the heavens.

“I got the Parahawk Medallion, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Is that the only reason you dropped in, Chenine?”

“I was ordered to bring it to you.”

Justin clapped the box shut. “That all?”

The girl took in the scene around them: the basketball court, the public pool and the wildflower path. There was a reason Justin liked this hill: it was damn beautiful, and even a cold-hearted girl like Chenine was captivated by it, at least for a moment.

“Yes, that’s all.”

Justin watched the girl walk off. He balanced the ‘Li’l Slugger’ on his palm, stared at it with reluctance, and then called out to her:

“Hey, Chenine.”

The girl turned around just in time to avoid getting whanged by the baseball bat: she dodged it, caught the shaft with one hand and then stared at it with puzzlement. She looked up at Justin:

“Why are you giving me this?”

“I don’t really want it anymore. Well, at least I don’t think I *need* it anymore.”

Chenine fumbled with the baseball bat like a chimpanzee holding a handgun.

“I have no use for this.”

“Don’t you play?”

“No.”

“Weird.” He muttered. “For some reason I thought you might be pretty good with one of those.”

“Nope, and you really *don’t* want to give this to me: I’ll throw it out.”

Justin shrugged. “Fine. At least we’ll be even for the silver flask, won’t we?”

“No we won’t, because you still have that.”

“Then I suggest you keep the bat. But if you do or if you don’t, I could care less.”

Justin headed down the hill. “As for me, I’m going home.”

The girl cocked her head: “To Trident’s Bay?”

“No:” he smiled, “to Base-10.”

### **Abortion Plus 105 Hours.**

The screen resolution was poor, and the image blurred with a sickly green tint. Still, some things could be made out: a familiar corridor here, a well-known entryway there. The screen bobbed and weaved, then finally displayed a most curious image: the light fell on a giant cylindrical chamber, bottomless and seemingly without a ceiling as well. In the center of this chamber was a column, massive, imposing, and fractured in multiple places. Razors cavorted all around it, filling the cracks in as they went with their plasma-spray torches.

The center of the giant column was most interesting. In addition to a ton of concrete and metal, the slender nose of an Excel-Class Raiden stuck out of the pillar.

Samantha literally fell out of her chair.

Justin snickered, but tried to be more polite.

“Ah, save the hysterics, ‘ya bunch’a ingrates!” Connor Trent crossed his arms and sulked. The Typers sat in the main lounge of the *Olives*, crowded around a flat-screen monitor on the wall. It broadcast a live feed from one of the Razors.

“We’re not ungrateful, Trent.” Samantha explained. “But you have to admit: that was a pretty extreme response...”



Justin agreed: “I gotta say: if I had a choice between my Raiden and the countless lives of a base’s staff, I’d go with my Raiden every time.”

The red-headed Scot glowered at the pair with vindictive eyes: “I’ll be sure t’ keep tha’n mind for next time, *Mo Cuideag Beag*.”

“Bless you.” Samantha winked.

According to Connor, the only way he could save Base-10 from sinking beneath the waves was to blow a hole in the outer casing, find the major fault in the base’s central strut and literally wedge his Raiden into it. What he didn’t know at the time, however, is that the structural engineers would deem it unsafe to ever remove it, meaning that the Salt-o-Scot’s own Raiden, the *Principalities*, would be a permanent fixture in Base-10’s foundation.

“How did that poem of yours go, Connor?” Justin teased: “Behold the *Principalities*, their swords and scepters bright, beside the old *Dominions*, who don’t have to walk home ‘cause they were smart enough not to crash their Raiden into a base’s strut?”

“You really want this to come t’ blows, do ya ‘no?”

Jen joined the group soon after this: her news was sobering:

“The tally stands at 17.” She explained. “17 different incidents of Bydo chimeras rising out of the earth and going on the offensive at the same time we experienced the hydra situation.”

“Was the hydra really a chimera?” Justin asked.

“Yes,” Jen explained. For the first time Justin noticed the girl’s shoulder patches: they were those of a first class ensign. He blinked at this, but made no comment.

Jen continued: “Do you remember the sphinx demons?”

“You mean the bogeys from ‘Hatchling’s Rage’?”

“Yeah.”

“Hatchling’s Rage? What was that?” Sam squinted.

“Ancient history.” Justin scowled.

“We thought so,” Jen shook her head, “but the sphinx-demons came back: the hydra was a twisted union of those three sphinxes that you and Chenine gunned down right above the base.”

“You’re kiddin’ me!” Connor spat. “Ev’n I remember those bastards, an’ a hydra they were *not*.”

“Think about it, though: three heads, paws everywhere, a total of six eyes between them...”

“And what about its love for electricity?” Sam asked.

Jen shrugged. “That’s easy: the sphinxes dissolved into disorganized blobs after breaking up over the water. The resulting goo must have collected around the intake valve for our electric waterfall—”

“The hydroelectric plant...” Justin mused.

“Yup. And, with a little outside help that mess of goo grew up, got organized, and then it emerged as the hydra.”

“Fuck me.” Connor swore.

Justin leaned forward: “What kind of ‘outside help’?”

“This.” Everyone turned around to face Laura Hayle, who ran across the lounge with a memory chip balanced between her fingers. She pushed her way to the television and set the chip in one of the screen’s vacant slots.

“This pirate signal was broadcast over the civilian band about ten minutes ago: it bypassed the AM filters completely. They’ve cut off the transmission since then, but most of the friggin’ planet had the chance to see it.”

The blank screen flickered, then a large white backdrop filled the screen. Justin had to blink as the bright light assaulted his eyes. Soon enough a man walked onscreen; he held a book in his right hand, though Justin couldn’t read the title. All he could tell is that it was too small to be the Bible, and too big to be a simple pamphlet.

The man faced the camera and smiled. He was young, perhaps Justin’s age, or even younger. His sandy hair was far too long in front, and far too short on either side. He grinned with coffee-stained teeth and leered at his audience with grey, calculating eyes.

Even before a sentence escaped his lips the first word that came to Justin’s mind was ‘madman’.

“Good evening, children of the Illegitimate Empire. If you’ve never heard of such a thing, then know that it also goes by the name of ‘Allied Military’. It is to you—the yet innocent children of the Blue Marble—that I address this treatise of peace to. I do this because those morons in your precious military hierarchy are all but lost in the shadow of darkness. Mayhap they’ll resent this slander of mine, but you should remember that all morons hate it when you call them a ‘moron’. My friends: a few days ago our organization began broadcasting a signal to the far corners of our planet. It was a very *special* signal: one that had the power to reach the ears of even those blessed casualties of this conflict that you call ‘the fallen’.”

Laura whispered into Justin’s ear: “It was a *latent* Active-System Scan, something we don’t even know how to create, let alone detect. They’d been broadcasting it all day before the attack, but we just couldn’t pick it up...”

“We have raised an army from the dead. And—as the Illegitimate Empire’s news service has doubtless explained—that army was returned to the ashes from whence it came. Know that we did not do this to injure you innocent children, nor to destroy your military, nor even strike a blow against it: we did this solely to demonstrate our power, and to give that phony army of evil that oppresses you a taste of our resolve. You should know that the creatures you have called ‘Bydo’ are *not* your enemy: they represent a great opportunity for our species. Chicken-shit thought our race may be, they have come to bring great things to us! They are a superior form of life, and the way to our salvation as a planet lies not in creating weapons out of their flesh to use against them, but in *embracing* the potential they represent: we are so close to the gates of immortality, but your ‘dear leaders’ in the military are driving you toward a cliff.”

The manic man slicked back his flowing hair and smiled at the camera with his insane grey eyes:

“It is our job to pull you back from that cliff, and we *will*. I hope you will aid us in your own salvation, but whether you’re receptive to our treatise or not, we can no longer allow the world to murder itself in a pointless war. We will have no more lemmings falling from the cliff: ready or not—children of the Illegitimate Empire—your salvation *is* at hand.”

The man rested his fingers over his sternum; Justin noticed that his fingernails were worn down to nubs:

“My name is Kenneth Allie McCaul.” He spread his hands to either side. The camera panned out to reveal several rows of balaclava-clad men and women, all standing at attention to either side of the speaker, and all staring at the camera.

The man grinned with his stained teeth: “And we are ‘Unity’.” The video went blank for a fraction of a second, and then a grainy image filled the screen.

That was the end of the transmission.

“Is that a carousel?” Justin squinted. “Like at an amusement park?”

“Their logo, I suppose.” Laura nodded.

Samantha glared at the screen with dark eyes: “We knew the ‘Parity’ radicals were planning something big, but I never thought it’d be like that...”

“Well, they can’t do it again.” Jen said: “We’ve got that special ‘latent’ on record: we know what to look for now, so they can’t ever use it again.”

“But the fact that they could even emit a signal like that when even *we* can’t is troubling.” Laura added.

“It does make you wonder what else they can do.” Jen shook her head. “But why are they trying to do this to the military? Their philosophy doesn’t make any sense.”

Justin shrugged. “They’re lunatics, for one. This ‘McCaul’ guy mentioned ‘salvation’ a bunch of times: maybe they think that feeding everyone else to the Bydo Empire is the only way they can get close to God, or something like that...”

Samantha ground her fingernails together: “Whatever his reason, that long-haired wacko and his posse are responsible for the deaths of Lieutenant Ramirez and Nurse Denise, plus anyone else who died in the other attacks.” She narrowed her eyes into bleak razor slits:

“If that fucker really wants to meet-up with God then I say it’s up to us to arrange the meeting.”

