

JUSTIN AND "ANTITHESIS"



HIS MORAL ANTIPATHY

"Typers", Book II

by Shane Kent Knolltre

*The concept of R-Type, the Bydo, force-orbs, and most ship names are copyright © Irem Software.
All other characters and content are copyright © 2006 Shane Kent Knolltre.*

“Civilization is the process of reducing the infinite to the finite.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes

“What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.”

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Act II, ii.

“What is strength? Strength is, in its rawest form, a sunbeam: a ray of light. It is simple, quantifiable: a limited phenomenon of photons and neutrinos created, dispersed, and scattered throughout eternity, never stopping, never ceasing to exist. It is an unstoppable force begotten of limited starting materials: the finite made infinite. Very like the Bydo, isn't it? We see that horror— their god-like adaptability, an almost infinite soup of raw potential, a nearly angelic grace in overtaking (and subsuming) all they cast their eyes upon— but at the same time we remember this truth: for all their terrific power the Bydo are, compared to the human race, little more than flecks of dust grown teeth...”

Bydo Lab Chief's Dissertation (The “Sunbeam” Speech)





Congruity

I.

“It looks like an egg to me.”

“Eggs aren’t really round like that, you know.”

“Then it’s a *round* egg, isn’t it?”

“Guess you could say that.” Justin smiled. He rolled his eyes as far up as he could; Piperel’s narrow chin greeted him. “So whaddya think, Pip?”

“That’s the spaceship you fly, huh?” The girl rested her elbows on Justin’s head, crushing the pilot’s spiky black hair.

“Yup: that’s it.” Justin rested his left arm on the mooring floor handrail.

Twenty meters in front of them, suspended in the air by the cruel mecha-arm, the *Platonic Love* stared down at the duo, its crystal canopy sparkling like the eye of a Cyclops.

“Pretty.” Piperel appraised.

“Pretty’ isn’t what they were going for, Pipkin.” Justin rebuked her.

The little girl grabbed Justin’s head with her small hands, pulled her legs up from around his neck and balanced on his shoulders, wobbling on knobby knees.

“They should paint it purple an’ yellow. That’s what I’d do.”

“I think you’re missing the point of the Raidens, Pip: they’re not supposed to be cute-looking, they’re supposed to...”

Justin returned his eyes to level and blinked: he’d felt a small bump on his left hip. He craned his neck forward, trying to look around Piperel’s leg.

Chenine was standing off to his left, holding Justin's arm out to one side. She absently flexed and extended the limb, then released it. The arm dropped back to Justin's side like a lead weight.

Jen Drake stood behind the platinum blond girl. His squadmate turned to Jen, then shrugged her shoulders and grunted in a 'see: I told you so' manner. Chenine then sauntered over to the far side of the observation deck, slid down against the railing and closed her eyes.

"That was the third time she'd done that." Jen explained to Justin, who looked genuinely bewildered. "So it's true: you really can't feel anything in that arm, can you?"

"No, I can't." He answered. Justin's gaze darted between Chenine, who bore the faintest smirk on her pale lips, and Jen, who pouted sulkily. "Oh, I see." He smiled. "And what did that nasty li'l shark over there bet you, Jen?" If he could, Justin would've crossed his arms.

"My flask." She spat angrily.

"The Airen one?"

"Yes."

Justin flinched for her. "Bad move."

The private ruffled her pink hair with one hand. "Rrrgh! I could've sworn she was bullshitting me."

"As a rule: I don't bullshit." Chenine retorted, not opening her eyes.

"She doesn't bullshit, as a rule." Justin confirmed with a smile.

"No bullshit rules." Piperel agreed.

Both Jen and Justin flinched at the same time: they'd forgotten that 'virgin ears' were present.

"Don't be such a parrot, Pipkin." Justin said.

"Is your arm *ever* gonna get any better?" The child asked.

"It sure is. I just need to use the *Love's* Sensations Link again." He looked over at Jen; his 'kid-speak' tone didn't change, but he was clearly addressing the private now. "My mind was so invested in the link during Jupiter that when the *Love's* arm got amputated, my brain assumed that *my* arm got lopped off: it was tricked." He looked back up at the child on his shoulders. "Blood's still flowing through it, though: so it's not hurt, but my nerves aren't working right. They're kinda 'out of synch' because my noggin is ignoring my limb."

"Your brain thinks that your arm isn't there? Have you tried looking at it with your eyes? That way your brain'll see it and know it's there, won't it?" Pip asserted with a triumphal smirk on her cherubic lips.

"I'll have to try that." Justin mumbled. He turned back toward the private.

"Anyway, Chenine's got your number on this one, I'm afraid. Looks like you owe her one silver flask, Jen."

She stuck out her pierced tongue and scoffed. "Friggin' Raiden pilots..." she muttered. The private pulled the flask from beneath her uniform dress's ruffles. "You're all freaks and con-artists in my book." She tossed the vessel up over her head in Chenine's direction. Soon after there was a bounce noise, and then a grunt.

Justin swiveled around in time to see his squad-mate, still sitting on the ground, rubbing her bonked head; the flask wobbled on the floor between her legs.

“What? I thought you guys were supposed to be super-reflexive and catlike.” Jen both apologized to Chenine and accused her in one statement.

The silver-haired girl shrugged with indifference. She stashed the silver flask in the satchel pocket of her khaki pants.

“I’ve taken a few neurobiology courses,” Jen continued, “and my professors told me that limb-neglect doesn’t happen when a person’s using a link. And even if it does, the problem goes away after a few days all by itself.”

“Well, the doctor could just ‘jump-start’ my brain with some electrical firepower, but that’s technically an operation—”

“It *is* an operation.” Chenine mumbled.

“—so it’s easier to wait for the *Love’s* refit, when it gets a new arm, and ‘integrate’ my senses that way. As for the link, well, your profs are sort of right: I wouldn’t have been paralyzed if we were using the older-generation Sensations Links—”

“The Tohl-Ranz System.” Chenine interjected.

“Yeah. See, the old systems could process and distribute information at about, what was it: a hundred-trillion operations-per-second? Or thereabouts, anyway.”

“You mean 100 teraops.” Jen corrected.

“Whatever: point is, they were technological dinosaurs—”

“Triceratops dinosaurs?” Pip leaned over eagerly. “I love those guys!”

Justin continued: “See: your average human brain has roughly the same amount of processing power: 100 trillion ops-per-second. That meant the Tohl-Ranz Links could just barely keep-up with the minds they were interacting with: they had just enough time— and processing power— to send the most basic information between the pilots’ brains and the Raidens’ computers. But the Pragma-Class links we use now are a different story: they work at about 300 trillion ops-per-second— er, 300 ‘teraops’, as you put it. So—”

“They’re the ones with horns, you know.” Pip added.

“—so they’re literally three-steps ahead of the pilots’ minds. They have both the time and processing power to convey more ‘complete’ information between mind and machine.”

“And that includes a complete recreation of the mental trauma you’d suffer from an amputation.” Jen nodded.

“Mmm: what’s dead to the Raiden is dead to the brain. ‘Course it only happens when a pilot’s link-devotion is ridiculously high.”

“And yours was, huh?”

Justin nodded. “At the time, all I could think of was attacking that Opie. Everything else wasn’t really an issue.” His dimpled cheeks receded; Justin lowered his eyes as he remembered the experience. He brightened again soon enough, however.

“Well, I will say this: at least the *Love’s* photonic cannons didn’t get lopped-off.” The pilot smirked as he drew an invisible line down his stomach, over his bellybutton, then stopped right above his groin, pointing downward.

“Uugh! You’re kidding right?” Jen cringed with a touch of sympathy for Justin’s sex. “Even without a Y-chromosome I’m feeling that one. Guess your voice would really stand out in crowd if that ever happened.”

“He’d certainly be quite eunuch, in that respect.” Chenine agreed. Her lips rose in a tiny grin. She kept her eyes closed.

“Eeegh! Amputation!” Pip shuddered atop Justin’s shoulders. “So messy!” She extended one of her palms in a tomahawk gesture, raised it over her head and brought it down on her other arm.

“Oh!”

The precariously-balanced girl suddenly slipped from her perch atop Justin’s shoulders. She fell headfirst off his left side, where Justin’s dead arm was of no help to her. Jen started in surprise, but before she had a chance to react Chenine darted between the private and Justin, snatching the girl out of the air.

Dazed, Piperel looked up at Chenine, who was now cradling her in her bare arms. “Sorry!” She sweetly apologized. “An’ thanks!”

The silver-haired pilot scoffed through her nose like an indignant horse and set the child down. “Clumsy.” She accused.

“Jeez...” Jen muttered. “Now *that* was fast.”

“Reflexes of a Dancer-pilot.” Justin agreed. “Born to be an R-Typer, isn’t she?”

“It was either that, or join the metropolitan ballet.” Chenine replied.

“You could’ve been a *dancer*-dancer, huh?” Jen asked.

Chenine nodded, then smiled thinly. “But I prefer this line of work: R-Type Pilots are so much less competitive than ballerinas. The occupation’s a little less stressful, too.”

Justin smirked. “If I’m not mistaken, I think she just made a joke.”

Sirens blared high above them. Red strobes flashed along the rusty walls of the bay.

“Ooo-oo!” Piperel covered her ears with her hands and stumbled for the observation deck exit.

Chenine grabbed the retreating girl by the collar of her pink dress. “Interesting jewelry you’re wearing...” she muttered.

Pip looked up at the Typer, mystified, then suddenly remembered. “Oh, yeah!” She pulled a pendant off her neck: it was a large golden emblem depicting a raptor with wings outstretched, its beak spread in a fearsome display, as if it were screaming in anger or in pain.

“Here ya go.” She handed the medal back to Justin, then darted away from the noise.

The giant mecha-arm shivered, then slowly descended, brining the suspended *Platonic Love* down to the floor. The superior deck above them also came down on rusty gears.

Several techs wandered about this deck, performing various tasks on computer consoles and with the machinery. Dr. Samuel Roont’s eyeglasses blazed silver in the light of the bay.

He flattened his hand against his upper chest. “You must be at least this tall to ride the rollercoaster!” He barked with sarcasm. The Bydo Labs doctor pointed down at Piperel. “You: get out!”

The little girl, put off by the loud sirens, was already well on her way to the door. She struggled with the iron hinge, darted out, then the door slammed shut behind her.

Roont looked at Justin. “In five,” he yelled, then disappeared amongst the ballet of techs behind him.

Chenine handed the lustrous gold medal back to Justin, then slumped down against the handrail once again.

“Is that your ‘Golden Kite’?” Jen asked.

Justin nodded. He slipped the medal into the breast pocket of his rubbery black flight suit. “That’s what it is. For ‘heroism unbecoming’, and all that.” He mumbled. “So: what did Chenine risk in your bet, anyway?”

“Kiwi fruit.” Chenine answered.

Justin arched an eyebrow. “Kiwi...?”

Jen smiled. “It’s not important. It’s kind of a long story.” She waved the question away.

“Hmm.” Justin nodded. He rubbed the left side of his abdomen as if he were cradling a bruise.

“Problem?”

“My prosthetic.” He explained. “It’s settling in OK, but it keeps getting clogged ever so often. It’ll take a while for it to start channeling my blood like it should.”

“Hell: it’s been two weeks since you got back from Mount Olivier Medical, right? If I were you I’d give those military doctors hell until they fix it up right.” Jen grasped Justin’s right shoulder in sympathy, but the Typer struggled to escape her hands. He could tell that Jen was surprised at his evasion.

“Sorry: my skin’s kinda ‘prickly’, see...” he lied.

“That’s alright. Anyway: I think you should rattle a few cages about that prosthetic until they fix it up for you.”

“That won’t work: didn’t you hear?” Chenine muttered, “He’s having *trouble* venting his spleen.”

Jen furrowed her brows. “Say what?”

Justin chuckled. “Not important.” He waved the question away with his one good hand. “Oh, well: sorry about your flask, Jen. I rather liked it.”

“Eh,” the private shot Chenine a dark look, “I really wasn’t all that hot about it, anyway.”

“Why not? Doesn’t that Airen stuff drive you wild?”

The private shrugged and crossed her thin arms. “The design was asymmetrical. I was never happy about that.”

Justin recalled the engraving on the front of the vessel: the ‘imbalanced heart’.

“It’s a neat design: kind of a metaphor for personal instability. I thought it suited you rather well, Jen.”

“Oh, thank you.” She spat.

“Not instability:” Chenine corrected, “incongruity.”

“Potato, po-tah-to.” Justin cooed.

“They’re not the same things: one is a disease, the other is a condition.”

“What would you know about instability? You’ve just about got ice-water coursing through your veins.”

Chenine lazily opened one eye and met Justin’s gaze, very briefly.

“—‘dear’.” He sarcastically qualified the barb.

Dr. Roont called down to the trio, and seconds later threw an electrical stimulation wand at them. Justin snatched it out of the air.

Jen backed up. “You’re gonna expose your Link Prongs, aren’t you?”

Justin nodded. “Just to be absolutely, positively sure that my nervous system gets the hint and synchs up with my brain.”

The private nodded. "If you don't mind, I'm getting the hell out of here. As much as I like body piercings, well..."

"It's disgusting, I know." Justin handed the wand to Chenine, who got up off the floor.

"No, no: not really. It's just... disturbing. Anyway, good luck with your little mental synchronization." She waved to him, backed up to the door, then looked at his squadmate. "As for you, Chen, just watch your back. You played me like a keyboard today, but I don't believe in letting 'imbalances' stand, capisce?"

Chenine shrugged. She sat up on her haunches, dusted her pants off, then keyed in Justin's prong-reaction frequency.

"Hang on," He requested as the girl rose and held the wand to his back. He grabbed the zipper on his *Liefde* suit and shed the upper half of the garment. "Might as well not make put any holes in the suit."

"You've had all your scars grafted-up except that one, I see." Chenine stared at Justin's chest: his ribs were visible due to a lack of toned abs, though there was some muscle around his pecks. Dotted about his skin were areas of much lighter skin pigmentation, like a mosaic patchwork: the remnants of his wounds suffered at Ganymede. This test-tube grown skin—genetically his own—would take at least another week to produce melanin.

There was one wound that remained: along his neckline, on either side, there were small lines: tiny chain-lengths branded into his skin. They converged at his solar plexus, where a two-inch long, irregular 'X' pattern was seared into the flesh.

"I haven't seen a reason to get rid of it, yet. Don't you think it makes me look distinguished?"

"Different." Chenine shrugged.

"Well, the thing is: I got that cross-pendant from my parish church way back, like when I received First Communion." He looked back at his colleague. "That's—"

"I know what your Eucharist is." She cut him off.

"Hmm. Anyway, I guess it was important to me. When I lost it—when it melted away in the Jupiter Campaign—I was upset. And, if this scar is all that's left of it, I might as well hold onto it."

Chenine flipped out the head of the wand; sparks idly crackled and simmered along the tip. "Well, I can see that it left quite an impression on you."

"You're in a playful mood today, Chen." Justin smirked as he offered the girl his back. "Any reason why?"

"I'm always happy when I come off-duty." She answered. "And don't call me 'Chen'".

"Well, hell: you let Jen do it."

"You're not Private Drake."

"So, what: you just make arbitrary decisions on who can call you what?"

"Call it an incongruity."

She pressed the wand against Justin's back, provoking a scream from the young man. He fell to his knees. His twelve thoracic Link Prongs glistened atop a bed of rent flesh and blood.

II.

Sven Wraith made his way down Base-10's Southern corridor. A row of windows cast auburn light across the walkway. The late afternoon sun was red on the horizon; it ignited the purple seawater and painted it a bloody crimson. The Raiden-Leader carried a data-pad in one hand and his jet-black cane in the other.

"Your combat record is impressive, Captain. Especially for a junior pilot."

"Thank you, Aryl." Samantha Rayne answered. The pilot followed close behind her new commanding officer.

Wraith thumbed through the stats. "Your Moro-Plantar Test scores are phenomenal, although I'd expect no less from a Dancer pilot. You Dancers are expected to have the best reflexes of everyone, anyway."

"Of course, Aryl."

"Your former squadmates have nothing but praise for your attention to duty, as well as your professionalism in the air." He stopped walking, turned and took in the pilot: Samantha was slim, though quite tall, perhaps an inch shorter than Wraith himself and a good half-inch taller than his scrawny Striker-pilot, Justin Storm. Her copper-colored eyes—ruddy, blemished jewels—gave the girl an aura of toughness, or perhaps rebelliousness, despite what her record might say. Her shoulder-length hair was put-up in a clumsy bun, as if she were used to wearing it much shorter. This 'Sam' had the looks of a reformed tomboy: Wraith was willing to bet a box of Caribes that she was the kind of girl that played basketball with little boys in the schoolyard, and even a little rugby after that. No toy dolls for her, nor tea parties with other little girls. Only recently, he reasoned, would she have begun to reclaim a semblance of her femininity.

And, judging by her aggressive body language and curt voice, she had quite a ways to go if she wished to recover those female gender roles.

In total, though, she seems a run-of-the-mill, stand-up pilot.

All the same, Wraith decided to put the fear of God into her as early as possible.

"Your Squadron Leader's comments over the past year have been, however, mostly neutral towards you. Any idea why that is, Captain?"

"I couldn't say, Aryl." She stood with legs spread, hands interlocked behind her.

Oh, for God's sake...

"At ease, Rayne." He droned. This subject was obviously uncomfortable for her.

Small wonder why...

"Well, that's alright, Captain: I think *I* can say why." Wraith was enjoying this playful torture a little too much, though he couldn't have much sympathy for the girl.

After all: it's her own fault.

"Could it be that your SL was so noncommittal about your performance because he wanted to avoid— what should we call it?— a 'bias' in his reviews?"

"Bias? What kind of bias would that be, Aryl?" There was a lump in the woman's slender throat.

"Oh, well, let's see, I don't know: maybe, because you two maintained a steady, albeit secret, consensual sexual relationship for over half-a-year, he must've thought it inappropriate to directly critique your performance, do you think, Miss Rayne?"

Those copper-colored eyes blossomed into big black marbles. "Aryl, sir! I..." She was flustered, genuinely taken aback, and had no rejoinder for this accusation other than a one-word whisper.

“How?—”

“*How* I know this isn’t a question. The fact that I know it is enough: that kind of conduct is sufficient to get you tossed out on your ass from most units, do you understand?” Wraith leaned forward, his jaw clenched into a snarl. Then his tone softened considerably. “Unless, of course, your superior officer pressured you into this tryst?”

The Captain squared her shoulders. “Sir, *if* there was an improper relationship between myself and my SL it was *me* who started it, not my Squadron-Leader.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Yes, Aryl.” She lifted her head, proud, but bit her lower lip nervously.

Wraith crossed his arms. He rapped the tip of his cane menacingly against one of the glass windows.

“You’re a loyal girl, Captain.” Wraith smirked as he continued down the corridor. Samantha followed with hesitation, like a mouse tailing an adder. “But you don’t strike me as a seductress, exactly.”

“But I can assure you: my SL—”

“Forget him, Captain. Your beau’s future in the Raiden program is not in jeopardy. He’s already been disciplined, anyway.”

Samantha blinked twice, a pensive gaze etched on her face. “How was he disciplined?”

“*He* was the Commit— I mean, he was *our* first choice to pilot the new arrival: as an experienced, proven leader he was the obvious choice. After we determined his ‘indiscretions’, though, he was passed over. It makes sense, no?”

“Yes, Aryl, but passed over for his lover?”

Wraith looked back at Rayne as he pressed a button on a nearby elevator: he smiled, flashing perfectly white teeth.

“—*alleged* lover.” Sam flushed as she modified her statement.

“Again, your combat record is superb for a junior officer: you demonstrate more than just base potential Captain, maybe even a nascent stardom in your own right.” Wraith nearly gagged as he flattered this mere child before him with sickening platitudes: all these lies were necessary to give the Captain a proper ‘worldview’ on her new position, but he detested the constant demands of his tenuous position: he was really little more than a phony politician when it came to the pilots under his command.

The elevator doors opened and he motioned for Samantha to precede him inside. The doors shut, and the cabin began its long, slow descent. “Given your progress in the *Saltatory Conduction Squadron*, it’s likely that you would’ve become a senior pilot in a few months, anyway.”

Rayne smiled fondly. “I enjoyed my time in *Salt-Con*; they’re the only Squadron I’ve ever known.” She looked at Wraith eagerly. “But I don’t mind staying a junior pilot for awhile if it allows me the opportunity to be a part of the new program.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Rayne.” The elevator ground to a sudden halt: warning lights flashed in the cabin. Samantha looked at the RL, her eyes questioning.

Wraith smiled. “Call-up computer: descend to floor B-8.”

A tinny voice protested: “Authorization is required to access the R-H Development Center.”

“Authorization is Wraith: 1-18-25-12.”

The elevator gears ground, then the cabin descended further into the darkness.

Wraith continued: "I'm glad to hear you'd be willing to remain a junior pilot in order to fly one of our birds, but you are *not* going to be the junior pilot of the *Platinum Heart*, Captain."

Rayne arched a bushy eyebrow. "But... I assumed that I'd have to apprentice under another pilot for some time, at least a little while..."

"The *Heart* is new, Rayne: there is no previous pilot for you to learn from."

"Then I'm the senior pilot." The girl marveled, betraying a satisfied smile on her thin, unpainted lips.

"No." Wraith shook his head as the doors opened and the pair stepped out onto the development floor. "I don't think you understand me: there is no other pilot, *period*: you are to be the exclusive pilot of this ship."

"*Exclusive* pilot? You're friggin' kidding me!" Sam caught herself. "I mean: 'exclusive pilot': that's such a rare thing, Aryl. Are you sure—"

"Not in the *Tears' Shower Squadron* it isn't." Wraith shook his head. He stopped in front of a glass window; the large room beyond them lay bathed in darkness.

The captain appeared skeptical. "Aryl, how many people are there in our squad?"

"Besides you, there are two others: the pilot of the *Chaste Gazer* and the pilot of the *Platonic Love*."

"Both are the exclusive pilots?"

"Yes."

"Wow." She mumbled.

"Captain, it's important for you to understand: these ships are highly experimental, as you know. Even as they're proven in combat we collect data on the ships' performances, as well as the pilots' reactions to the vessels."

"Reactions?"

"The Hybrids push the limit of what we've been able to do with denatured Bydo flesh. Most researchers are squeamish about the fact that a regular Raiden is composed of 3-percent Bydo flesh by volume. As for the Hybrids: you don't just *double* that amount and call it a day. We're still studying all the ramifications of the change. The fact that a full 7-percent of the R-H vessels are Bydo flesh has, so far, provided several positives to us— including an increased performance in areas of high Active-System Scan activity, as well as the ability to take a little extra physical punishment from bogeys— but as you can imagine there are costs involved."

"Costs? Such as...?"

"The first snag we ran into was a phenomenon called 'Impingement'."

"What's that?"

"The extra flesh in the ships has the ability to interfere with the pilots' Sensations Links in high-stress situations; we've developed a digital monitoring system that detects this interference and tracks it over time. It's called the 'Impingement Factor'. Every ship in the R-H lineage has one, including the *Heart*."

Wraith grit his germane, polished teeth in his jaws.

Ah, nothing like lying through one's teeth to really bring out the bastard in someone.

Sam scoffed. "Sensations Links? Do the other squad-members actually fly with on-board links?" She smirked.

“Indeed. And, from this moment forth, so do you, Captain Rayne.”

Sam started. “What? I mean: say again, Aryl?”

“Ah.” Wraith produced another data pad from his uniform pocket. “That’s right, Miss Rayne: according to the Allied Military’s Doctrine of Human Rights— third revision— I am prohibited from ordering you to undergo any procedure or operation considered ‘superfluous’ or ‘extraordinary’...” he leaned on his cane, waiting for Samantha to get the gist.

“You mean ‘augmentation’, don’t you, Aryl?” Sam’s face darkened considerably.

“Quite right, Captain. You see: the prerequisite for membership in the *TSS* is simple, but quite absolute...”

Sam gazed to one side, deep in thought. Then she raised her head again. “Prongs, Aryl? You *can’t* actually mean prongs, can you?”

“I can.” Wraith growled like a leopard. His tenor then reverberated back to a silky, falsely congenial tone. “However, if you feel strongly against ‘polluting’ your virgin body with machine parts there’s nothing I can do to coerce the matter.” He shrugged expressively. “We can just retransfer you back out to the *Salt-Cons*, right?”

The underhanded man turned on his heels and took two steps before Sam called out to him. He couldn’t suppress a dark smirk: part of it aimed at the young girl he was extorting, part of it aimed at himself for being such a piece of scum.

“The *Pizzicato*’s already been assigned a new junior pilot: I’d end up in the squadron’s reserve roster.” She rolled these last two words with scornful derision.

“Oh, my: a quandary.” Wraith muttered, nearly with a sing-song cadence.

Captain Rayne waited a full three-seconds longer than the RL predicted before giving her answer: “No, sir: it’s not a quandary.”

“Oh: why is that, Miss Rayne?” Wraith turned to face her again: he feigned surprise as the girl danced to his scripted ballet.

She’s like a monkey to my organ-grinder: this child is a dancer, indeed...

Samantha squared her shoulders again. “Because I *want* this assignment, Aryl, and I’m willing to do what it takes to receive my commission.”

Good girl...

“Good soldier.” He nodded, his voice encouraging. Wraith handed the datapad to Samantha and waved his hand dismissively. “Just take care of that at your leisure.” He turned around and started tromping off again.

“Aryl, sir...” the girl interrupted.

“Mmm.” He turned.

Samantha’s copper eyes glowed in the dim corridor. “Can I see it? Can I see the *Heart*?”

“Why, certainly, Captain.” Wraith smiled, then quickly whisked his cane right in front of the pilot’s face, missing her nose by centimeters. The tip slammed against a switch on the wall: the gigantic room beyond the glass screen came to life with light and noise.

Hydraulic pistons brought a massive display platform up to eye-level.

“The call-sign is R-H-ERS.” Wraith motioned towards the behemoth behind the glass. “This is the lovely little bird you’ll be piloting: Miss Rayne, I’d like you to meet the *Platinum Heart*.”

Despite the cool and suave exterior she projected, Samantha's face fell a few notches as she looked beyond the shimmering glass wall.

"You can go down and inspect it personally once we're all done, here." Wraith eyed Samantha knowingly: he understood the awe a pilot felt upon seeing their new ship for the first time. It was the start of an intimate bond that grew up between man and machine.

And, in this case: man, machine, and monster...

"Does that sound good to you, Captain?"

"Oh, hell yes." She mumbled.

Half of her was in utter awe as she gazed at the ship. The other half of her grinned like a devil.

III.

"'Off-kilter' indeed, pilot."

"I'm just calling it like it is, Plinshine, and if you don't like it, then nuts to you, 'kay?"

"Maybe it feels 'different'. That's a better word than 'off-kilter', don't you think?"

"You want another word? How about 'incongruous'?"

"Say what, now?"

"Never mind. Just take-off the training wheels, alright?" Justin sighed. He'd forgotten how cramped a Raiden cockpit was. His legs were plastered against the side panels. Three massive control consoles invaded his personal space, making for a tight and uncomfortable claustrophobia. He'd leaned to dread this tightness over the past three months.

At the moment Justin ignored all the fancy consoles and their shiny buttons. In fact, his eyes were closed. One of his fists lay balled-up over his chest. If his other arm was working it would be crossed over his chest as well.

As it is I must look like Jen right now, doing that silly little Airen salute of hers...

"Are you sure you're ready to have those training wheels come off, li'l boy?"

"Shut up, Tabris." Justin growled. He could see up into the control room above him, using the mechanical 'eyes' of the *Platonic Love*. He could discern Scott Tabris' brown head of hair and his know-it-all smirk. Even with the messy red-and-green spectral display from the *Love's* scanners Tabris' smug face came through loud-and-clear in Justin's brain.

"Disengaging mecha-arm." Quartermaster Donald Plinshine, in contrast, was all business. There was a reason for that, of course: he wasn't too keen to be working with Justin at all, let alone engage in any banter. After his near-death experience, courtesy of Justin's meltdown inside the *Love*, he could see why that was so.

Justin felt the mechanical arm release the *Love*: it was liberating, as if his own bare flesh were being unpinned. The *Platonic Love* fell a few meters before Justin fired the mobility rockets. Blue flames belched up beneath the Raiden, and Justin brought the ship into a sedate hover a few meters above the mooring floor.

"So far, so good. Any change on your end?" JG Tabris asked.

Justin inhaled, eyes still closed. He squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. “I still say it’s all off-kilter.”

“Call it whatever you want, Storm: the JHAB-III is the latest in Raiden Arm-Tech, and that’s what the Brass wanted the ship’s limb replaced with.” Apparently Sven Wraith had really pressured Plinshine to requisition this massive appendage, and the Quartermaster spent the better part of the week buried in paperwork trying to get one.

“It’s better, you know.” Tabris added knowingly.

“It’s bloody friggin’ heavy.” Justin disagreed. He should probably be grateful for Donald Plinshine’s effort on his behalf, but the pilot really felt like complaining.

“‘Bloody’? Did you just say ‘bloody’?” Tabris was amused. “You’ve been hanging out with those Scottish boys over at Base Sruighlea for too long, Storm. Anyway, look: you haven’t even tried the ‘piston sting’. It’s supposed to be really fantastic. It’s brutal for bogeys and, well, let’s just say that it’s been known to give ‘pleasure’ to linked pilots when they fire it.”

Justin mumbled to himself: a string of profanities and complaints fell from his lips. He began exercising his right arm: feeling the familiar movements of the sleek little spike arm as it flexed and extended. After a few minutes he sucked it up and started struggling with the big, ungainly left arm. It was massive compared to the other arm. With this imbalance in armature he was going to look like a saltwater crab in the sky, for God’s sake! The mechanical limb was tough to move: sweat beaded upon Justin’s forehead after only a few minutes practice.

“The piston, Storm: try the damn piston.” Tabris was almost eager to show-off the retrofit that he and Sam Roont performed on the *Love*.

Justin breathed hard: once, then twice. With a snarl he brought up the gigantic left arm, thrust it forward in a stabbing-motion, then ‘twisted’ the whole apparatus with his mind. He felt the piston click, then engage.

Steam billowed from the edges of the oversized spike arm. Then, without warning, the tip shot forward two meters with the force of a pile driver. A shockwave radiated along the ship’s frame.

That felt good. In fact, it felt *really* good...

Justin exhaled, feeling the steam radiating from the ‘spent’ arm as keenly as if he were next to it. Slowly, awkwardly, the spike clanked back into place, locked itself into position, and reset for another possible extension.

“How’d *that* feel, li’l Typer?” Scott Tabris crossed his arms and smiled with satisfaction.

“Good.” Justin sighed. His lips nearly quivered with pleasure. “Damn good.” He opened his eyes and stared through the sweat on his brow: his own left arm was extended out, just like the spike-arm on the Raiden. Justin slowly rotated his limb, flexed his digits and cradled his fist against his chest.

“Your link-devotion has exceeded 50-percent.” Plinshine observed. “That should mean—”

“Yeah: my arm’s working now: everything’s synchronized.”

Justin lay back and spent several more minutes enjoying the new-found movement in his left limb.

Even as he lay there in the dark cockpit of the *Platonic Love* he was overcome with unease: Justin had a mystery on his hands, there was no question. He didn’t really

understand the mechanics of an R-Type ship, or the malfunctions that could arise in one, but he did know one thing”

There was something *very wrong* with his Raiden, or with his head, take your pick. Either way Justin couldn't ignore the evidence: his hallucinations, the weird phenomena that he'd witnessed and— been a part of— in this ship. What *were* the R-H's? What was their true nature, beyond all the glossy press-releases and official documentation? There were too many freaky things happening to ignore: his Limerence-Psychosis during a stress-test, the unexplained destruction of the Ferryman out a Ganymede: why were such strange things happening to him whenever he piloted the *Platonic Love*?

And, most disturbingly, all his little questions boiled down to one big question: what were his superiors not telling him about this shiny metal coffin he was flying?

For the longest time this question wasn't his business. Deep down inside Justin always *knew* there was something not on the up-and-up at Base-10. It was a feeling, like when one feels their skin crawl for no reason: this feeling intensifies, strengthens, until they turn around and see, to their surprise, that someone's eyes are upon them, watching them. Justin never broached these misgivings because he'd been given a gift that he really didn't deserve: this glorious Raiden commission. And besides: who the hell was *he* to stick his nose where it didn't belong?

But now? Now his skin was crawling, and he felt eyes on him— eyes *around* him— whenever he sat down in the pilot's seat.

He needed answers, and he needed them now.

As it was, all he had was a clue: it was a name, dancing through Justin's head like an elusive lullaby.

'Quint'.

He remembered that funny, phantom-child very well.

“Who *are* you, Quint?”

“What was that, Storm?” Tabris asked over the speaker.

“Nothing.” Justin shook his head.

As far as answers were concerned: he knew a good place to start. He wanted to have a look-see at his little 'niece': that new Raiden down in the dungeon of the R-H Development Center. Maybe a gander up that lady's skirt might shed some light on a few mysteries.

“Why don't 'ya lock the Raiden up, alright? I'm done with it for today.”

Justin spasmed reflexively as Donald Plinshine sent the mecha-arm out to grab the *Love*. It pierced the hull in a cruel, reflexive embrace.

IV.

“New Zealand?”

“It's a long story.” Chenine mumbled as she fingered the satchel pocket of her khaki pants. She was perched on the wing of her Raiden, the *Chaste Gazer*, kicking her legs back and forth absently.

“Geez, I don't think your RL has any reason to send you out to South-Pac.”

Tabris answered. The brown-haired young man sat on a stack of extra photonic cannon chargers.

“I know he doesn’t. That’s why I’m trying to count all my available options.”

“Could you ask Sven Wraith—”

Chenine glumly shook her head before he could finish that sentence.

Tabris grunted and set his chin in his palm. He bore a comical similarity to Rodin’s ‘Thinker’. Of course, one of the major reasons the Lieutenant was wrecking his brains to solve Chenine’s problem was because he had visions of the sculptor’s ‘Kiss’ statue, as well.

That sculpture always seemed a little cheerier to me, he thought with a grin. Scott looked up at the white-haired girl and lost himself for a moment in Chenine’s luscious pink lips.

An instant later the young man sat up and snapped his fingers.

“Ah! How about this: I happen to know that we get all our *Ab Ex Mortis* from Auckland—”

“The Antibydo solution?” Chenine arched an eyebrow.

“Yeah. We need a constant amount of the junk on hand at all times, in case we have an emergency with the force-orbs and have to scrub ‘em. Anyway: I’ll bet if we conveniently ‘lost’ a batch or two in an accident...”

“—I’d be sent out to rush-deliver a replacement batch.” Chenine reasoned.

Tabris smiled mischievously. “You know: those temperature control gauges down in the R-H Development Lab malfunction all the time...”

The young girl smiled and rolled her eyes. She put her legs together, oozed off the opal wing of the *Chaste Gazer* and landed gracefully on the floor. She sauntered past Tabris, then suddenly stopped beside him and gripped his chin.

“*Vous êtes aimable, Lieutenant*,” she whispered.

Any amount of blood in Scott Tabris’ brain suddenly and instantly relocated itself.

The girl’s smile widened and she released his chin. “But I think Dr. Roont would be displeased if you did that: maybe even to the point of ripping you to pieces.” She shook her head and sauntered toward the bay exit.

“No skin off my back, Miss Chovert: I can still manage it, if you really want me to.” He called.

The girl held up one finger and wagged it as she walked. “...but then the Aryl would take what’s left of you and grind it into dust.”

Tabris started, then gulped: that wasn’t something he’d considered. She had a good point, there. Dejected, he acquiesced.

“Alright, Miss Chovert. It was just a crazy idea. Oh, by the way: how’s your Western End rose doing? I was hoping the salt in the air around here wouldn’t be too much for it; you know how temperamental roses are...”

“The flower you gave me.” She wasn’t so much asking a question, or even making a statement, but stalling: like a schoolchild who didn’t do her homework. “It died.” She admitted with a cavalier shrug. “I am sorry.”

“Oh, I see...” Scott tried to hide the disappointment from his face. “That’s alright, ma’am.”

Chenine stepped out of the bay.

Tabris sighed. “Guess I’d do almost anything for love...”

“—but you won’t do that.” A voice rose up behind Scott. It was followed by a pair of hands clapping together in applause.

He swivled around on the boxes: Scott was greeted by Justin Storm’s wry face.

“There’re easier ways to get into a girl’s pants, other than tampering with Base property and facing a court marshal for it.” Storm scratched the back of his head with deliberate strokes. “‘course, that might be one of the *only* ways to get into Chenine’s knickers.”

“Shut up, Storm!” He jumped off the boxes, his face flushed.

“I knew you had the hots for her, Tabris, but to the point of committing treason?”

“It’s *not* treason.”

Justin shrugged, a satisfied smirk cemented on his face. “Some people would call ‘treason’ the ultimate grey-word, but not military tribunals.”

“Oh, for God’s sake: the worst I’m guilty of is overzealous favoritism.” Tabris narrowed his eyes: “And who can criticize me for playing favorites when the only choice I have is between *you* and her.”

Storm inspected his fingernails, still smirking. “Still: doesn’t look good for you, Scotty-boy.” He looked up at the man. “Of course, Laura Hayle doesn’t have to hear about your questionable ethics, at least not from me...”

Scott sat back down on the crates. He crossed his arms defensively. “Alright, Storm: just what is it you want?”

The pilot’s smile widened. “Do you have the keys to the R-H Development Center on hand?”

After thirty minutes of arguing and griping Scott found himself traveling with Justin through the bowels of Base-10, down the ‘final’ freight elevator, and through the lonely corridor that lead to the R-H Development Center.

“Strange door.” Justin commented as they stood before a massive iron barrier. Etched upon the door was the curious design that Scott Tabris was so familiar with: the smoldering ‘heart-and-teardrop’ logo.

“And I thought the design on Jen Drake’s flask was funny-looking.” Justin appraised.

“It’s a design that Dr. Roont seems to like.” Tabris replied.

“Mmm: the Aryl, too. I’ve seen the same design on some of the files in his office.” Justin stared at the door quizzically, looking for a nonexistent latch: the door was totally smooth.

“Ah, ah.” Tabris smirked. “Hang on, there.” He pulled Justin back and faced the door. “T.I.A.” he called in a voice that reverberated throughout the underwater corridor.

The heart-and-teardrop design glowed, then the door sunk into the metal floor. Within seconds it disappeared into the ground like Atlantis falling beneath the ocean waves.

“Neat.” Justin admitted.

The pair continued inside.

“I’m not really happy about this, you know.”

“I’m not really in the business of caring, you know.” Justin dismissed Scott’s concerns as he struggled with the brown maintenance uniform. He changed clothes in a small, dingy locker room, ancillary to the main Development Bays.

“Urf!”

“What?” Tabris asked from behind the row of lockers.

“Friggin’ caught myself.”

“Caught yourself?”

“Zipper: the zipper!” Justin growled.

Tabris wasn’t sympathetic. “It’s not my fault that you choose to go ‘commando’ under that *Liefde* suit of yours.”

“There’s a reason for that.” Justin snapped back. He emerged from the lockers in the unflattering brown work clothes. “I don’t see why I have to wear this crap, anyway.”

“‘cause I *said* so.” Scott was not about to take any flack from Justin. “Just so we’re clear, yet again: you’re *not* supposed to be down here. No one’s supposed to be down here *except* a handful of general maintenance techs. If anyone walks by the display window I don’t want them seeing some guy strutting around the *Heart* wearing a Raiden-type flight suit, got it?”

Justin grumbled at this as he tugged at the uncomfortable garment.

“Also: you’ve got *five* minutes, alright? No more and no less.”

“That’s was our agreement.” Justin nodded.

“No: that was the blackmail.” Scott scoffed. “Oh, and don’t touch the cockpit canopy lever. As a matter of fact: don’t even get *near* it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll set off about fifty different alarm systems. Then the Development Bay will get flooded with teargas, the doors’ll lock down, and about two minutes later a bunch a guys with MP-180’s will tromp down in the elevator, bust into the bay and— in all likelihood— put a bunch of holes in your scrawny li’l body.”

“Point taken.” Justin mumbled.

“The bottom line here is ‘look, but don’t touch’. This Raiden should be kept immaculate for the new pilot.” Tabris moved down the hall.

Justin followed behind him. “And what about that, anyway: who *is* the new pilot? What do we know about ‘em?”

“Not much. I haven’t met the new guy yet. All I know is that he’s from the *Salt-Con Squadron* over at Mount Olivier. His name is Sam Rayne. He’s on base, somewhere, I think.”

“Terrific: can’t wait to meet him.” Justin mumbled disinterestedly. “So where the hell is the new bird, anyway?”

Scott slapped his fist against a wall panel: a retinal beam flared from the console and struck Scott’s dark brown eyes. Then the panel pulsed with three green flashes. A symbol appeared on the console very briefly: another heart outline, but this one a radiant silver and without the teardrop in the middle. Gears ground, and the wall before them lifted up. It *wasn’t* a wall: it was a massive bay door.

“*Five* minutes: you got it?” Tabris grabbed Justin’s shoulder to emphasize the point.

Justin was busy gaping at the behemoth before him. At Scott’s touch, however, he shivered and pushed him away.

“Don’t friggin’ touch me: Goddamnit!”

“Hey, hey, hey.” Scott lifted his hands. “Alright, fine. I’m gonna watch the elevator landing pad. *One* of us has to make sure no one gets wind of this and tosses us both in the brig.”

“Huh...?” Justin’s voice was distant as he gazed upon the massive silver raptor before him. “Christ: I thought the *Love* was silver-colored, but this...”

“Never mind.” Scott waved the pilot off. He stalked away, muttering some choice expletives about ‘pebble-brained Typers’.

V.

How in the holy hell could he know all those things?

Samantha stared at the floor of the escalator.

This Aryl Wraith: what kind of a man is he? Definitely not warm and cuddly, although Sam never knew a Raiden-Leader who was. But still, there was something more to him; it was something very unsettling.

How could he know all that stuff... she still had no answer.

Sam considered herself to be a good ‘information processor’, but her head was reeling at the moment: this ‘*Tears Shower*’ group had only *two* other members, exclusive pilots each, and everyone was expected to get themselves augmented so they could use those damned links.

No, not ‘expected’: he literally blackmailed me, issuing a de-facto order to have my butt put under the knife.

But, still: to get her status as an *exclusive* pilot? It was more than a surprise to her. Better than that, even: marvelous! As a matter of fact, the very idea very was enough to get her wet.

Down, girl. She chided herself wryly.

The escalator reached the bottom floor and Sam stepped off. For the moment she was content to let those uneasy feelings evaporate under the bright floods that bathed her new commission in light: she was going down to the development bay.

She strutted through airlocks: each one obediently hissed open for her, then snapped shut behind her. The slim pilot stepped through the last lock, her tough black boots clanking over the wire-mesh floor, the jagged zippers along each heel jangling like enormous earrings.

Then she was standing face-to-face with the *Platinum Heart*.

Sven Wraith explained a little bit of the ship’s history to Sam during her orientation: this was the fourth ship in the Raiden-Hybrid lineage, though only the *third* to see active combat, for some reason.

They must have the series prototype up on blocks, somewhere...

“So, just who are you, then?”

Sam arched an eyebrow: at first she thought this whispered question was directed at her, but soon she noticed a young man in brown coveralls stepping around the cockpit canopy, one hand running along the silver hull. He was staring into the milky cockpit canopy and not looking down at Sam.

I wonder if it’s normal for people to talk to inanimate objects at this base...

“Hey: grease-monkey!” She barked.

The youth turned on his heels. He nearly fell off the scaffolding set-up around the ship’s frame. He looked down at Samantha with two massive green eyes. The man was fit, but he wasn’t a particularly muscular specimen, which was strange to see in a deckhand’s body.

Usually lifting all that cargo and carting it all over hell-and-creation manages to put some biceps on 'em, at least.

His hair was a spiky cloud of ink, mussed into a sloppy comma over his brow.

Three months. Samantha guessed his time in the Allied Military by surveying his short-cropped head of hair. Enlistees were shaved bald when they showed-up at their recruitment centers for Basic, and you could tell how long a noob had served by the amount of hair they'd managed to re-grow. It was as reliable as rings on a tree stump.

And this guy? He's no more than a sapling.

"Me?"

"Yes, you, poindexter."

"That was kinda uncalled for." The deckhand crossed his arms and leaned on the side of Sam's Raiden.

Ballsy li'l grease-monkey!

"Get your mitts of the hardware, buddy." She growled.

"Grease monkey?" He muttered.

"You prefer 'deckhand'?"

"Deckhand?"

Oh, Lord: they've got all the stubby-bus people working down here...

The young man looked at his uniform, then returned his eyes to her.

"Oh, yeah, of course..." He looked Sam up and down. "But who the hell are y—"

"So what can you tell me about this vessel, buddy?" She crossed her own arms.

"Couldn't say much, really." He scanned Sam again.

"Idiot." She muttered under her breath as the daft deckhand descended the scaffolding. Sam stepped back and admired the bird. The *Platinum Heart* sat, proud and long, beneath the layers of scaffolding like an F-14 fighter jet in storage. The Raiden was an 'A-Frame' craft: it's traditional fighter wings jutted to either side, giving the ship a tip-to-tip wingspan just shy of 25 meters. All the metal plates of the exoskeleton were soldered together into one functional unit and this— along with the mirror-finish polishing of the metal frame— gave the vessel a brilliant luster.

Sam finally understood the rationale for the saccharine ship name.

An A-frame Raiden fighter that gleams like a shiny locket...

"Platinum heart', indeed." She smirked.

"Say what?" The man landed on the mooring floor.

"And you can't tell my *anything* about the ship?" She leered at him derisively.

"What, do you usually work on Korang fighters, or something?"

"This isn't exactly my day job."

"Obviously."

The young man scratched the back of his head. "So, who are y—"

"This is an Excel-class Raiden." Sam mumbled, partially to herself.

The man looked at the ship. "If you say so. Technically it's an Excel-clone, though."

"Whatever." She ignored the man and strolled around the ship's exterior, noting the ship's assets as she did so. "Reinforced, self-sealing 'test-tube' type cockpit..." she eyed the cannon-slits beneath the canopy. "Three, four, five... *seven* class IV 'FLT' photonic cannon ports."

“Seven, huh.” The man said. “My- I mean, the *Platonic Love* only has four ports, and they’re all class III’s.”

“What about the other bird?”

“The *Gazer*? She’s only got two, but they’re class IV’s.”

“Only two, huh? That makes this Raiden the most powerful gunship in the squadron.” Samantha smirked with satisfaction.

“But the *Love*’s wave cannon still puts this one to shame: it’s a Striker-grade sniper-type weapon—”

“Wave cannons don’t mean squat.” She scoffed, running one of her calloused hands over the ship frame as she rounded the corner. “What good is a ‘one-shot wonder’ when I can lay down a constant stream of photonic bolts? Besides, I’ll bet that Striker-clone takes a good minute to ‘get it up’, anyway.”

“Forty-seven seconds.” The man growled, almost under his breath.

“Whatever.” Sam inspected the ship’s rear. Two large, oblong discs were welded beneath each wing where they connected to the fuselage.

“Scramjets.” She recognized. “And one subsonic ramjet on the ass for good measure. That’s some serious propulsion.” She stepped back and surveyed the ship from a distance. “But, still: this mother weighs a ton.”

“It probably weighs several: wouldn’t you think?”

“Shut up.” She muttered dismissively. “Those jets are like an extra set of props on a Messerschmitt: even with the power, this baby can’t do anything fantastic in the air...”

“What the hell more could a pilot want?” The man narrowed his brows. “I mean, Excel-clone or not, this thing is definitely the *Chaste Gazer*’s daughter. The structural layout is almost dead-on, except for the wings. I’ll bet this thing could break Mach 2, easily.”

“It could break Mach 4.” Sam scoffed. “You really don’t know *anything* about Raiden-tech, do you?”

“One tries.” The man growled like a pent-up tiger.

“Well: you seem to know about the other Raidens on base, so tell me: what does that ‘*Chastity Gazer*’ thing have in the way of propulsion?”

“Four scrams and three rams.”

“Well, heck: there’s Mach 8 right there, at a minimum. I’d be a slowpoke behind that kind of propulsion.” Sam was used to the brilliant speed possible through Dancer-tech, and part of her was hesitant to give-up that ability.

I won’t be a bat-out-of-hell anymore...

Now she’d be stronger, but slower. She’d have to settle for ‘bulldog-out-of-hell’.

“Chenine’s ship weighs a lot less, too. And it’s got crane-type ailerons, to boot.” the young man added.

“Mach 12, then.” Sam grunted. That was faster than she’d ever gone in the *Pizzicato*, at least atmospherically. “Well, aren’t we all nice and balanced, then.”

“Balanced?” Then the man’s eyebrows arched even further. “And ‘we’?”

Sam glared at the man, angry that he was still there. “*Us*: the *TSS*.” She looked back at the massive platinum locket, imprisoned in the scaffolding. “The *Gazer*’ll have the speed, the *Love*’ll have the brute strength, and the *Heart*’ll have the guns: it’s all balanced. That’s obviously what the Aryl was going for, here. A blind man could see that.”

“Of course they could...” The man scratched his raven-colored hair again. Sam already found this habit annoying.

“Chenine?” She asked after a moment.

“She flies the *Gazer*. Now, who are you—”

“Another woman, huh?” Sam turned on her boot heels and tromped towards the bay floor exit. “That’ll be weird: I’m used to being the only girl in the group.”

“Group?”

“The *Tears’ Shower Squadron*, idiot!” She growled at him. “Yeesh! You’re dense. I’m the pilot of that lovely metal bird over there, if you haven’t figured it out yet.”

The man stepped in front of her. Sam noticed his assertiveness: he wasn’t so much confrontational as he was curious. If Sam were a bulldog, this meek kid would be a puppy dog.

He’s got the eyes, at least.

Come to think of it: this was just the type of guy Samantha was likely to go after (if she weren’t still the ‘alleged’ lover of the *Saltatory Conductions’ Squadron Leader*). Puppies were docile, tame, and easy to control: just the way she liked her conquests.

Those’re terrible thoughts, Sammy-girl.

Still, Rayne had a combatant’s instincts, and a predator’s mind. She couldn’t help herself for summing up a potential ‘prey’ so quickly. As it was Sam knew that she’d never give this putz the time of day if they passed in the halls: she was just playing around with her thoughts, on the fly, while she dealt with the idiot.

Puppy-dog boy crossed his arms. “The pilot? You? I don’t think so, ma’am.”

She smirked like a crocodile. “Really?”

“Let’s just say that you don’t meet certain qualifications.”

“Ooooh.” Sam stepped forward. Her eyes were steel rivets. Puppy-dog boy took two big steps back, just as she predicted.

This guy’s as manly as Peter Pan.

Her crocodile-grin widened. “And just what kinda qualifications am I missing, grease-monkey?” She rolled these words with an ice-cold drawl.

Soon the man was backed-up against the bay wall. Sam leaned in and stared him down: she was approximately his equal in height, but the combat boots gave her an inch on him.

“Am I deficient in personality, huh? Or maybe ability?” She leaned even further forward, by this time the man’s emerald eyes were dilated and his teeth clenched.

“No.” He answered. “Genetics.”

The caught Sam off guard.

“You’re missing a Y-chromosome, ma’am: the pilot of the *Platinum Heart* is some guy named Sam Rayne.” The puppy-dog boy smiled, triumphant at his jab.

Sam released him, stepped back, then laughed in his face. She crossed her own arms, saying nothing.

“What do you say to that, huh?” The man challenged.

“Wait... for... it...” Sam said aloud.

“I said: the pilot’s name is Sam-”

“..wait... for... it...”

All at once, like a light clicking on in the attic, the man's face drooped until he looked like a beagle. "-antha." He muttered. His face bore a look of horror. A blush crept over his face, and down his neck.

Probably everywhere else, too.

"Sam-antha." The blush intensified until it looked like he was sunburned. "Oh, hell, I... look—"

"Tell it to your CO, pal." She growled as she strutted for the airlocks. "I'm gonna have a chat with your supervisor, if not about your attitude, then about your incompetence when it comes to Raiden-tech." She turned to face him at the last airlock. "So who should I talk with to lodge a complaint against you, anyway?"

The man bit his lip: he didn't answer.

"Screw it: I'll ask someone else." She turned to leave.

"Aryl Sven Wraith." Puppy-dog boy replied.

Sam turned around, slowly.

"He's my CO." The man explained. He looked down at the ground. "And he's my Aryl, too."

VI.

The locker door squealed like a dying rat.

"You could've told me that you were a Raiden pilot."

Justin grabbed the zipper on the brown uniform collar. "I wasn't exactly supposed to be down there looking at the ship, you know. I was trying to keep my cards close to my vest..." He started unzipping, but then arched an eyebrow and motioned towards the barracks door with his head.

Samantha sighed. "Squeamish about being seen in your boxers, huh?" She walked over to the barracks entrance, placing the locker door between herself and Justin's body.

"No boxers." Justin mumbled.

"What was that?" That imperial growl she put on display was already annoying him.

Justin repeated himself.

"What the hell're you strutting around like that for?"

"Tch! You've obviously never worn a *Liefde*-class suit."

"No, I haven't. I'm used to Class-III spacesuits. But still: it's better than not knowing a lick about Raiden-tech."

Justin muttered under his breath as he pulled up his khaki pants and buttoned his turquoise shirt.

A pale hand gripped the door frame. Chenine swung into the barracks, veering at the last minute to avoid Samantha.

"Oops." Samantha grunted as she placed a hand on the girl's shoulder, bracing herself against the impact.

"Hmm." Chenine grunted. She glared at Samantha with indifference, then she gazed at the palm on her clavicle. Chenine pulled away from the touch.

Justin slammed his locker shut. "Oh, uh: Captain Samantha Rayne, meet Chenine Chovert." He motioned between the women.

Samantha blinked in surprise: she knew this girl. She didn't let her shock override her civility, though. "Hi, there." She extended her hand and smiled warmly.

Chenine took the hand hesitantly and shook it like a cold fish. "Captain Rayne."

"You may not remember me, but we've met before..."

"Nash Ultima: the Kit Kat Club. In the lavatories." Chenine rattled-off the details like a rolodex.

"You two know each other?"

Chenine shook her head. "We met very briefly."

"Her Swahili was flawless, then." Samantha complimented the girl, but also gave her a skeptical glance.

"Swahili?" Justin mumbled.

He quickly swiped both hands in front of his face in a defensive motion: one of them came back down holding a silver bottle with a skewed heart-design on the casing.

"Jen Drake's flask?" He turned the beautiful vessel over in his hands, then looked back up at Chenine: the girl's throwing arm was still extended.

"Don't you drink?" This seemed as much an accusation as it was a question.

Well now: don't go putting a false-edge to people's words if it really isn't there.

He was caught off-guard by the pop-tart's seemingly generous gesture and, frankly, was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"I don't like alcohol much." She explained.

"I do." Justin admitted.

"So be it."

Justin checked the girl's eyes: they were large, blue, and cold as a glacier. Her face was cemented into a noncommittal pose, like a classical Greek statue. For some reason he thought she looked a lot like a kitty cat leaving a dead bird on his doorstep.

Gifts given without a hint of love, only a sense of obligation...

Chenine made for the door without another word.

Then Justin realized that this *wasn't* even a gift at all.

He smiled. "Scott Tabris' Western End rose didn't fit into the neck of this flask, did it, Chenine?"

She looked at him with soft surprise. It quickly dissolved into indifference.

"The thorns on that kind of rose are massive: you didn't take that into account when you made that little bet with Jen for the bottle." He rolled the flask over his hand. "It's not a real practical vase, anyway, is it?"

"Sloppy thinking on my part."

"That's not like you at all, is it?" Justin shrugged.

More incongruity in a day of incongruity... I can't take much more of this.

He wagged the flask in front of her. "I ain't keeping this, Starfighter. This is going back to poor ol' Jen in Ops, you know."

"As you wish." Chenine shrugged and pressed through the door.

Samantha caught her on the shoulder once again.

"How'd you know that I spoke Swahili back at the Kit Kat, anyway?"

"Your eyes," she explained, "the rusty yellow color around the pupils: you have Nalubaale Syndrome."

Justin squinted, noting this deformity for the first time. He naturally avoided looking people in the eyes when he spoke to them; eyes made him uneasy. But now he noted the rather attractive blemish in Samantha's peepers.

"You were a 'Lake Victoria baby', weren't you?" His sudden interest in Sam's condition overrode any good manners on his part.

"Assuming you were raised in East Africa, you spoke Swahili, at least. And I didn't *know*, for a fact, that you spoke any English."

Samantha looked even more surprised as she tried to wrap her head around that bit of logic. "Alright... then I guess that was the most efficient way to handle the situation..."

"How the hell do you know Swahili, Chenine?" Justin asked, but the girl ignored his question and ducked out the door.

Two seconds later she popped back in again and, turning to Samantha, apologized. "Captain, about your eyes: I meant no offense. They're not unattractive."

Then, just as quickly as she appeared, she disappeared once again.

What a little Cheshire Cat she is...

"What the hell was *that* supposed to mean?" Samantha scrunched her face.

Justin smiled. "Don't worry about it. Coming from Chenine: that's a compliment. I'd enjoy it while you can, 'cause she doesn't give out many."

"What was that thing about the rose?"

Justin explained JG Tabris's conversation with Chenine about the rose he'd given her.

"And Western End roses are notorious for their massive thorns."

"But how'd you know she kept the flower? Is it that you know a little bit about women?"

"Lord no." He shook his head. "I know a little bit about botany, that's all."

Plus, when you've got that much ice packed up your ass, you've just gotta have a romantic side, too.

Justin didn't really *know* how he knew that, but deep down inside, he knew Chenine was a romantic at heart. She wouldn't give someone like Scott Tabris the time of day, but she would string him along like that. It was a quirk in her character, just like the flaws of a diamond.

Or fissures in a glacier...

"After all: sometimes incongruity is the only congruous thing about human behavior."

"Say what?" Sam asked, baffled.

"Nothing." Justin shook his head. "Even *I* don't understand what I just said, anyway."

VII.

Chenine sat, legs scrunched up to her chin, staring at the small crystal vase on the dirty washbasin. The fluorescent lights overhead bounced off the blood-red petals of a bright, flawless rose.

The stem was gnarled with cut marks where all its thorns used to be: it fit the slender neck of the vase quite easily.

“A little bird told me that you were looking to hit Auckland, soon?” Laura Hayle stood in the doorway of the female Raiden pilots’ barracks.

“Yes, I am.”

“If you want: I think I can just about finagle that for you in the not-too-distant future.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“What’re you gonna do out there, anyway?”

“Pick up some fruit.”

The brunette Lieutenant puckered her lips, but Chenine wasn’t ready to provide an explanation.

“I hear the new arrival’s somewhere around here.”

“She’s next door.”

“Hmm.” Laura looked down the hall, towards the male barracks. She took a step before Chenine warned:

“He’s in there, too.”

“Justin Storm?” Laura stepped back as if Chenine told her there was a rattlesnake at her feet. “Forget it, then.”

Chenine picked up a small backpack on the bench and stepped between Laura and the doorway.

“If you’re going back to Ops, could you—”

“—log out for you. Sure thing.”

“Thanks.” Chenine stepped down the leaky corridor. As she reached the seventeenth-floor elevator the floor beneath her reverberated with a deep boom: some Korang fighters were taking-off from the launch bay downstairs. The vibrations rolled up her high-strap boots, knocked her knees together, reverberated along her spine and then rattled her brain.

Not that my head isn’t already all shook-up.

Chenine was just three days off her ‘prescription’ bottle of *combat buddies* (as she called them) and she was already strutting around and scheming like Machiavelli. There were things she wanted to do: things she wanted to *give* people, or do for them, overriding her better judgments. She was feeling happy: very happy, like a child listening to her favorite lullaby. But— at this rate— a ‘crash’ was just a few days away, minimum.

She could only imagine how bizarre her behavior would get until that point came. She was already sensing that capriciousness in her eyes: a pent-up animal loosing its chains.

She needed a refill.

Kill the tiger— she thought as the elevator doors opened for her.

—and to hell with the lullabies.

