



Constructive Souls

The ‘beep, beep, beep’ of an alarm clock dug into his brain like an ice pick. Justin rolled over, groaning. “Call-up computer: time?” he slurred. There was no answer.

“Time!” he yelled angrily. There was still no answer, just the steady, painful beeping of an alarm clock. An alarm clock next to a bed.

Next to *his* bed. In *his* room.

Justin pushed the covers away from his face. The mental fog of sleep began to melt away. Of course the computer won’t respond: he wasn’t *on* base, and he didn’t have a state-of-the-art computer system at his beck and call. He slammed his fist down on the clock, silencing its annoying bleating.

He got up groggily. His bedroom was dark and quiet. A slither of light shone from behind the window’s thick curtains. The only sounds came from a small divided cage on Justin’s desk. Amongst woodchips and hay, the hedgehogs were stirring.

“‘Mornin’, guys.” He whimsically called.

Justin threw on a robe and stumbled into the kitchen. His apartment was far from glamorous, but he did have a separate bedroom, kitchen and living-area (though the latter two were somewhat joined). That was quite a rarity for someone on a pilot’s salary. He paid for it, though. For one thing, his apartment complex was a good hundred miles outside the City. He didn’t mind that, though. These days many people fled the bright lights of the metropolis for the relative calm of the surrounding countryside. Some liked the idea of living less than 200 floors above ground; others enjoyed the occasional sight of a live tree in its natural habitat, not just in rooftop arboretums.

For Justin, it was all about the living space. Personally he rather liked the idea of living in the massive sprawl of Nash Ultima, the city of cities. He could learn to love life in a towering skyscraper, comforted with the confusing, random lights and noises of humanity. But the confined spaces and tiny, dormitory-sized apartments filled him with

claustrophobia. His apartment was not the roomiest of places, but even a Raiden-Leader would have trouble affording a similar-sized domicile in the City.

He grinned. *Hell, even a Commander would...*

Justin sat on the small balcony adjacent to his living-area. It was a quaint terrace with wooden floorboards and a small metal roundtable with wire-frame deckchairs. There were small plants everywhere, on the floor and hanging from the ceiling. Most of these were courtesy of his neighbor, with whom he shared the small verandah.

He kicked up his feet on the table and rested his head on his fist: the alarm clock couldn't get him out here. He had the entire morning off from testing and Chenine was doing standby at the base. Therefore, most of the day was his to fritter away.

And he fully intended to fritter it. Sleeping until at least eleven was a good start.

"Hello! Justin?" A quick, polite rapping came from his neighbor's screen door. It was Mrs. Elcane. She was a retiree from the New England Territories, the same region Justin was raised in. Her husband died about eight years ago; he'd been some shipping clerk with a company that (indirectly) supplied the Bydo Labs with non-organic material, and she fully believed that made her a bona-fide expert in the field of Bydo Tech, and all discussion and politics relating to it.

Justin didn't mind her nosiness, or her opinions. She was a friendly lady, and the pair would sometimes swap stories about the 'good old days' in the New England Territories (they were usually pretty odd chats: her memories included married life and stories about her office, Justin's usually involved trips to water parks and getting birthday cake on his face).

"I thought that was you, Justin: you're up late this morning! I suppose it's no wonder, what with all that commotion they had on the news the other day. They're letting you have the day off, I suppose?" Her perfume wafted through the doorway; it was stale and grandmotherly.

"Part of it, anyway." He replied. "All the maintenance crews get a nice half-shift today. I guess it's a way of rewarding us for keeping the fleet up to shape during the crisis."

"It really must be terribly dangerous, working on all those large battle-things..." she mused. Justin nodded distantly.

Mrs. Elcane asked Justin if he'd had coffee yet, and if he'd like some; Justin gladly accepted. He cursed his laziness for not making his own coffee, but changed his mind when he sipped the luxurious gourmet java she'd prepared.

"This is delicious." He complimented.

"It's decent." She said nonchalantly, and with a slight air of haughtiness. "I've got some danishes from Café DuBois. They're day-old, I'm afraid, but if you'd like some, they reheat well."

"Well, if you don't any plans for them..." Apart from being neighbors, Justin and Mrs. Elcane had virtually nothing else in common: she was retired, he was only 25. She had a pension and her husband's death benefits to care for her, Justin scrounged just to pay the rent each month. One of the lady's few subtle touches were her occasional offerings to the struggling pilot. Justin figured that she knew his finances weren't quite sterling, but she never brought it up. After all, she was a lady.

"Oh, no. Besides, you really deserve a box of fresh ones for all the work you've done on these plants." She motioned around her.

Justin greedily slurped his coffee. "That's nothing."

"Really, Justin, you're so good at getting these poor things to grow. Before I met you I couldn't even keep my little porthos plant alive: now we've got three kinds of orchids out here!"

"Just soil and sun, really." He said absently while stirring cream into his coffee.

"You can say that, but really, with all the work you've done on the plants, and all that wonderful work you do with your maintenance crew at that military base: you've got a real talent, Justin. You know, what my dear late husband would call a 'constructive soul.'"

Mrs. Elcane's hyperbole was irritating to Justin. He could smell a faint tint of alcohol on her breath. Ten o'clock and she was already three sheets to the wind. He didn't mind; if Justin had to talk to anyone at all this early in the morning it might as well be a drunk.

He wondered how Mrs. Elcane would feel if she knew about his real work. He wondered how she'd feel knowing that he was a callous liar (it wasn't really by *his* choice, but still, it reflected rather poorly on him).

"Thanks" was all he said.

Sam Roont was sitting behind his desk. It was a clean desk, immaculate and ordered. The desk downstairs at his lab was littered with papers, charts, pipettes and Petri dishes, but Roont always prided himself on keeping order where he could. His office was one of those places.

There was only one thing sitting on the oak table. It was an ampoule, a vial. It was like any medical vial found in the Base's infirmaries with one exception: it was painted completely black. Roont was absently twirling the thin tube with his fingers, playing a one-man game of spin-the-bottle.

"Call-up computer" he finally said. He waited for the computer to acknowledge his call. When it did he said: "What is the location of the members of the Tears' Shower Squadron?"

The computer answered: "Pilot Justin Storm went off-duty at 0330 this morning. Pilot Chenine Chovert is scheduled to be in the secondary infirmary at 1000."

Roont checked his watch and then switched on his speakerphone and punched some buttons.

"Infirmary." A perky voice answered.

"This is Sam Roont. I understand Miss Chovert is supposed to be down in your auxiliary branch today?"

"Let me see... that's right. She's due for her physical. But I could have sworn she was just in here for one not too long ago."

"She'd get monthly physicals, dear." Roont observed.

"Oh, right. I guess they have pretty strict standards for the Typers- I mean, Raiden pilots, right sir?"

Roont's dimples showed as his lips rose in a saccharine grin; he felt like flirting a little. "Oh, it's really all in their benefit: they get to see so much of your outstanding care." He sweet talked. "I envy them, really."

"Ha, I'll bet." The woman on the other end tittered.

“No, seriously. It makes me so jealous.” That was enough: he felt a wave of nausea inside him as he continued to feign sweetness. If he kept this up he’d give himself diabetes. After all, it wasn’t *her* that he’d need to be sweet to, but the girl in the exam room. “Anyway, I’m coming down there in a few; make sure Miss Chovert doesn’t leave before I get there.”

“Not a problem. She came in just a few minutes ago, so she’ll be here for a while. What’s the nature of the visit?”

“It’s medically related.” Roont said simply, and then he disconnected the line. He sat silently in his chair for a few minutes, staring at the black ampoule on his desk. It looked disturbingly like a savage fang. He grabbed the vial, tossed it in the air and confidently snatched it out of its spinning freefall.

“Showtime.” He said as he left his office and headed for the infirmary.

Chenine drew in a deep, controlled breath. Her head was subconsciously tilted backwards. The doctor’s stethoscope was cold and uncomfortable on her bare back. Everything about a physical was uncomfortable to her: the room was way too cold, she felt naked in the thin paper gown, and she didn’t like being prodded and postured like a doll.

“Knock, knock!” A man’s voice sounded from the other side of the exam room door.

The doctor pulled her stethoscope down. “Who is it, and *what* is it?” She sounded less than pleased.

Sam Roont opened the door, much to the doctor’s ire.

“What the hell are you doing here?” She fumed. “I’m in the middle of an exam!” she pushed the door shut, but Roont stuck his foot against the jamb.

“I know. I’m here to see your patient.”

“You can talk to her after we’re done, you ass, now get the hell out!”

Sitting on the exam table, Chenine watched all this with disinterest. She didn’t share the doctor’s outrage at Roont’s intrusion, but she did warily pull the front of her gown into place and bring her legs together.

“You don’t seem to understand, my dear doctor. I’m here as a medical adjunct for the girl.”

“Medical adjunct for the girl? The *lady* here gets her medical care from actual medical professionals, thank you very much.” The doctor was now irate, her big brown eyes blazed with a cold fire. “Just because you’re certified by the Bydo Labs doesn’t mean you can interrupt a medical exam on a *human* patient like this. If you don’t leave right now I’m calling the Commander.”

Roont shrugged. “Skip that and call her RL: *he’s* the one authorizing my visit here.”

“Do you really believe that her superior officer can have *any* say over her medical care?” The doctor’s pearly white teeth were gritted like a canine’s jaws.

“It’s okay, doctor,” Chenine said, quietly.

“You *bet* it’s okay,” Roont continued, wagging his finger at the doctor. “All I have to tell you, ma’am, is that I *am* an official medical adjunct for the Tears’ Shower Squadron. It has to do with the nature of their missions, and their contact with certain

elements that I specialize in.” He waved his hand dismissively. “You can connect those dots, if you want. Now, give me some time with the girl.”

The pair argued for several more minutes. Chenine didn’t listen, she put her brain on ‘standby’, thinking about other things until the doctor finally left, in a real huff, and Sam Roont stood alone before her.

The room seemed deathly quiet. There was a steady, monotonous drip from a faucet at the exam room’s sink. “How’re you doing, my lady?” Roont asked with a big, bright, fake grin on his face. His greeting was hollow, like a phony politician’s.

“Fine.” She said simply.

“I’m here to give you a little something we’ve been working on to help you and your colleague work better in the field.”

The white-haired girl didn’t say anything, she just listened.

“Your RL’s already talked to you about your ships’ Impingement Factors, and how they can affect your Raidens’ performances, right?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she acknowledged quietly. Chenine regarded Roont with skepticism, but certainly didn’t show it on her porcelain face.

Roont didn’t say anything, he looked like he was waiting for her to keep talking. She took this as a sign that he wanted to make sure she was following him. “Since the Raiden-Hybrids have so much more Bydo material in them than other R-Type ships, they build-up interference when the Sensation Links are used.”

“Right,” Roont agreed, “and this interference can cause systems to malfunction, errors to occur, and other, well, fairly nasty stuff to happen.”

That begs the question: why use Sensation Links on the R-H’s at all? Chenine didn’t voice her question, even though it was a good one, to her.

“Anyway, the boys over at our Labs have started producing this neat little set of treatments. They’re experimental, but pretty innocuous. I can guarantee their safety for you.”

“What kind of treatments?” She asked.

Roont pulled a black ampoule from his vest. “Simple injections. They’re derivatives of some amino acid chains and light metal products. They’ll facilitate your Sensation Links, that is, make your bodies a little more ‘conductive’, if you get my meaning.”

“...I see.” Chenine stared at the black vial.

Roont grinned encouragingly. “Think of it as caffeine for today’s ‘linking brain’: your Sensation Links will be a little easier with this in you system.”

“Is it permanent?” She asked. Roont shook his head. Chenine followed up: “How long does it stay in the body?”

“The half-life’s about three months or so, but you’ll need a little booster before then. We’ve done all the animal-model testing for this stuff, and all the test subjects came through safe and sound. So, does that sound good to you?”

Chenine nodded. It didn’t really sound all that ‘good’ to her, but it didn’t sound bad either. She didn’t really have a choice, assuming her RL *was* on board with this, so what was the point of asking more questions?

Roont pulled a hypodermic needle out of his vest and plunged it into the ampoule; he pulled back the plunger and a greasy brown liquid oozed into the syringe: it had the unsettling color of dried blood. Chenine didn’t know why she’d make such an

association, but it was the first thing that came to her mind when she saw the ruddy sludge.

“Arm, please, dear.” Roont whispered gently.

Chenine pulled the clingy paper gown off her left arm and held it out, but Roont came right up next to her body, pressing his body near her, steadying the needle against her exposed vein.

“This won’t hurt a bit.” He cooed. Roont held the needle in an unorthodox manner, one-handed, his other hand gripped Chenine’s shoulder in a comforting embrace. He pulled her close. Chenine could feel his warm, moist breath on her naked upper chest. Inwardly, the girl shuddered.

Roont held her far too tight for comfort as the needle pierced her flesh. The syringe slipped into her vein and Roont slowly, deliberately pressed the plunger down, sending the thick brown gel into Chenine’s body.

The needle was removed; Chenine cradled the puncture site as Roont slowly (*far* too slowly for her taste) pulled away from her. He exhaled dramatically and smiled with a warm (and snide) look. “Well, I think I need a cigarette.” He joked crudely. “Thanks for your indulgence, and be sure to let us know about any side effects, in the unlikely event they should come up, okay?”

“Sure.” She quietly answered.

“You’ll also need to come twice a week for evaluations. We might be seeing quite a bit of each other over the next few months. I look forward to forming a constructive working relationship with you...”

Roont brushed his delicately-manicured fingernails over Chenine’s bare leg, just above her knee, as he headed for the door. It creaked and slammed shut unceremoniously behind him.

Chenine shuddered again and gathered her clothes, thinking about the snakelike Roont. He’d managed to torque her off (those were her words: in reality she was *angered* by him, though she wouldn’t like to admit it). She wanted to go home, or get in the *Gazer* and fly around aimlessly for a while. As she was on standby, she could do neither.

Those hands on her body... Chenine didn’t really like anyone touching her, but something about Roont was so dark, so vaguely slimy and snakelike. She couldn’t put a finger on it, but he bothered her intensely.

I think I need a shower, she thought.

Seven Raidens spiraled through the darkness of space. They were Dancers: sleek and elegant in the bleakness of the Asteroid Belt. A train of silver dust trailed behind their tiny, graceful tailfins as they streaked through the night void. The Dancers were thin like razor-sharp discs. Most had cockpits with very sharp nose cones, like those seen on classic fighter jets.

“*Chorea to Pizzicato*. You there, Sam?”

Samantha Rayne answered. “This is the *Pizzicato*. I’m here, sir.” The pilot was clad in a full-on spacesuit, helmet to boots. It was a necessary precaution in the small and unprotected Dancer-series ships. She was sweating heavily, the rubber in her chest plate chafed like a bitch, but Sam was loose and cool, she even had a steely grin on her face.

No pain, no gain...

The day was anything but routine. Twice the normal number of Raiden units had been called to patrol the Belt since the Jupiter Mass appeared. She wished that the SJC would hurry-up with their offensive planning. Sam wasn't the sort of person that enjoyed playing defense for too long.

"Sam, I was just telling our point-ships that we're changing course: there's a company of Strikers up ahead, and they want us to keep clear of their power station."

"The big bullies." She smirked. "They think they're so tough, but they start bleating like babies when anyone gets too close to their little electric pacifiers."

"I hear you. Raidens weren't meant to be tied down to cables or power stations." He laughed, but it was an uneasy chuckle; the laugh rang very false. "That's a fact, for sure."

"I'll be sure to correct my course when our point-ship detours." Her voice was muffled in the spacesuit. Sam could sense some uneasiness in her squad leader. "...is there any other reason you called me?" She was used to a professional, minimal amount of communication between their Raidens (plus, the breathing apparatuses in their suits made talking a chore). "It sounds like you've got something on your mind. Hope it's not about my annual performance review..." she joked.

"No, not at all," he paused, "and then again, yeah, I guess it is."

"Now you're not making any sense."

He sighed. "The truth is, Sam, the Aryl's being pressured to send someone in our squad out to a new assignment. The candidate gets themselves a piece of the new Raiden program."

"What new Raiden program?"

"Tch, I don't know a lot about it. You know the SJC: they wouldn't tell you where the moon was if you asked them, the secretive bastards..."

He wasn't just uneasy, he was also upset. He was *very* upset, cursing the Joint Command like that. "I know what you mean," Sam tried to sound sympathetic.

"No you don't..." he sighed. "Look, I wanted you to know before the announcement was made, but I couldn't tell you face to face..."

Sam's face drooped under her helmet. "You've been selected, haven't you?" She lowered her head, crestfallen. "I... that's great..." but her face told a different story: it was evidently *not* great.

"Sam-

"You should take the assignment and run with it, of course..." she said, hiding a subtle bitterness.

"Believe me, I would if I could. I submitted my name to the Aryl, but he made another decision."

"Who?"

There was silence on the other end. Sam waited for a response, then lifted her head. Her eyes widened in surprise, then disbelief, as the silence continued. "Not- not *me*?"

"...you." He said, with definite bitterness.

Samantha didn't know what to say. "Well I don't know anything about it..." Her face flushed, despite the cold of the cockpit. "Is this some office-jockey's error or something? I mean, why're they picking me?"

“Why’re they picking a junior pilot with half the combat experience of me? With a quarter of the leadership experience of me? With an *eighth* the ability of me? Good question...”

Sam bit her lip. Her squad leader was bitter, but he had some right to be. She knew he was never very happy piloting a Dancer; he’d been looking to trade-up for some time now.

But he immediately sounded regretful. “...hell, I’m sorry, Sam: that was pretty shitty of me...”

“I think you have a right to be upset...” she answered. “But you’re damn right, that *was* shitty of you: don’t you ever talk to me like that again.”

“Never, Sam. Never, you hear?” The pair were now talking along different lines: this was no longer a squad leader and his junior pilot talking, but something else. “I shouldn’t whine, and I *sure* as hell shouldn’t be yelling at you for this: it’s a big step for you, Sam, and you *should* take the assignment and run, naturally.”

Sam looked out at the stars. “Yeah...” she looked ahead of her, seeing the sleek *Chorea* flying in front of her. “and, you know, this doesn’t mean anything has to change, right?”

The squad leader didn’t answer for a minute. “No, of course not. Actually... actually it’d be pretty nice: we won’t have to sneak around anymore. You’ll be out from under my command.”

“But still not out from under *you*, huh?” Sam smirked. She could hear the tension in his voice, his bitterness and hesitant speech. She decided to change the subject. “So the unit’s not based out of Olivier?”

“Not from what I’ve heard. I think it’s at some little port in the Gulf, South-Southwest from the Lone Islands. It’s Base-9, or 10, or something like that.”

“Huh. That’s near Nash Ultima, my old home. How convenient...” Sam grunted. She hung her head, her facemask filled with a frosty fog.

“Sam,” the man on the other end said softly.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to snap like that, OK?”

She didn’t answer for a second. “Yeah.” She said after a few awkward moments.

The Dancers flew through the eternal twilight, dutifully scanning for any anomaly or enemy presence. The silent asteroids continued their ballet as the razor-like ships moved on in the night.

The pilots never notice three small beads of light as they glided through the Belt. They were almost invisible to the naked eye, and glowed with a very faint yellow light as they hurtled through the darkness towards the Solar center.

Towards the Blue Marble.

Justin took the 1:15 train into World’s End station. It was the last civilian center before the Gulf area, and it was a good half-hour’s commute from his apartment complex. He made his way over to the East end of the complex where there was only one transport bay. Three recruits in uniform stood with M4 carbines inside the terminal, checking the ID’s of all who passed.

Justin pulled his Military ID card from his backpack and flashed it to one of the pimply-faced MPs. It was a green-coded card, meaning the holder was a service

employee. Specifically, Justin's card listed his position as 'general maintenance personnel'.

He grimaced and gripped the handrails as the WaveSkim transport took off from the bay. Justin detested these trips, the transports filled with people, seats never available, always noisy and usually smelly. To add insult to injury, the military transports didn't allow electronic broadcasts for 'security reasons', so he couldn't even listen to music on his canalphones.

After stopping at three minor supply depots the WaveSkim finally reached Perimeter 1-0, the tiny artificial island that was the gateway to Base-10. After passing by two more military grunts, Justin reached the small launch bay for the automated MiniWave watercraft that made the last leg of the trip to the base. He broke away from the main group of commuters and walked over to the transport for 'command and adjuncts'. He jammed the phony ID card back into his backpack with derision.

Justin approached the tiny doorway to the little MiniWave bay and spoke into a small speaker, tacked into the false-rock wall of the island.

"Call-up computer: access, please."

"Name, access number, designation." The tinny speaker droned.

"Storm, 12-15-22-5. Tears' Shower Squadron." He replied. A red laser shot out from the console, hitting Justin square in the eyes. It flashed for a few seconds; then a tone sounded. The door hissed and slid open; Justin quickly stepped into the little bay as the door slid shut once again.

The launch bay was tiny, consisting of a small concrete standing area, then a water-filled tub in front of a small rusty bay door. There was one other commuter in the little bay. She was a pink-haired girl with a small nose-ring. She was wearing cut-offs and a tight white shirt that exposed her midsection.

Justin was, to say the least, surprised to see a girl like that waiting for the command transport. If security weren't so over-the-top, Justin would have guessed that she was lost.

"Hi there!" She said with a warm grin.

"H'lo." Justin replied.

They stood in silence for a few seconds. There was a 'pop' noise from the girl, and Justin noticed she was chewing bubblegum.

You've got to be kidding me... he thought with a small grin.

The girl glanced at Justin and held out a small stick with pink wrapping. "Gum?" she offered. Her breath reeked of a sweet cherry scent.

"Oh, no thanks." Justin refused. He leaned on the railing, looking down at the bay's cruddy black water. "You been waiting for a while?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I just missed the last transport..."

"Really?"

She grinned meagerly. "Actually, I was running to catch the last boat, but it was being taken by some Ops techs who kinda closed the door on me. I guess they'd rather not share a transport with me." If she weren't already wearing too much rouge, she'd have been blushing. "They might think that I don't really fit in with the culture here."

There was a long pause. Finally, Justin said: "I can see why."

She looked at him accusingly. "Is that right?" Her slender black eyes were daggers.

Justin grinned. “Yeah: everyone knows grape bubblegum beats cherry hands down.”

The girl smirked, apparently trying to hold back, but then gave up and laughed. “Jeez, you sure don’t seem like the typical command guy.”

“How so?” Justin still stared into the water.

The girl shrugged. “Well, most of the command guys at this post are really anal and bitter. I mean, they’re all these psycho military devotees, and they’ve all been stationed to this crappy little waystation, in the middle of nowhere.”

“I could see how that might piss ‘em off.”

“But I haven’t seen you in Ops before...” the girl said, flashing a skeptical look. “either you can turn invisible, or you’re sneaking yourself a ride on the ‘express ferry’.” She squinted at him with mock suspicion, but then she shrugged (and Justin noticed for the first time that she wasn’t wearing a bra). “Eh, either way, it doesn’t matter. My name’s Jen.” She extended a hand: Justin couldn’t help but notice her pitch-black fingernails.

“I’m Justin.” He said, limply shaking her hand. “And you’re more or less right: I don’t get around Ops too much...”

Jen looked at him a little closer. “Then why are you taking this transport, hmm?”

Justin’s grip tightened around the railing. He didn’t enjoy ‘introducing’ himself like this. “I get to use this transport because I work for the subcommander.”

Jen pursed her lips and nodded. Suddenly the lights came on upstairs and her black eyes widened a bit. “The subcommander, huh?” Then she snapped her fingers, “or as you’d call him: ‘Aryl’, right? You pilot that little round ship, don’t you? You’re one of our Typers!” She paused and flinched. “Sorry, you guys don’t like that word, do you?”

Justin shrugged. “Some pilots get offended by it. I really don’t care, though.”

The bay door opened with a loud squeak and the seven-man MiniWave taxied into the dock.

“Ladies first.” Justin offered as the side-door of the oblong water craft hissed open.

They rode in silence for awhile. The cold Gulf water splashed around the craft as it bobbed and weaved amongst the waves. Justin stole a few quick glances at the curious girl.

Jen noticed. “What?” she said, a little defensively.

“Oh, well it’s nothing,” Justin said quickly. “But, I don’t know, usually people react differently when I tell them about my job.”

“What, you want me to shower you with glory and praise, or something?”

“No, no, it’s not that,” Justin started to blush. Now he wished he hadn’t said anything. “But, I don’t know, usually people get all google-eyed and worked-up when I talk about the Raiden.”

“Star struck, you mean?”

“No, well, yes, I don’t know...” he *really* wished he hadn’t said anything now. “It’s just nice to get a low-key response, that’s all.”

Jen swallowed her gum and set one of her feet impishly on a seat (they were both standing and holding the handrails; it was impossible to sit comfortably in the MiniWaves). “Yeah, well, no offense, but it’s not like you guys are moving Heaven and Earth, or anything. I wanna see the Bydo exterminated like anyone else, but you Raiden

guys are severely over-hyped.” She rolled her head back and closed her eyes. “Personally, I don’t want anything to do with Bydo tech, and that includes you guys.”

Justin stared at her; it was hard to tell what he was thinking.

Jen opened her eyes and looked back at him. “Oh, but look: don’t pay attention to me, okay?” She put one fist hand to her chest and bowed her head ever so slightly (that was an Airen custom, Justin noted). “I’ve been in more-or-less a ‘whiny bitch’ mood lately.”

Justin nodded. “Well, I can understand that, I guess. Any reason in particular?”

The pink-haired tart shook her head, but her silence didn’t last long. She scoffed: “This assignment. This job. This... this *uniform*.” She flashed the contents of her satchel: there was one of those unflattering female military dresses inside, complete with unsightly ruffles and the standard unattractive skirt. The navy-blue fashion eyesore was a depressing sight. Justin thought it was a far more conservative dress than this girl was used to.

Actually, I’m sure of that.

“It is a little dour, isn’t it?” He said, feigning sympathy. He couldn’t really *be* sincere. Justin rather liked the male dress uniform, on the few occasions that he’d ever had to wear his. Most of *his* time was spent wearing that skin-tight black piece of shrink-wrap they called a ‘flight-suit’.

“No, no, I mean the whole thing. Not just the clothing, but the culture.”

“Oh, you don’t like the military?” Justin tilted his head. “Then why-”

“I was basically kidnapped.” Jen shook her head. “And by my own government, too...”

Justin perched his lips. The picture was becoming ever so slightly more complete. “Drafted, huh. That’s rough. But at least you got an assignment in a Command Ops section, even if it is here at Base-10.”

Jen stamped her foot back down; her acid-wash miniskirt fell back into place. “Oh, yes. How lucky that I get to hang-out with a bunch of certifiable nut-job military hawks.” She shook her head, looking slightly embarrassed at her little outbursts.

That emotion probably doesn’t come easily to her, Justin thought.

“Never mind. I shouldn’t be telling all this to you. You didn’t ask to get dumped on today, did you.”

Justin’s lips were still perched. “Well, no. But I understand where you’re coming from. The other Raiden pilot and I don’t have a very easy time here, either.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“No? Well think about it: this base has *two* Raiden units in operation, and we take up a whole *eighth* of the docking and cargo spaces in the maintenance ring.” Justin turned his head and looked at the looming wheel of Base-10 on the horizon, growing bigger and bigger by the second. “The regular military guys at the base don’t think a Raiden unit belongs here, and they kinda ignore us. The base fleet, well, they *hate* us for taking all their resources and not giving back anything.”

Jen was looking at some seagulls on the water. “Yeah, well you guys ‘gave back’ recently, didn’t you?”

Justin recalled the Sphinx-demons. He shrugged. “Yeah, well to most people on base it doesn’t matter whether we’re just sitting on our asses or out there being ‘constructive souls’: their opinion of our program doesn’t change much.”

“Constructive souls?”

Justin shook his head. “Never mind. But look: a Raiden unit, you know, doesn’t interact or coordinate with general military. We’re *supposed* to be autonomous, like a second brain, or something. That’s fine if you’ve got ten or fifteen pilots all banded-together at a base, a regular Raiden unit... a fraternity, you know?”

“But you two are all alone here, right?” Jen nodded.

“It makes you feel kinda...”

“Isolated.” Jen finished.

Justin nodded. He looked her in the eyes, briefly. Apparently they could understand each other better than he thought.

They rode in silence for a while. It was one of those nice, content silences that Justin adored. There was no awkward small-talk or uncomfortable shuffling; they had managed to break the ice ever so slightly, and that afforded him a nice, pleasant quietness for the majority of the trip.

Jen, in contrast, was far less taciturn than Justin. She was the kind of girl that was only comfortable when she had something to say. “Well, at least with the new arrival you guys will have another person in your little clique.”

Justin didn’t say anything for a moment. Then he finally asked: “And how do you know about the new arrival?”

“Oh, you know: you can’t keep many secrets in Command Ops. I’ve seen all kinds of requisition orders and ‘permit-clearance’ forms cross the senior officers’ workstations.” She looked at him with a devilishly comical grin and asked. “Why? Am I not supposed to know about it, or something?” She had this cute (if slightly gothic) resemblance to a Cheshire cat.

“...I didn’t even know about it, until now, that is.” Justin admitted.

Jen looked at him to see if he was joking. When she decided he wasn’t, her face flushed and her eyes widened. “You’re joking, right?” Justin shook his head in reply. Jen’s overly-powdered face was becoming ashen. “I shouldn’t have told you that...” She cringed and stamped her foot. “I should *not* have told you that...”

“Don’t stress...” Justin said.

The girl grabbed Justin’s shit collar (that was an unexpected move) and said: “You don’t get it: I think this is one of those ‘state secret’ things, you know? They give us all these lectures on keeping the goings-on of Command Ops classified and all... it’s bad enough for me to be in the military at all, let alone getting reprimanded and sent to someplace even *worse* than here...”

Justin was blushing like a tomato. His pulse was through the roof and his breath was quick. For now, let’s just say that he didn’t like being touched like that, although the truth is a little more interesting.

“Hey, don’t sweat it.” He reassured her. “I didn’t hear any of this from you, okay?” He truly meant it, but at that moment he would have said anything just to get her hands off him.

“I’m sorry,” she relaxed and sat down in one of the MiniWave’s bucket seats. “With all the new military training and everything else I’ve been getting, I guess I just don’t know how to act when the fear of God is put into me, you know?”

Justin brushed his collar down. *I think I can relate to that...* he thought.

The little watercraft moored itself at the sea-level docking bay in the center of Base-10's rings. The pair took the main elevator up to Command Ops' secondary level (the floor beneath the 'hot zone'). They parted company outside the staff locker rooms, where Jen went to put on her horrible military dress.

Justin headed over to the base communications center, right next to the main bank of elevators and escalators that serviced the rest of the base. The receptionist on duty looked up from her console for one brief second and said "the subcommander wants to see you" before returning to her work.

He made his way up into the main Ops offices, passing by many smartly-dressed personnel: junior officers, lieutenants and senior command staff, all glorious in their immaculate military clothes. They were a great contrast to Justin, who shuffled down the hallway in his loose-fit khakis and aqua marine shirt (the only required 'uniform' he and Chenine had to wear; if they had to wear that complicated military dress it would take too long to strip out of it and get into their flight suits in case of emergency).

None of the officers and cadets saluted Justin as he passed them, and he showed no formal treatment to them, either.

He knocked on Sven Wraith's door. The RL let out a gruff "come in", and Justin entered the barren office. There were only two chairs in the room, one behind Wraith's desk and one in front. There was a single metal filing cabinet off to one side, with no other furniture or decoration in the room. There were a few stacks of paperwork piled in one corner of the office. The RL was typing out some orders on his desk-side console.

Justin put his feet together and fired-off a quick salute.

"Sit down, Storm." He absently said. Justin did so. The room was not yet filled with the Raiden Leader's sooty smoke: his cigars came later in the day.

There was a 'pregnant pause', as Justin would call it. Wraith continued tapping on his console, his blue eyes cold and distant. Justin looked around the room uncomfortably. Finally the RL looked up and asked: "When're you due for your next physical, Storm?"

"Uh, not for another two weeks, sir, I think..." Justin answered.

Wraith nodded and closed his laptop. "Those orders I just sent out are going to the mobile-defense corps' satellite unit: we're being given limited access to Epdin. Miss Chovert gets off duty in three hours, I want the two of you to get out to Satellite Alpha and pick up a package for the base before she leaves."

"A package?"

"It's a shielding program." Wraith explained. "it turns out that, for whatever reason, Base-10 *was* one of the targets of the Galilean Mass's attack." He paused and folded his hands on the desk. "I can be pretty candid and cut through a lot of administrative nonsense when I say that our R-H units are probably to blame."

Justin nodded. "Che- I mean, Miss Chovert and I suspected that. I guess the Hybrids have enough Bydo material in them to be worthy of the Mass's attention, right, sir?"

"Just so," Wraith said, evasively, "but remember, it's not your job to suspect, it's your job to follow orders."

"Yes, Aryl." Justin replied, a little hesitantly.

I'm gonna get slammed for damaging the docking ring... he thought gloomily.

“Anyway, the package we’re getting from Epdin is a program that we can broadcast on the base’s main dish: it’ll scramble any active-system scans near Earth and help us avoid detection in case more skimmers penetrate the planet’s outer defenses.”

“I see.”

“The setup’s called ‘brown recluse’: it’s the same device used to keep the Bydo’s scans from picking up Nash Ultima and the few other metropolises worldwide that are foolish enough to still be standing.” Wraith editorialized. Justin knew that the Aryl didn’t like the idea of big cities in this day in age. He had a tactician’s mind, and the thought of so many indefensible assets grouped in one place was enough to give him an aneurism. “It’s not the kind of technology they just give away to military bases, but due to our extenuating circumstances...”

“They’re willing to make an exception.” Justin’s eyes were downcast as he thought about that logic. “But aren’t they going to be re-launching Epdin’s main power grid today? I know that the SJC had been shutting parts of the network down, since the Bydo had been out of the picture for so long, but-” His eyes widened and he quickly added: “I know I’m not supposed to know about that, but word gets around, you know, sir?” Wraith nodded wearily and motioned for Justin to continue. “But won’t the SJC have all kinds of transports coming in and out of the Alpha area now? They’ve got to be scrambling to put the whole network back online.”

Wraith shook his head. “Well, you’re right about Epdin being partially offline. It’s a huge finance and resource drain. The SJC only wants to use it during times of ‘high stress’, as they call it. But there’s a certain group within the ruling party called the Epidin Raising Committee, and they’ve got their noses to the grindstone trying to reactivate the entire system. There’s plenty of activity, all right, but don’t concern yourself with it. We’ve been authorized to send a small delegation, a *very* small delegation. You see, the signal-scrambler program is classified to the point that we’d need an escort of fifteen fighters, or their equivalent, to retrieve it-”

“And they consider the *Gazer* and *Love* to be the equivalent?” Justin guessed.

“The word ‘Raiden’ carries a little extra weight with everyone, even the Epidin Raising Committee, and they’ve allowed us to enter Satellite Alpha on the condition that we *only* send a few ships, in order to cut down on traffic going into the area.”

“I understand.” Justin nodded.

Wraith folded his hands in his lap and absently toyed with his pitch black cane.

Now *I’m gonna get slammed for damaging the docking ring...* Justin predicted.

After several seconds, Wraith said: “You’ll be taking point on this one, pilot: now get out of here.”

Justin stood and saluted, but hesitantly asked: “Just one more question, Aryl...”

Wraith reopened his laptop. “Yes?” he said, not with impatience, but with a definite edge to his darkly lyrical voice.

“Well, I was assuming that I’d be, well, brought up on disciplinary charges... for damaging the base and the *Love*, but I’m getting raised to point position instead?” He inflected confusion into his voice while trying to hide his genuine amazement at this reversal of fortune.

“Superficial damage to the Raidens is inconsequential as long as you complete your objectives; those ships are built to get knocked around. As for base damage, *that* was a matter of choosing the lesser of two evils: you happened to choose correctly.”

Justin nodded, still perplexed.

Wraith shot him a quick sidelong glance and added, matter-of-factly: “However if something like that were to happen again the Commander would likely see you court marshaled, so don’t make a habit of it.”

“Yes, sir...” Justin said, still unconvinced. He could understand why he wasn’t being disciplined for his actions, but a de-facto promotion? He pursued the matter: “but still, sir, assigning me to point like that-”

The RL tossed a manila folder on his desk with force. “Miss Chovert disobeyed the engagement orders during ‘Hatchling’s Rage’, therefore *you* are my current point-pilot. In a week or two, the situation may be very different, but that’s *my* prerogative. Do you understand, pilot?” He said those last words with a staccato, barking pronunciation; there was only one answer to that tone.

“Yes, Aryl, of course.” Justin said.

“Anything else?” Wraith barked. His eyes were fiery; the phrase was definitely *not* a question

“No, sir”. Justin quickly left the office.

His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. Dried sweat was crusted on his shirt and pants, but that didn’t stop Scott Tabris from coming down with his famous all-out, overdrive drum solo.

The crowd goes wild!

The tech was slamming a feral syncopated beat on the metal floorboards of bay R-A. He twirled a pair of massive socket wrenches in the air and brought his ‘drumsticks’ down on the pipes and sheet metal beneath him.

Bip, bip, bop, bop, boo, bip, bop!

He swung the wrenches in the air and yelled: “Thank you, Nash Ultima!”

Then, to his sudden, chilling horror, a sound came up behind him: It was a lone ‘clap, clap, clap...’ It echoed in the now very silent bay.

Scott swung around to face Chenine and Justin. The pilots were squeezed into their jet black flight suits, standing side-by-side and staring at the panting tech. Justin was the one doing all the clapping. “You get an A-plus for effort, but if Pyotr Frieze finds out what you’re doing to his floor, he’ll make a distribution system out of your innards.”

Tabris blushed violently and cast the wrenches aside. “...I, uh... the, um, *Gazer* is good to go...” he stammered.

“Cool,” Justin rolled the word mockingly. “just make sure the tech running the mecha-arm sends the *Platonic Love* out in primary position, alright?”

Tabris wiped the sweat from his brow. “Huh? Oh, send you out first? That’s a change...”

“He’s running point on this mission, today.” Chenine said. Scott looked over at the girl, her hands folded neatly behind her back, her feet set-up together, prim and proper, like a delicate ballerina’s would be.

“Why’s that?” He looked again to Storm.

“I disobeyed the Aryl on our last mission out, and I’m being punished.” Chenine answered. Tabris didn’t quite understand this and looked to Justin for an answer. The pilot flashed him a quick shrug: he didn’t know either.

Loudspeakers blared inside the dim bay: “R-H-AGP has arrived at the inferior deck of bay R-B: will the pilot please report immediately...”

“That’s my cue.” Justin smirked. He ran off towards his ship. Sprinting away, he couldn’t resist shouting back: “later: ‘sticks’”!

Tabris and Chenine stood face-to-face for an awkward moment. He motioned to the wrenches: “look, that... that’s just something I do, you know, as a kinda ‘victory jig’, like after I’ve been working for ten-hours straight... it’s, well it’s a good stress reliever, you know?” Chenine looked at him with ineffable eyes: she was either thinking about how nuts he was, or deciding what she wanted to order from the cafeteria for supper.

She finally spoke: “There might be more constructive uses for your spare time.”

Immediately Justin yelled back at them: “That’s alright, ensign: spontaneity is the diet of the constructive soul, you know!” He disappeared into the bay next door.

“What?” The tech yelled back, but Storm was long gone. Tabris hung his head and sighed. “You know, I think I hate that guy.”

“He’s an acquired taste.” Chenine admitted. “Like coffee.”

“Or strychnine...” the tech growled. He held a slim metal ladder next to the *Chaste Gazer* while Chenine ascended. The lanky girl trotted up the steps like a mountain goat and crawled onto one of the ship’s bright opal wings. Scott added: “Hell, my parents always said acquired tastes expand the mind, though. How long did it take you to learn to love the java bean, Chenine?”

“I don’t drink coffee.” She said tersely as she slid into the dark cockpit and buckled all her straps.

There were two constants to space: it was vast, and it was wide.

They swam through the vacuum; glittering fragments of dust and comet-matter falling behind them in a silvery rain. Before them the yellow sun blazed. There was no darkness in the interplanetary void, only the ever-present light of the burning sun. It was a furnace, ticking away time until it turned old and died in a red, wrinkled whimper.

In the meantime, they swam.

The sunlight bounced off the tiny pebbles and debris falling from their bodies, but upon them *no* light shone. To any observer, it looked like seven streams of dust tails were mindlessly hurtling towards the stellar center. For all anyone knew, those tails could have been left by a ghost.

But they were *not* ghosts. The seven swimmers flew by a large, messy asteroid. They crossed through its dusty path, parting the debris in a murky fog of pebbles and ice as they went.

As they parted the fog, their shapes became apparent.

Anyone who has ever seen a swan would recognize them.

But, then again, anyone who *knows* what a real swan looks like would have recoiled in horror at the sight of those ethereal shapes. There were beaks, long necks, graceful bodies and tails, but that’s where the similarities end.

Swans don’t have beaks filled with three rows of serrated teeth. And swans don’t have empty holes for eyes: holes that glow with an ungodly amber light. They launched themselves past the lonely floating rock and hurtled closer towards the stellar center.

Towards the Blue Marble.

“R-H-CRTS: Your status is green, green, green to launch.”

The *Chaste Gazer* soared out of Base-10, following the milky jet stream left by the *Platonic Love* as it rose into the sky. The elegant bird tailed the ungainly sphere into the clouds, looking curiously like a great falcon chasing after a shiny toy ball.

Chenine’s voice crackled into Justin’s canalphones. “The roll-out report?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. You take that, and I’ll do the approach report on our way home.”

Chenine grunted softly: a monosyllabic agreement.

“I saw a vulture in the sky...” She began, and described the mission to Epdin for her flight recorder.

By the time she had finished the two ships were sliding gradually into the icy crystals of the upper atmosphere. They were rising steadily and slowly. There was no need to perform a screaming vertical ascent; that kind of thing was for emergencies only. As it was, Justin and Chenine were lucky that they didn’t go into ‘link shock’ when they performed their rapid ascent during ‘Hatchling’s Rage’. In ships with active Sensation Links, sudden changes in temperature and pressure have a tendency to cook unprepared pilots’ brains like eggs.

Justin and Chenine either had confidence in their abilities to survive that maneuver, or else they were reckless as hell.

Both the *Gazer* and *Love’s* computers locked in a course for Satellite Alpha: the primary hub of the Earth Perimeter Defense Network, and Justin and Chenine let their autopilots bring the Raidens into a leisurely climb. Chenine was already getting into her favorite autopilot-controlled pastime (sleeping) when Justin radioed her.

“Chenine, you still with me?”

“...I am, now.” She mumbled.

“The Aryl said you were being punished for not following orders yesterday. If you don’t want to talk about it, I understand, but-”

“Our orders were to exterminate all incoming targets.” She explained wearily.

“Yeah?”

“I let the last target go.”

Justin thought about that for a minute. “You didn’t let it go: didn’t you chase it straight into the base fleet? You pursued it until the fighters came into range; the damn thing was friggin’ vaporized, right?”

“Yes, but not by me.”

Justin thought about *that* for a minute. “The Aryl punished you because we didn’t *personally* destroy all the targets?”

“It would seem so.” Chenine said indifferently.

What a hardass. He thought about the steel-eyed RL dressing down Chenine for what he considered a failure, what only *he* could consider a failure. “So he wanted perfection from us, huh?”

“I got the impression that he wanted a stellar performance.”

“Didn’t we give him one?”

“Apparently *I* didn’t.” she curtly answered. “Look, it’s my problem, not yours. All I know is that he thought it was very important that we take down all the targets, and I wasn’t able to do it. That’s all there is, okay?” She signed off the channel without another word.

Probably going to curl-up and take a nap, Justin thought cynically.

He shook his head and adjusted the cockpit temperature controls; it was getting damn chilly inside the ship, despite his thermal-insulating suit. The sky was becoming darker as the ships rose higher into the stratosphere.

Wraith might be an ass, Chenine, but you're still a bitch...

Thirty minutes later the pair of Raidens were dancing between columns and pillars. They had entered the outer orbit of Earth and were bobbing and weaving through what some pilots whimsically called the 'Epidin-o-sphere'.

The Earth Perimeter Defense Network is obviously not an actual solid layer above the planet. There are two reasons for this. First, while ideal for defense, a solid barrier would be impossible to construct. A second, more minor reason is that it would be environmentally catastrophic for the planet.

Epdin is a series of orbiting satellites, dun-colored columns that eerily resemble ancient pillars like you'd see in the Parthenon, or ancient Rome. Flying amongst the scratched-up chunks of metal, one feels like they're moving through the ghostly remains of some long-gone empire.

All these cold pillars and columns serve one purpose: reflection. The gigantic main satellites send out an incredibly burst of energy when they're activated. The energy scatters all around the sky, propagated by the refraction equipment inside each pillar and column. Like a ray of light in a hall of mirrors, the result is very bright, and violently lethal.

For now the decrepit mess of metal was silent, dead. The cost of running Epdin was beyond astronomical, and the SJC had secretly cut down on the satellites' operations, so much so that when the sphinx-demons attacked most of Epdin wasn't even on standby. Their dirty little secret had come out. In the head honchos' defense, those monsters had been atypical: a normal Bydo attack comes with a much more advanced warning, and usually in much greater numbers. As it was, Epdin's main station wasn't even turned on when the new Mass appeared at Jupiter. But it looked like that was going to change.

The 'traffic' into Satellite Alpha was incredible. Gigantic cargo freighters stretched out towards the black horizon, their rusty metal hulls a stark contrast to the elegant finishes on Justin and Chenine's birds of prey. The whole scene was a mess, typical of a bureaucratic endeavor. But since it was a military-run affair, at least it was a pretty mess. Some genius had tattooed colorful directions into the pillars around the station.

"Hah: they're just like road-signs." Justin chortled into Chenine's canalphones. The girl had woken up a mere five minutes ago and she absently scratched the back of her head while listening to her team-leader ramble. "I wish the directions were this good down on Autoway-7. Let's see... I guess we fall under the category of 'miscellaneous pick-ups'" he read the billboard-sized graffiti, "so, according to the graffiti anyway, we should approach from the northwest."

Chenine covered her mouth as she yawned. She was hardly a self-conscious person, but she didn't want him to hear her yawn. "We're technically in the exosphere right now; we should be moving in 3-D terminology." She inflected a bit of uncharacteristic venom into her voice. "You really should know that, I think."

There was silence on the other end of the line for a second. Justin sighed into her earbuds and said: "Fine, then: approach from 3-3-0, mark naught." There was an

emotionless quality to his voice, but underneath his words had a razor edge to them. “I haven’t eaten since 8 this morning: I wonder if their mess hall’s open...” He sounded almost as jovial as before, but Chenine could tell he was talking through clenched teeth. He seemed to try very hard to avoid conflict, whenever possible.

She didn’t know why she’d said that; *she* certainly didn’t care how strictly they followed procedure. She also genuinely didn’t care that she had lost out on point-position. Quite the contrary: she disliked all the monotonous responsibilities and tasks that came with being a Raiden point-pilot, and was frankly glad to be removed from the spotlight. There was no reason for that anal-retentive jab: her comment was spite for spite’s sake.

Some of it could be burn off from her earlier encounter with Sam Roont, but there was more to it than that. *It must be him...* she thought. *Something about him that just brings out my bitter side...*

Glop...glop...glop...glop...

Chenine pulled herself out of those pointless ruminations. A sticky amber mess was collecting on her canopy cover. She leaned forward with a cocked eyebrow and stared at the strange jelly forming on her canopy with her round, sleepy eyes. The slimy mess dripped all over her canopy like rain on a windshield. *That wasn’t right at all.*

It seldom rains in space...

“Call-up computer, analyze that substance.”

There was a pause. “Specify” the metallic voice replied.

“The... precipitate... out... side.” She slowly finished. The lithe girl balled one of her small fists. If she had the energy, and if she was that type of person, she might have kicked the on-board computer for its stupidity.

There was another pause (this one more constructive). Small shocks of electricity danced on the crystal canopy as the computer reached out and probed the mess on the transparent shield. It finally answered: “The substance is 20 percent propylene glycol, 10 percent silicone oils, 5 percent mercury and 65 percent helium with trace minerals.”

She clicked her tongue.

What the hell is this?

Then Chenine saw past the dabbled sludge on her window. The *Platonic Love’s* engines burned brightly ahead of her: the flame on the Raiden’s left side burned much redder and brighter than the one on her right.

She was no chemist, but Chenine could put two and two together.

“Gazer to Love,” she called.

“Look, Chenine, I’ve got it, okay? I’ll keep better track of navigational procedure next time, if it’ll make you happy.”

“I’d be happy enough to grin,” she said, “but you’ve got more important things to worry about.”

“Huh?” he sounded baffled.

“You’re leaking coolant.”

There was no noise on the other line for a second. Then a muffled ‘shit’ came into her ears as Justin checked his coolant levels.

“Damn it: the *Love* didn’t give me a warning or anything,” he spat. “Sheesh...” there was another pause as he considered his options.

You're the point now, she thought, *so have fun playing decision-maker...* there was no venom in this thought, just a small, healthy dose of schadenfreude.

"Okay, we'll approach from the same vector, and I'll put out a little warning about the ship," he decided. "Hopefully we can dock at their maintenance bay and jump a few people in line."

"Assuming you don't run out of coolant before then."

The voice on the other end became as jovial as ever. "Oh, don't worry about that, I can always open my hatch and bail out: I'll just need you to catch me before I hit the lower atmosphere, okay? I hear re-entry really hurts..."

Justin was biting his lower lip pensively: he was in a foul mood. It wasn't enough to be treated so tersely and rudely by his Aryl, but to have that little white-haired princess digging into his side was too much. He took a few deep breaths: truthfully Justin and Chenine got along fairly well (at least he thought they did), but sometimes her passive aggressiveness just made him livid.

...*He* never made any statements about being perfect, and little miss 'walk-on-water' didn't have to be such a goddamned bitch like that...

'You really should know that, I think'... *She* should know when to keep her damn mouth shut...

What the hell was her problem, anyway? She screws up and *he's* supposed to be mister perfect, now?

Justin lay back in his seat and focused on the stars outside. His glittering green eyes stared at the distant dots. He drew a long, satisfying breath and pushed those thoughts aside. They were melodramatic and irrational thoughts, to be sure, the kind anyone has echoing inside their heads from time to time. They were thoughts that came with a bad mood, in the spur of the moment, not the kind of thoughts you based your actions on (if you were rational), but pure bursts of cathartic emotion. Justin shoved them away and focused on his landing procedure.

But his pulse was still quick, and his mood still sour. That dark foulness drifted through his mind like a cancerous blood clot, wound through his tensed body like an invisible serpent, danced in microscopic pulses of electricity around him in his body's small electrical field.

Justin focused his mind on other things; he reached out through his Sensation Link, distantly feeling the bitter cold of space outside his ship and the pelting of tiny shards of debris as the *Platonic Love* drifted towards the station. All the while that dark energy in his body wound through the Sensation Link like a vibration through a string.

Or better yet, like a signal through a telephone cord.



T I A