



Corruptio Corpus Vile Pessima

I.

Wraith pulled his finger from the cage and unleashed a string of profanities.

“Did he nip you, sir?”

“Yes.” The RL ripped the white glove from his hand and wadded it over the wounded digit. “And there’s another one in there, too. He’s huddled up in the sack. Have your boys see to him, as well.”

“Of course, sir.”

Wraith stepped over the metro police technician and watched while the officer dusted down a cheap pine nightstand. There were dozens of prints on it, but probably none of any consequence. The nightstand was half-draped with a red and green comforter tossed wildly from the bed and strewn in a messy heap. If he’d encountered this scene in any other context, and on any other day, Wraith would’ve considered it an innocent reflection of the messy life of a young bachelor.

After all: who’s to say that he isn’t just a slob?

However, in present context this scene was much more ominous.

He moved to the small bedside window. The view was depressing: most of it was taken up by the crumbling brick wall of the tenement house next door. The only semblance of a view came in the form of a frost-caked basketball court on the street below.

A second technician rose up off the floor. He pointed down at a mess of blood-red droplets on the floor.

“That sample isn’t a match against your database, sir. It isn’t his.”

“Oh, no?”

“No.” He handed Wraith’s PDA back to him. “And it’s damn thick for a human blood sample; there were traces of mucus, so I’d say it’s from a nosebleed.”

“Or from a nose that was bloodied. What’s the gender of our mystery donor?”

“XY: it’s male DNA, sir.”

The other forensic technician looked up with a smirk. “Tch! A bedroom scuffle? Maybe your boy got a little rough with his lover.”

Wraith shook his head. "Not possible."

"Well, how do you know?"

"We run our pilots through a psychological battery during recruitment and the tests don't lie: he's a devout heterosexual." Wraith stepped through the bedroom door and glanced back at the first technician: "If another man was in this bedroom recently then it *wasn't* for fun and games; you'd better get that 'crime scene' tape of yours ready."

He walked past a small living room setup, complete with a worn corduroy couch and wall-mounted TV. There was a discolored patch of floor in front of the couch: it was a large rectangle where the floorboards were much cleaner than the area around it.

There was a carpet here recently. Very recently, in fact...

This tiny living area butted up against the kitchen island, and behind this was the screen door to a small balcony laden with plants. Wraith was no botanist, but he could tell an expensive plant from a cheap one, and most of the plants on that patio were worth their weight in silver.

He couldn't afford to even maintain those plants on a flight lieutenant's salary...

"Have we talked to the neighbor, Captain Doby?"

"Lord, no." The head policeman waved his hand. "Just keep your pants on, amigo."

Michael Doby represented the absolute worst of the Metro Police, at least in Wraith's mind. The gum-chewing, hip-swaggering, badge-flashing fool was a character study in arrogance combined with ignorance.

What a dangerous combination that is...

"If you can't handle this situation then I can always bring in the Military Investigative Branch, you know."

Doby sighed and yanked his black wraparounds from his face and made a display of clipping them to his belt just a few inches from a bulky electro-pin handgun.

"No need for theatrics, Mister Wraith."

"Subcommander."

"Whatever. But your boy went MIA on city property, so he's my jurisdiction, okay? As for the neighbor, yes: your flyboy's got a neighbor who shares the outdoor patio, but I'm not ready to rush an interview out of the old gal."

"Why not?"

Doby crossed his arms over his navy-blue vest and shook his head. "Well, sir: she's got one bitch of a hangover, and I wouldn't want to trouble her unless it were important. So far I haven't seen anything in here to convince me that any kind of crime has taken place at all."

The RL set his black cane in front of him and leaned forward. His lips trembled like a rattlesnake's tail: "He was supposed to report in for duty at 2200, and that was over seven hours ago, captain!"

"Then he's AWOL, ain't he? Why don't you check all the bars out in True, huh? 'Cause that's where he's probably holed up. In my experience a young AM officer is kinda like a frat house on two legs: tons of liquor tends to pass through 'im. And these flyboys act like rock stars sometimes, don't they?"

Wraith was about to knock a few of Doby's teeth from his head when another technician poked his head up from behind the kitchen island.

"Sirs! I've found something."

Wraith, Doby and another crime-scene investigator crowded behind the man: he was examining the narrow floor space between the island and the fridge.

“It’s all on the floorboard here, and the stream runs beneath the counter.”

Wraith clucked his tongue as he examined the bright red pool of blood on the floor.

“Sweet Jehovah.” He growled.

The RL handed his PDA to the technician, and within seconds the examiner came back with a profile on the blood.

“Type A, and let’s see...” he fiddled with Wraith’s pad. “No question: this is your boy’s blood, sir.”

Doby whistled. “It is a lot, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and no.” The technician tried to remain optimistic: “This fluid had a ton of oxygen in it when it came out, so it hadn’t traveled far from the guy’s heart: my guess is that it’s from a head-wound. You know how bad those things can bleed— even if it’s just a little scrape— so he might not be too banged up after all.”

“What’s that?” Wraith planted his shoe beside a second puddle. It was much smaller, also red but far more milky and transparent.

“That’s more blood, also from the subject.” The technician dipped a second test strip to the solution and ran it in through his own PDA. He blinked in surprise: “This blood is mixed with a shitload of sedatives. Uh, omnicuronium, in particular.”

Captain Doby whistled again: “Blood and sedatives, huh? So the guy was shooing himself up, and he smashed his drugged-out head on the island?”

Wraith sneered at the man and addressed him as he would a small child: “How many users have you ever come across in the Nash who’ve even *heard* of omnicuronium? That’s not a club-drug: it’s a high-powered anesthetic. You haven’t found any evidence of drug paraphernalia in this apartment, have you? No needles, no rubber bands, no OD-counteragents, nothing?”

Doby shook his head.

“And you’ve still got to account for that second blood sample in the bedroom, which was left here by a *second* donor.”

“What’s your theory, then?”

Wraith motioned to the bedroom. “Someone— or probably several ‘someones’— got the drop on him in bed. He lashes out and gives one of them a broken nose—”

“And then runs all the way over *here*?” The captain tapped the island. “Where he gets himself overpowered and injected? The front door’s on the other side of the room, Wraith: why would your pilot run over here if he were really in trouble like that?”

The RL rolled his eyes and shrugged. He then noticed an island drawer above the massive bloodstain: it was slightly ajar, and a few faint lines of blood dotted the inner groove. He pulled it open, scoffed, and then reached inside.

“He was looking for this.” The RL pulled a large, old-fashioned handgun from the drawer.

“Bleeding God!” The man gawked: “Tell me that’s not a real powder-projectile weapon?”

Wraith wrestled with the gun and forced the slide apart in clumsy, jerky motions. The technician beneath him immediately scuffled out of the weapon’s line of sight. The

subcommander finally managed to drop the side: a copper-colored bullet fell out. Wraith smirked:

“Oh, yes: this weapon doesn’t shoot little electric needles like your pea-shooters. It’s an instrument of death, not incapacitation.” He held it up: “This is what he was trying to get to, Doby.”

“Your little boy’s in a whole heap of trouble, my friend. Possession of that kind of weapon is a second-degree felony in and of itself.”

“Then put an APB out for him, you jackass!” Wraith slammed the gun down on the counter: “But I hope that even you can understand that my pilot is the *victim* of a crime, right?”

By now even the captain had to admit that Wraith’s pilot wasn’t simply engaged in some early-morning bar-hopping: Doby left to organize a taskforce on the matter, leaving Wraith alone in the apartment with the technicians. He approached the man in the kitchen and tapped him on the shoulder:

“I believe there’s some unprocessed evidence in the bedroom.”

Alone in the kitchen, Wraith stared down at that stain on the floor: the pool of Justin Storm’s blood. He stood there for quite some time, deep in thought, and more than a little troubled.

Soon thereafter he rummaged around beneath the kitchen sink, found a gallon of bleach cleaner and poured the solution over the bloodstain. He watched the red stream decompose into a milky white foam.

II.

Wraith called for Sam Roont as soon as he arrived on base. The pair met in his office just before noon.

“Storm *could* be an addict, you know.” Roont toyed with an unlit cigarette. “And one who’s gotten himself into trouble with the wrong people...”

Wraith scoffed. “What, the Basals? Please! If Justin is using some kind of ‘chemical-happiness’ then he’d be much less sulky in person, don’t you think? And again: trafficking in omniconium is *way* above the capabilities of a two-bit criminal organization like Basal Ganglia.”

“They’re not *that* little, but alright: I concede the point. Well, wasn’t Storm ‘outed’ as a Raiden pilot recently?”

The RL nodded. “Even after we declassified him he didn’t really have anyone to tell, so he kept his job a secret until last week. The Evergreen catastrophe forced his hand.”

Roont wedged the cigarette between his lips and shrugged: “That means anyone could know about his commission. And isn’t there money to be made in capturing a trained Raiden pilot for ransom, or something like that?”

Wraith opened his office blinds. The warm light of Command Ops streamed over his cold eyes and criss-crossed along his chiseled jaw in thin stripes: “No, no: the Basals aren’t suicidal enough to try kidnapping an Allied Military officer; they know that would be then end of their little ‘understanding’ with the Brass. If this was a professional job—which it looks like it was— then ‘Unity’ is more likely to blame.”

“Bad news for Mister AGP if that’s the case.”

“It’d be bad news for us all, Samuel.”

Several minutes passed. Dr. Roont stared out the window behind Wraith’s desk: the sky was a brilliant pearl-white behind all the temporary scaffolding that currently held Base-10’s exoskeleton together. Wraith peered into Command Ops and watched as Samantha Rayne and Laura Hayle chatted at the Lieutenant’s workstation. Chenine Chovert sat nearby, perched atop a box of replacement consoles yet to be unpacked.

The RL bit his lip. “It’s got *them* spooked, I suppose: even Miss Chovert’s joined the dialogue.”

“Tch! Anything upsetting enough to make that girl get sociable is something to be feared, isn’t it? So, then: what to do? Shouldn’t you be on the horn to your friend ‘Johnny’?”

Wraith shut his blinds:

“Yes. I’m thinking we should keep our friends in the Committee close at hand, and our seatwarmers even closer, for the time being.” He faced Roont: “I’ll get Johnny’s attention as soon as possible. Until then we need to keep our eyes open. What about JG Tabris?”

“He’s on vacation at Isla Lian. You want me to get in touch with him?”

The RL nodded. “Yeah, you’d better, and as soon as possible.”

III.

“Whaddya think they’re talking about?” Laura leaned over her console and watched as Wraith and Sam Roont conversed in the subcommander’s office.

“What else could they be talking about? They’ve gotta be dealing with the little squall that Storm has started here.” Samantha chewed on the end of a toothpick.

Jen Drake shuttled a wad of bubblegum between her cheeks. “Who saw him last, anyway?”

“Dunno.” Sam answered.

“One of you had to see him at the memorial service for the Evergreen victims, right?”

The Captain shrugged. “No: I don’t even think he was there.”

“He was.” Chenine interrupted.

“I didn’t see him.”

Laura shook her head: “Justin had to be there: attendance was mandatory for all flight officers in this hemisphere.”

“Right, but I wouldn’t blame him for skipping it. That was a damned unsettling service: all those empty coffins that were laid out on that grassland beside the cliff.” Sam crossed her legs on the workstation and wrapped her arms over her torso. “Yeah, fine: maybe he was there, and maybe he wasn’t, but I wasn’t really looking for him, okay?”

Laura picked-up on the pilot’s defensiveness. “Did you lose someone up at Evergreen, Sam?”

The girl’s yellow eyes quivered, but then resettled into hard spheres almost immediately: “Yeah. A friend of mine from SPAR. She was a retired commando. Her and her three kids.” Sam hung her head. “It was a bloody pointless death. She didn’t have any other family, so I pushed her coffin over the cliff for her.”

“Sweet.” Jen whispered.

“Don’t you *ever* call me ‘sweet’, ensign.” Sam’s upper teeth curled over her lower lip.

Laura cracked the top off a can of Pop-Up cola. “Did Justin know anyone up at Evergreen? Were there any coffins for him to send over?”

“Not that I know of.”

Chenine tapped her pencil over the Sudoku grid she’d been working on all morning: she hadn’t managed to make much progress. “He mostly hung around the rows of little coffins at the service. I think he was helping push some of the unclaimed boxes over the edge. It must have been upsetting for him...”

“The kids’ caskets, huh?” Sam bit down hard on her toothpick, but then pulled it from her lips when she realized how closely she was mimicking Dr. Roont’s nervous habit. “I wonder how badly the whole Evergreen thing rattled his cage. Perfect Fifth or not, Storm is a pretty emotional guy: his brain isn’t just a cold blank slate like most Fifths. Was he upset enough to do something stupid, you think?”

“That doesn’t sound like Justin.” Laura shook her head. “But he is a drinker.”

“Aren’t we all?” Sam smirked. “I’m afraid he might be face down in a gutter somewhere after getting into a bar-fight, or something like that. I just wish they’d tell us more than what they have. Secrecy kinda sucks. Eh, what do you think, Chovert?”

Chenine tossed the Sudoku puzzle on Jen Drake’s workstation and pocketed her pencil: “I think that he *is* typical for a Diapente: if he were upset by Evergreen then he’d be venting in the *Platonic Love*. The sensations-link helps him get rid of all his overriding emotions: it *turns* his brain into a blank slate and keeps reality from corrupting his inner tranquility. It’s soothing for him, and he’s the type of person that can find comfort in that kind of mechanical interface.” She got off the box and headed toward the cold zone of Ops: “He’s inhuman like that...”

Laura’s brown eyes followed Chenine out, puzzlement cemented on her face. “Well, he was human enough to cry over a bunch of kids he didn’t even know...”

Samantha crossed her arms over her chest; she didn’t look at Chenine, but she did knock the girl’s Sudoku puzzle off the desk with one foot. “Everyone’s got a mix of human and inhuman traits in ‘em, Lieutenant. But I guess some of us are more inhuman than others.”

IV.

Sleep just wouldn’t come for her tonight.

That wasn’t really accurate: sleep *did* come, but in very short spurts. Chenine drifted back to consciousness countless times as she tossed and turned through the night. The clock on her nightstand read 3:14 and she only had a few hours of sleep under her belt.

Simply put: sleep just wouldn’t *stay* for her, tonight.

The Ketoni girl lay curled up in a fetal ball, huddled-up against one side of her spacious bed. The bed was empty save for herself, but Chenine felt an odd measure of comfort in having her body pressed up against the side of the mattress.

Well, there’s more comfort to be had in being pressed up against another warm body, but...

She whipped her head to and fro, chastising herself for the persistent musings. Chenine lost her most recent ‘tenant’ just last week: she had three days off from her duties at Base-10 and showed up— out of the blue— at her boyfriend’s work, packed for both of them and ready to take off for whatever point of the compass they chose.

Suffice to say, he was not amused, and she created one hell of a scene before he managed to get her out of the office. He came back to the apartment to get his stuff that very afternoon. He was particularly pissed since Chenine refused to go out with him for two days prior to this little episode; she’d stayed in bed most of that time, lethargic and apathetic, trying to keep the guy amused with her ‘animal magnetism’. But even for a gorgeous girl like Chenine those feminine wiles can only go so far, and they can only keep a person amused for so long before they come down with cabin fever.

Chenine blinked lazily in the darkness: she could barely see the faint outline of her pill bottle through her window’s trace moonlight.

“Even *they* can’t keep me on the level anymore, can they?”

Part of the problem, of course, is that she only used the Ellipsis during her military shifts. If Chenine started using them in her off-duty hours then she’d be looking down the barrel of a very messy overdose.

When it comes to Ellipsis the line between ‘therapeutic’ and ‘cataclysmic’ is thinner than a razor...

She threw the covers off her body. Three times tonight Chenine had spent some quality time beneath her shower dousing herself with ice-cold water, but it did little to soothe the girl’s blistering-hot skin. Sweat trickled over her frame from the crown of her white bangs to the tips of her bare toes.

“I really need to chill out.”

Chenine retrieved her pet tarantula from his bedside cage. She lay down spread-eagle and set the colorful spider down on the nape of her neck. In the blackness of the room the creature looked like a dark, diseased hand cradling the girl’s throat.

“How ‘bout it, Flip?” She asked.

Chenine gave the tarantula free-reign over her naked body. She lay with her head to one side, resigned and unmoving. This was her ‘crash’ pose: she could hold this position for countless hours at a time whenever her runaway train of a brain finally ground to a halt, dead as a steam engine pulling up to a railway station to take on some water. In addition, she found it to be a most comfortable position to stay in whenever she let her little pet nip at her skin and corrupt her blood with its neurotoxin.

Flip wandered down the narrow valley between Chenine’s breasts, paused at her navel and tromped up and down her left thigh and leg. Twice the spider’s fangs frothed up with a translucent milky syrup, but each time the creature declined to nibble on the girl’s offered flesh.

“You’re worthless.” Chenine plucked the spider up, then grabbed her pill bottle in the other hand. She eyed the froth bubbling over Flip’s teeth, and then the open top of her pill bottle.

Ten seconds later she tossed the tarantula back in his cage. The girl balled a fist and cast the pill bottle across her bedroom; it struck the crystal display frame that housed her beloved first-run ‘Little Nemo’. She sat with her arms on her knees and contemplated that adventurous, pajama-clad little child in the artwork.

Who was Nemo’s enemy again? It was the ‘Nightmare King’, right?

That heroic little boy had to face off against a hideous monster in order to get his pleasant dreams. Chenine, on the other hand, just had to face off against her own locomotive mind if she wanted to sleep soundly.

It looks like he got the better end of the deal...

She spent the next thirty minutes lying supine, arms splayed to either side with her eyes half-open and glassy. It wasn't sleep, but it wasn't exactly wakefulness either, and it was the best she could hope for at the moment short of any chemical intervention. She forcefully drained all thoughts from her noggin— both the rational and irrational ones— until she was nothing more than an empty vessel, a hollow body awaiting whatever sleep might come.

Mercifully, she did manage to slip into unconsciousness for a few brief minutes. During that time her mind oozed down into the thick fog of a dream:

Chenine saw a skyline riddled with storm clouds. A blessedly-cold wind screamed down across a blue ocean. The glassy water stretched to infinity before her. The girl had never known a world of blue water— as a member of Generation Eve she was born after the Cataclysm. She dipped her fingers in the brine with adoring wonder. The sapphire liquid sparkled on her fingertips.

How beautiful... she leaned in closer to examine her own wavy reflection.

“Ugh!” The girl bucked as a sudden pain stabbed at her collarbone: she inspected her clothing and noted that she was wearing a white cotton tee-shirt. Resting in the breast pocket was a ridiculously-large Western rose. The gaudy, blood-red thing was at least twice as big as the one Scott Tabris had given her, and its thorns were disproportionately huge.

That rose was the only hint of vegetation on the dark beach: the gale-force winds rising off the water pounded a wasteland of obsidian soil. She got up off the chaotic beach and turned her attention inland. She wandered up a hill and came to the center of the landmass: apparently she was on a very small atoll. A large patch of green vines radiated out across the land like arteries trailing away from a heart. Dotted all along these vines were row upon row of radiant white roses, perhaps a hundred-thousand strong.

More, even: a million. Countless millions...

The girl stared at the center of the atoll with curiosity. She descended amongst the thorny mess of vines and roses, careful to avoid the spines, some of which were thicker at their base than Chenine was at her waist. Finally, she scrambled through the last of them, her skin cut in two-dozen places and a coat of sweat training over her porcelain face.

At the center of this green mess— encased in rose-studded vines— was an old and gnarled-looking tree. The stubby, cracked and leafless thing looked pathetic, even more so because of the flashy, young greenery around it. The gnarled thing looked more like the inverted root of a giant live oak than a tree in and of itself, but Chenine immediately recognized it for what it was.

“That’s a bristlecone pine tree.”

It’s just like Methuselah, isn’t it?

Chenine remembered this type of tree from her elementary school science class: her textbook had a picture of one of them that they called ‘Methuselah’ because of its extreme age: it was the oldest living organism on the Blue Marble (though it took an uprooting and transfer to a greenhouse for the thing to survive beyond the Cataclysm). Chenine remembered the picture in her textbook well: the twisted little tree was in the

background of a museum photograph. It was partially obscured by a large Greek statue of the *Venus Kallipygos*. The concept of something so repulsive and ugly being able to survive for so long stuck with young Chenine like a pebble in her shoe. The idea was persistent enough to be transformed into a very bad poem for her junior high English class: ‘Life is a Bristlecone Pine’.

Chenine’s overriding thesis—especially during her moody adolescent years—centered on this contrast between the beautiful symmetry of the *Venus Kallipygos* in all her feminine glory and the gnarled little tree lurking behind it. She often thought of the woman who posed for that statue:

For all your stunning beauty and grace that tree was already 2,000 years old when you posed for the sculpture, and it barely aged at all in the time it took you to be born, to mature, and to die. Both you and your ‘perfectly-formed’ rear-end are nothing compared to that kind of longevity, are you?

The bristlecones were damn-near timeless: the world around them changed in varying degrees, but the trees remained—constant and unchanging—their stubbornness matched only by the tides.

And their ugliness? That’s unmatched...

They had a right to be ugly, of course. The disgusting exterior of the bristlecones was built solely for function: it was an otherwise worthless container that served to hide their real *raison d’etre*: soft, water-laden pith beneath that was very much alive—bustling with life—and indistinguishable from the ugliness on the outside.

Chenine touched the rough bark of the tree. Her hands drifted down to one of the green vines that ensnared it: the ripe, living flesh of the vine couldn’t be more different from the rough and knotted bark of the pine.

She started ripping the vines away.

One, two, three, four... the vines sloughed off the tree like skin rent from the bone. However, the more vines Chenine removed, the more came in to take their place: within minutes she was up to her eyeballs in white roses. The feeling was suffocating, and the further in she got the more claustrophobic she became. Finally the vines started grasping at her own limbs. She found herself struggling to keep her hands and legs free of the botanical bonds, which desperately tried to restrain her and push her backward.

“Ulmph!” She pulled through the last of them and set her bare hands upon the crusty bark of the tree itself. The bark cracked, and then the entire gnarled pine split down the middle as if a lightning bolt had rent it apart. The forest of vines around it melted into nothingness and all the roses disintegrated: their innocent white color rusted down to a dull red luster before crumbling into dust. The tree blew apart, and Chenine fell to her rear choking on ancient sawdust.

A figure emerged from that ashy cloud.

Its body was dark, and the thing’s eyes blazed as yellow as kindling. Chenine shuffled backward on scraped knees. This thing must surely not be human! Despite her efforts, though, the monster reached for her, grasped her slender throat and pulled her to eye-level. It bent its terrible head down and examined the crimson rose in the girl’s breast pocket.

The ash cloud faded, and the creature’s eyes cooled until they became less demonic, and then less frightening. After that, they became wholly human.

They were also quite recognizable.

“You?”

Chenine bolted upright, panting into the darkness of her bedroom. A coat of sweat had returned to her body and her limbs once again ached in a thousand places.

So much for sleep! After hours of wrangling and clearing her head— just when she’d managed to reduce her mind to a vapid, empty vessel— she had to go and spoil things by filling it up with clutter once again.

Corrupting my tranquility. She shook her head. *And, of all things, why on Earth would I trouble myself by thinking of him?*

Thump.

Chenine’s body tensed: the nightmare wasn’t her only reason for waking up. There was something else: it was a noise— like a light scraping— coming from next door. It sounded like someone was moving furniture in her living room.

Or someone’s accidentally bumping into it...

Chenine slid off the bed with infinite caution, set her feet on the wood floorboards and retrieved her pink nightgown from the floor. Not taking her eyes off the bedroom door, she slipped into the garment and carefully crept towards the doorway. She fumbled against the wall as she tiptoed across the room until her hand grasped the slim neck of the Li’l Slugger. She set the undersized wooden bat on her shoulder, pressed her body against the door and drew a breath.

Her pulse hammered away in her head like a hammer on an anvil as Chenine burst into the tiny living room. She entered with the bat raised up in a clumsy combat stance. The room was pitch black save for the nearly invisible light of her refrigerator’s ice dispenser. There were, however, a multitude of new smells in the room: one was the faint odor of cigarette-soiled clothing, along with the unmistakable musk of finished leather and caustic oil. Chenine flared her nostrils: she’d smelled that kind of oil before, but where? The answer came to her in short order: it smelled almost identical to the gun cleaner they used at Base-10 to lube-up the Aegises.

There were noises in the room, too: Chenine could barely make them out with her link-enhanced hearing. She tried to estimate the exact number of people breathing in the room, but when she counted past four it became a moot point. The girl pulled the baseball bat off her shoulder and, still clutching the neck with one hand, allowed the head to hit the floor with a reverberating thump.

Someone took that as a cue, because the lights came on immediately.

Five men stood before her: two on her right near the couch and two on her left before the kitchen bar. The man in the middle— the one who flicked the lights on— folded his hands behind his back and smiled politely.

“Good evening, Miss Chovert.”

Her eyes darted between the crew, alarmed at first, but then she cocked her head. These intruders were all clad in combat uniforms: thick-padded chest plates with several rows of pockets and trim utility belts bearing a variety of tools that one might find useful. She could see items like electro-pin guns, a set of *real* handguns, packets wrapped in foil (these could only be plastic explosives), and a small collection of syringes bearing pale fluid.

That kind of stuff is only ‘useful’ if you’re going into battle ...

The men wore black from head to toe. Balaclavas concealed all their faces except for the leader in the middle. He gestured towards Chenine with urbane poise:

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Chovert: I don’t mean to be forward, but I’d be delighted if you’d come with us. We have a comfortable car waiting in the alley behind the building and— I’m afraid— time is not on our side.”

Chenine eyed each man in turn, then cautiously stepped forward and rested the Li'l Slugger on the couch. Immediately two other men lurking behind her stepped forward and positioned themselves on either side of the girl, greatly restricting her possible movement. They were each two feet taller than Chenine and at least 150 pounds heavier. One of the soldiers sneered, his gritty teeth parted beneath the balaclava:

“Tch! You aren’t even gonna *try* to resist, little girlie?”

Chenine stared at the floor; her voice was emotionless: “No. There’s no point, anyway.”

The lead man nodded: “That’s really quite sensible of you, Ma’am. Thank you so much for your understanding. Well, shall we, then?” He opened the door and gestured for her to go through. The two men gripped Chenine’s shoulders firmly, but gently, and led her out into the hall. She noticed two other men near the elevators keeping a lookout for any possible witnesses. There was little chance of that, though: her skyscraper corridor was deserted at this time of night.

After that a blindfold came down over her eyes and Chenine saw nothing else.

V.

Wraith reclined in his chaise lounge. Various lights and shadows danced over the edge of the 400th floor patio, shimmering from below like the underwater lights of a swimming pool at night. Thankfully the nearest skybridge was over 50 stories down, so the din of traffic was muted to a faint echo in the abyss below.

His eyes half-heartedly scanned a deep tome on his lap. It was the collected works of Leith Paltry— Sven’s favorite poet— but even in his insomnia Wraith didn’t much feel like reading himself to sleep. However, he had to do something while waiting for a response to his inquiries, and he didn’t know what that should be. And just where *was* that response, anyway?

Are we sleeping on the job, Johnny?

A noise sounded behind him: a tapping sound deep inside his suite. It was the hollow rap of a fist on the oak entryway.

He got up and shuffled into his dark parlor. Wraith reached into his burgundy robe as he walked and pulled out a long serrated knife. It gleamed under the scant light cast by the RL’s marine aquarium, and as Wraith hobbled through his dark foyer— teeth cemented in a snarl— his prized yellow tang peeked out at him from its rockwork home. The fish’s black eyes glistened like pearls.

“Bold as always, eh, Archimedes?” He smiled. “Is it true that you only eat shrimp? If we play our cards right, you might just get some human flesh tonight...”

He rested his back against the large wooden door and held his knife taut. With a deep breath Wraith flung the door open, grabbed the man in the entryway by his collar and pulled him inside, slamming his back to the wall. He set the knife against the man’s throat and snarled.

“Woah!” A familiar voice sang out. “What’s the plan, Aryl-man?”

Wraith released the man and sank back down on his cane: “Montana?”

“Hiya!” The shadowy man smiled like a Cheshire cat.

“Sven.” A grandfatherly voice called from outside. Wraith peeked around the corner and there— with his own black cane clutched between two arthritic knees— was old Uriah. Two soldiers stood to either side of him, each one armed to the teeth, and all of them wielding MP-180’s. The black submachine guns glistened in the hall light, and the patches on the men’s left shoulders were clearly visible:

‘Allied Military Specialized Assault Regiment: Team Aphelion.’

“What’s going on?” Wraith demanded.

Uriah scrunched his face: “It’s a red alert, old friend. Johnny Unitas has some disconcerting information: they’re targeting us, Sven. Peyton Manning is dead, and that lackey of yours, Scott Tabris, couldn’t be reached at the convention he’s attending. The Isla Lian authorities just put out a missing-person bulletin for him—”

Wraith cursed like a sailor and grabbed his earpiece. He jammed it onto his head as he stepped into the corridor. “That’s all I needed to know. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“A wise decision. Where’ll you go, then?”

“Base-10.” He fumbled with the earpiece and dialed up a number. “Incidentally, do you mind if I borrow a couple of your Spec-Ops soldiers?”

“Four of them are waiting for you downstairs. I’m off for the Dead-Lands’ Lighthouse along with Mister Montana, here. Sven, you need to get the hatchlings under wing—”

Wraith held up a finger to shush the old man as his earpiece crackled to life. A calm, patient voice answered him:

“I’m standing by, Raiden-Leader Wraith.”

“Initiate *Operation Aerie*, major.”

“Copy that, sir.”

VI.

Sleep came easy for Samantha Rayne tonight. It always did.

Thump.

One of the benefits of being trained to be as skittish as a jackrabbit is that wakefulness comes pretty easily, too.

The noise outside her bedroom door was soft, but it immediately brought Rayne’s eyes open. She sat up and pulled an electro-pin gun from under her pillow. The captain crawled to the foot of her bed.

Any other night Sam would assume that her golden retriever was being naughty in the kitchen, but that wasn’t a possibility: Spade was staying with the neighbors tonight. Although Sam would never confess her paranoia to the personnel at Base-10 she had an aching feeling in the back of her mind. Simply put, she thought that the whole deal with Justin Storm’s disappearance stank. It stank to high-heaven, and Samantha had the nagging suspicion that— somewhere and some-when—shit was going to hit the fan. After all, with people recently breaking into their barracks to deposit cryptic notes, as well as the situation with McCaul’s Unity group, there were any number of people that could be gunning for military staff like Samantha and her squadmates.

It's funny, but the Captain usually felt pretty good about herself when she was right; she didn't this time.

An exception that proves the rule, I suppose...

She crouched at the foot of the bed, and when the door flew open she was ready to take on her first assailant. Sam fired three shots from her weapon. Each dart landed on a hard chest plate; electrical fire billowed harmlessly over the absorptive suit.

Swing and a miss...

She judged where the man's head would be and hurtled the weapon at him. The attacker dodged it by inches, and then he came for Samantha. He got her by the thighs and flipped Sam's body end over end, grasping her wrists in a textbook combat hold. The girl grinned: that was just fine by her, after all, because she knew how to perform a reverse-hold. Two kicks and a punch later she had the upper hand.

Unfortunately for Samantha, her attacker apparently knew how to perform a *reverse-reverse* hold.

"Caught!" Sam nearly choked on her tongue as her back slammed into the hard bedroom floor. The man's knee pressed down on her sternum, and then the cold steel barrel of Sam's own electro-pin gun was jammed down against her forehead.

"You done yet?" The man's voice was lazy; he spoke without effort.

"Fuck you, you fucker!" She panted and snarled at her attacker, but didn't move her body.

"That's quite a vocabulary you've got there." He pressed the barrel even tighter against her forehead. "You Captain Samantha Rayne?"

"Fuck you, you god-damned cocksuc—"

"I'll take that as a yes." He stood up, removed the gun and extended a helping hand. "I was told that you might overreact to our arrival."

"Overreact?" Sam wrinkled her nose. "And who told you that?"

"I'm with SPAR: Team Aphelion. Your CO ordered us to take you into protective custody immediately."

"Aphelion? You're Spec-Ops?"

"That's what I just said, Captain. Matter of fact I'm a major, so I wouldn't mind it if you called me 'sir', but let's not get too hung up on that..."

Sam shook her head. "My Aryl sent you to put me in protective custody? How the hell can I know if that's true or not?"

"Subcommander Wraith sent a message for you."

She managed to get up on her elbows. The major's blows were precise: the hits on Sam's body were targeted to incapacitate her and not to inflict pain. She'd be fine, as soon as she caught her breath. "What's his message, then?"

The man field-stripped her electro-pin gun as he spoke: "Wraith tells you to 'stop being such a paranoid little bitch and follow your orders, Captain.'" The commando shrugged.

The slightest grin flickered on Sam's face. "That does sound like Aryl Wraith."

"So, you trust me now?" He again offered his hand.

She took it and got to her feet. "Whether I do or not, I don't really have much of a choice." Sam dusted herself off and motioned for the man to lead her on. He didn't: the commando prodded Samantha out and followed close behind.

A total of ten men and women stood in her living room: all of them wore the elite Spec-Ops battle garment and all of them were heavily armed. They escorted Samantha downstairs and out of her skyscraper to a waiting convoy of black SUV's. At least twenty soldiers stood around these vehicles, their firepower equal to that of a small army.

Before she was whisked away in the convoy Samantha noticed a man who stood out from the rest: he was unbelievably tall and incredibly well-built, even for a Spec-Ops soldier. As soon as this golem caught sight of the Typer he went for his ear; she couldn't tell what he was saying, but she did catch one phrase in passing:

“Yes, sir: the hatchling is secure at this end ...”

She heard no more: Samantha was immediately sandwiched between two Spec-Ops soldiers in the back of an SUV. The heavily-armed caravan made its way down this deserted sector of Nash Ultima, screaming along the asphalt at high speed with sirens howling and strobe lights flashing across the dark streets all around them.

