



Dipole Moments

I.

By noon the sun was shining brightly. Sea birds twittered and cawed from their perches on the dull iron scaffolding outside Wraith's window. The scene was, simply put, angelic. But Sven Wraith's countenance was darker than a moonless night.

"You're sure it's them, are you?"

"Trust me. I'm in a position to know these things, Sven." The RL's speakerphones crackled as Johnny's garbled voice came through on the secure line.

Wraith balled a fist and rested his face against the window: "Reidemeister..."

"Yes, well: he's the least of our concerns. The senior general is a rather easy-going guy. It's the other generals that'll be keen on using 'coercive' tactics to get information out of our little pawns. But, then again, I suppose that Reidemeister is the biggest of *your* concerns, isn't he?"

"He won't be a problem." Wraith snarled.

"Glad to hear it." Johnny sighed. "Well, this is embarrassing, isn't it? At this point the best we can hope for is that our hatchlings are still in one piece. At least we managed to stop the bleeding before we lost *everyone*..."

"Ten minutes, Johnny! We lost Miss Chovert by only ten minutes. Of all the luck!"

"Well, look at it this way: you probably got to Samantha Rayne with minutes to spare. She had to be next on their list, after all. I take it you've got her well under wing, correct?"

Wraith scoffed. "Of course I do: she's sitting in the middle of a military outpost in the Western Wastes surrounded by a battalion of Spec-Ops soldiers. I'm taking care of *her* protection, but what does Ainsworth say, eh? Was he planning on doing *anything* for us?" The RL jammed a cigarette between his lips and lit up: this was an unheard-of act for him, but it was something he was prone to do in times of ridiculously-high stress.

This bloody-fucking qualifies...

"The SJC ordered the Allied Commanders to turn over any and all personnel they may have 'detained', but the generals are stalling, shutting themselves up like an oyster.

It'll take Ainsworth at least a week to pry open their shells, if you get my meaning, Sven."

"Johnny, the R-H's can't last more than a week without their seatwarmers. The *Chaste Gazer's* already gone two days without Miss Chovert in the saddle. If we can't get her and Justin Storm back within the next few days then we'll have tons of dead Bydo flesh leaking out their Raidens' hulls."

Wraith's computer beeped before he could get any further into the tirade:

"Subcommander," Laura Hayle said, "there's someone here to see you. He's waiting out in the cold zone."

"Damn it, Laura: I said no interruptions!"

"Yes, sir: but his security clearance is 'Castor Bean': I think he's from Allied Command."

Wraith stood motionless for a moment, and then he slumped into his chair. "What does he want, Lieutenant?"

"He's got a message for you, but it's a little weird—"

"Weird? And it's a message from the Allied Commanders?"

"Yes: he says that the generals want to help you find our people, but only if you're willing to help *them*. I'm not really sure what that means—"

Wraith cut the line.

"You get that, Johnny?"

A whistle. "They're not interested in the pilots, huh? They just want you. So maybe they're *not* torturing the poor little devils, then?"

"Or they're frustrated because they haven't gotten the answers they want." He bowed his head against the desk. "They have us by the balls."

"It seems that they want to hear about Antipathy from the horse's mouth. You're the highest-raking member of the Committee they know about."

"How do we know that's true?"

"We have... well, people who are right under the generals' noses, Sven. The old farts may suspect certain people, but you're the only known operative."

Wraith put out his cigarette and began to light another. He stopped with the lighter to his mouth and thought better of it: he spat it out and wiped his chin.

"The priority is to get our people back, Johnny."

"Agree. Well, what do you intend to do?"

"They've got us by the balls, but we've still got some cards to play. They're looking to shine a little sunlight on us, but sunlight can be a double-edged sword. Do you think the generals would want to expose us and shut us down if *they* became involved in Antipathy?"

"How would they become involved?"

"They already are, effectively. The bastards are digging into something that they have no concept of. If daylight hits this project it hits *everyone* in the general vicinity—no pun intended. They need to know just what they're dealing with and how far this rabbit hole actually goes..."

Johnny coughed. "You're not going to tell them?"

"I'll leave the names out of it." Wraith snapped. "Tch! I only know half-a-dozen proper names as it is, and you aren't one of them, 'Johnny Unitas'. But the Project's already been outed: this is just us facing reality."

“Or a firing squad...” Johnny sighed. “I suppose that’s acceptable, with time being such a factor...”

“It is.” Wraith played with the head of his cane. “So, do you believe that our Mutual Acquaintance would agree with this play?”

“Given the circumstances, yes I do.” Johnny paused. “But Sven, you’re not hoping for mercy from the man himself, are you? Are you counting on Reidmeister to save you?”

The RL’s faded grey eyes narrowed. He stroked his gimp leg. “Save me? I wouldn’t trust that man to feed my fish.”

Wraith jammed the cigarette back in his mouth and lit up.

II.

Chenine’s head throbbed like a squeeze-ball. When she opened her eyes the dim light overhead scorched her retinas: the room was somberly-lit, but to her drugged eyes it was brighter than the desert at midday. Her throat was dry, and her mind clouded in fog.

She summed up her current state with a simple exclamation:

“Ulgh...”

The girl turned over on one side. She yawned and scratched her rear. Her fingers brushed over a knotted, wooly material, much like a pair of sweatpants.

I’ve never worn such a thing in my life, I don’t think.

That little observation was interesting in itself, but when she finally opened her eyes that interest boiled over into absolute surprise.

“Mornin’, Starfighter.” Justin Storm smiled at the girl.

Chenine bolted upright. She slammed her head against the metal bunk above her.

“Low clearance.” He warned. “And take it easy: that stuff they shot you up with is wicked strong...”

“How is she?” Another familiar voice sounded behind him; Scott Tabris peeked around the Typer’s shoulder.

Chenine looked between the two men: “Where are we? What’s going on?”

“I can’t answer your first question ‘cause the screws won’t tell us where we are. Go figure.” Justin shook his head and got up off a rusty stool.

“The screws?”

“Guys that grabbed us. Coincidentally— to answer your second question— ‘what’s going on’ is that you’ve officially been kidnapped. Congratulations.”

Chenine sat on the edge of her bunk. The room around them was cylindrical, perhaps thirty feet in diameter. The ceiling was tall— over 50 meters— and it ended in a series of pipes and bars far overhead. Floodlights struggled through these, falling on the room and across their bodies in a series of jail-bar stripes. Everything was sleek metal, though worn with time and neglect. It appeared that they’d been dumped at the bottom of a very avant-garde cistern.

Chenine blinked and sat on the edge of her little bunk. For the first time she noticed her squadmate’s face; she squinted at Justin’s swollen right eye and the small patch of shaved hair on the right side of his skull. The flesh beneath was covered with a small bandage.

“You look like hell.” She noted.

Justin smiled. “Yeah, well, you should see the other guy. They came for me at my home, the sons of bitches! And they were sneaky, too: very pro. I guess they didn’t know about my link-enhanced hearing, though.” He tapped one ear. “As soon as those noisy bastards snuck into my bedroom I was on ‘em.”

Scott crossed his arms and looked away. “Oh, yes, very macho. And it seems that you handled things very well...”

Justin shot him an icy stare. “There were over half-a-dozen guys in my apartment, Tabris. But I gave the lead guy a couple hits before they took me down. I may have even broken his nose. Tch! The bastard’s schnoz was spurting like a fountain.”

“You paid for it, though.” Chenine again surveyed his face.

“Yeah, well that’s the strange thing: I woke up in an infirmary later on, and they stitched me up. It looked like they were genuinely concerned about my wellbeing. They gave me top notch treatment, actually. Also, I think the guy that beat me up got one hell of a scolding from somebody: he was getting yelled at from somewhere behind me. I wish I could’ve seen who was yelling at him, but I was strapped down to a medical table at the time.”

Scott bowed his head: “Mmm. But it’s what that guy was yelling about that has me worried.”

Chenine cocked her head. She felt a wave of nausea rise in her throat, and then quickly returned it to level. “What did he say?”

Justin sat back down on the stool and took a lip in his teeth: “He yelled at the guy for ‘damaging the merchandise’.”

“Merchandise?” Chenine bowed her own head. She took note of her clothing for the first time: a pair of slate-grey sweatpants and an uncomfortable white sweatshirt. Her clothing was identical to that of her fellow captives. Chenine got to her feet and peeked down the neck of her shirt, confirming that she was in one piece and— wonder of wonders— her body lacked all the tell-tale bruising she expected to see.

From what I can tell, I haven’t even been touched...

Justin snapped the neck of his own shirt: “Yeah, you got the strip-search, too. Nice, isn’t it?”

Scott eyed Chenine with hesitation: “They didn’t... you know, did they?”

The girl shook her head.

Justin nodded. “Scott wasn’t here when they brought you in, but one of the guys made a joke about doing, well... that kind of thing to you. I think it was just an off the cuff remark, but the other guy with him took it damned seriously: he said that if the other guy touched you he’d get a bullet in his brain.”

“Abductors with morals.” Tabris snorted. “It’s almost like they’ve adopted the Allied Military’s code of conduct.”

Chenine nodded: “They certain hit us with military precision, didn’t they? What did they mean by ‘merchandise’?”

Justin shrugged: “Well, we are being treated like pieces of meat.”

“But well cared for pieces of meat.” Chenine sat back down. “Someone prevented me from being assaulted, and those injuries you sustained were obviously unacceptable.”

“Why do they want us, then?”

“Information?” Chenine posited.

Tabris shook his head. “Not really. I’m the only one that’s been ‘interrogated’ so far, if you can call it that.”

“They weren’t abusive?”

Tabris let out a long sigh and hung his head: “Yes, they were. But it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle.”

Justin rolled his eyes. “Tch! No, they *weren’t* abusive. From what Tabris told me they’re even less harsh than the MIB is when they come over to do our drug tests. Two of those guys in the black hoods—”

“Balaclavas.” Chenine corrected.

Justin blinked; his lips were still parted in mid-speech. “What?”

“The hoods are called ‘balaclavas’.”

Justin leaned back and took a breath.

“Go ahead.”

“Oh, thank you. Anyway, two of those *black-hooded* guys came around a couple times and took Scott away for maybe ten minutes at a time. They’d ask a few vague questions, and then just bring him back. They haven’t put the screws to him.”

Tabris’ face flushed. “But they *did* shout at me a few times...”

“Poor baby. If they were really looking to get information out of you, they’d have done it by now.”

“And just how long would you last against them if they decided to go full-tilt, huh Storm?”

“About thirty seconds.” Justin admitted with a snarl: “pilots are soldiers, but we’re not superheroes: we aren’t trained to withstand torture. After all, the only enemy we’re supposed to deal with are the Bydo, and they’re not very interested in extracting information from us, just our bodies’ raw material.”

“But no one’s *been* tortured.” Chenine scratched her chin. She looked up: “How long have you been here, JG Tabris?”

“Four days, I think.” He groaned. “I was at a technology expo out at Isla Lian—”

“An all-expenses paid junket.” Justin accused.

“Whatever. Anyway, my schedule for the first day of the convention was pretty light: I only had to be at the convention center during the afternoon, so I decided to take the tram across the island and hit the beach in the morning. I was on my way back around noon and I had a tram compartment all to myself.” He lifted his hands to either side. “Next thing I know, I wake up in here.”

“What about you, Chenine?” Justin asked.

“I was at home and I heard a noise outside...” she looked off to one side and nodded.

Justin eyed the girl up and down. “You didn’t resist, did you?”

“That wasn’t the sensible thing to do.”

“After all, she might’ve wound-up like you, ‘sunshine’.” Tabris growled at Justin.

“Well, Chenine’s cooperation didn’t stop them from sedating her ass, did it?”

The girl arched an eyebrow at this. Justin soon realized that she didn’t understand what he was talking about. The Typer held up his right arm and pointed at his inner elbow joint, poking his bulgy-blue median cubital vein. The girl rolled up her right sleeve and, sure enough, a small red welt rested right over her vein.

Justin turned his head to one side and tapped his neck: a significantly larger welt blossomed along his carotid groove. “Guess they stuck me here ‘cause I was being naughty.”

Chenine scratched at the welt with her fingernails: “One can’t be too careful, I suppose...” She looked up with uncertainty, and then to either side.

“You hear it too, huh?” Justin nodded.

“That humming...” She looked down. “It’s like a mosquito in my brain... it feels like a signal’s coming into my canalphones. It’s ‘invading’ my whole head: that’s why I feel nauseous...”

“Tabris thinks the screws are broadcasting some kind of scrambler: they’re saturating our earbuds with the signal—”

“—and jamming us so we can’t send or receive any transmissions.” She nodded.

“I guess that’s more humane than jamming pliers into our ears and ripping out our cochlea...”

Scott motioned to Justin’s back: “And ten-to-one they’ve got us surrounded with keratinocyte shielding: the GPS locators in your link prongs won’t be much help, either.”

“We’re completely on our own, here.” Justin lamented.

The trio was interrupted shortly after this. A stocky man in fatigues entered through a panel in the side of the room: a whole section of the wall opened up. It was as sleek and unremarkable as the other walls, but it bore a large handle and keycard slot on the opposite side. The corridor beyond was black in all directions; Chenine couldn’t get any clues about their location.

For all I know we’re stuck in the Twilight Zone...

This man— who wore no head covering— was followed by two hooded, armed grunts wielding large electric batons. The lead man glared at Chenine with two merciless black eyes. His face lacked any hint of emotion: it was the face of someone whose mind was hammered down into a kind of induced sociopathy. Chenine had seen his type before. That blank countenance was earned by one of two routes: either through a life of hard criminal activity or, of course, a life of strict training by a military institution.

I’ll go with the former on that, I’d think.

“However...” she mumbled.

“What was that?” The steel-jawed man barked at the girl like a teacher challenging a noisy schoolchild. Chenine didn’t answer him, but the man made no follow-up to his challenge: he merely surveyed the girl from head to toe and nodded with approval. His eyes did not linger on the ‘usual’ points of interest; he surveyed her with an asexual objectivity, as if he were a doctor evaluating a patient. He pulled three foil-wrapped discs from his black vest and tossed them on the bunks without ceremony, and then he looked at all three captives in turn:

“Eat.” He ordered.

The black-eyed man left as quickly as he’d come; the baton-wielding men followed him out, walking backwards with their wiry eyes trained on the three hostages. The door sealed itself behind them with a loud hiss.

“You’d think he never saw a female before...”

“They’d been a little worried about you.” Tabris explained. “You took a lot longer to wake up than either of us did. I overheard some of the men talking during my

interrogation: apparently they gave you a double-dose of sedatives ‘cause your body was so resistive to the first shot.”

“Funny, isn’t it?” Justin smiled: “The Ketoni aren’t known for their resistance to drugs, are they? Why would you be so tolerant to that kind of stuff, Chenine?”

“I don’t know: there’s no reason why I would be. They probably missed my vein with the first shot.”

“That’s plausible.” Justin nodded.

“Is there any possibility for escape?” Chenine asked.

Tabris wandered over to the paltry stack of meals and removed a tiny plastic spork from under the foil of one. “Not with these kind of tools, no.”

Chenine cocked her head.

“I found a vent.” Justin explained. He motioned to the stack of bunk beds, where a small ventilation shaft lay just in reach from the top bunk, about 5 meters off the ground. “We’ve gotta breathe, after all, so they can’t keep us completely isolated.”

“Can we get through it?”

Tabris shook his head. “It’s got screws, big screws, and they’re sealed up with protective caulk. We’d need a torch to melt the caulk and a heavy-duty screwdriver to budge the screws.”

Chenine opened one of the meals; her nostrils flared in approval as a steam of chicken and carrots met her face. She took a spork and pocketed a few pieces of chicken in her mouth like a chipmunk, savoring the juices as they bled out of the meat and into her cheeks.

She managed to speak around the morsels: “Would a knife work?”

Justin scoffed. “It’d have to be pretty damned tough—”

“A Raiden-class utility knife?”

“Well, heck, those are molecularly-sharp, so of course they’d work.” He shrugged. “Matter of fact, I stole one from the Aryl a few months back. Of course, the fact that we don’t *have* one of those around right now kinda moots the discussion—”

Chenine interrupted him: “Could you both do me a favor?”

“Yes?” Justin and Scott answered at the same time.

She whisked one finger through the air:

“Turn around.”

III.

“And the luggage?”

One of the men glared at Wraith’s duffel bag before letting him on the elevator.

“It’s my magical bag of tricks.” He growled. “These stay with me until I meet with the Allied Commanders, is that clear?”

The man crossed his arms.

“Or do you want to be responsible for keeping me from meeting with the Allied Commanders? The ramifications for you, personally, would not be pleasant...”

When the elevator opened both Wraith and his ‘guide’ stepped through. Inside the compartment were two additional men. They stood at attention and eyed the RL with unveiled suspicion. Between these were two others: one was a toady little man with raven

hair and bulgy black eyes, and the other was a woman, obviously a marine commando. She looked at him curiously:

“Tch! Look at that face: chip off the block, huh? He’s marble to the General’s granite, ain’t he?” She smirked and addressed him directly. “Who else could you be but Sven Re—”

“—*Wraith*.” He snarled. The RL motioned to the men around him and addressed the toady man in the middle. “Are you afraid that I’m going to deck you, or something?”

“You wouldn’t do that.” The squat man answered. “After all, certain people might get hurt if you did.” The man’s voice was throaty and terribly congested. “Sorry about this blasted cold, subcommander. If we could get serious, for a moment: my name’s Senegal Kröterohr, and I’ll be escorting you to the generals’ chamber.”

“Fantastic.” *Wraith* growled.

The elevator descended in a near free-fall, silent on oiled cords. It was as quiet inside the cabin as it was outside, and *Wraith* stood as still as a statue, facing forward with the iciest of poker faces. The silence was broken only once, when the female commando noticed the fabric of *Wraith*’s duffel bag was moving.

“It’s none of your business.” He sneered at the woman, anticipating her question.

“Orders or not, I’m responsible for security around here, and when bags start moving on their own, that’s the line.” She crossed her arms: “Either tell me what that is or stand back so I can see for myself.”

Wraith ground the tip of his cane into the carpet: “90-percent of the bag is props for your idiot generals to follow along with my spiel. The other 10-percent is the only part that’s moving...”

“And that’s the only part I’m interested in, so how about it?”

He sighed: “Livestock, you stupid bitch: two hedgehogs and a spider.”

“Animals?” Kröterohr covered his mouth with his kerchief as he spoke.

“My pilots’ pets.” *Wraith* explained: “I expect to leave here today with my people in tow, but if the generals insist upon delaying their release—”

“Pilots? Release?” One of the large men grinned from ear-to-ear. “Why, Mister *Wraith*, I don’t believe we’re holding *anyone* like that, are we? At least not on the books!” He chuckled.

“If those sons of bitches don’t let my people go then I at least want to get these little vermin back into proper hands: I’d sooner toss them in a river than care for them. Surely the generals wouldn’t deprive my pilots of their creature comforts, would they?”

The lady commando looked at *Wraith*, then at the duffel bag. “Or rather ‘comforting creatures’, huh? I suppose you care for them a great deal, don’t you? Your pilots, I mean.”

Wraith didn’t answer.

“I mean, coming over here like this— going down into the ‘lion’s den’— all because of them, I guess they’re special to you.”

“They’re both one of a kind.” The RL ground his cane even deeper into the floor. “And that is the only reason they’re of any value to me.”

This effectively ended all conversation, but for the rest of the trip Senegal Kröterohr cast several sidelong glances at *Wraith*. More than once he eyed the duffel bag containing the pilots’ cherished pets with a cocked eyebrow, as if he were witnessing something that he couldn’t quite understand.

IV.

“Good God in heaven.” Scott sank down against the wall. “Wh— how—” the poor guy waved his hands erratically and screwed his eyes shut. “No: never mind, just— ah, forget it!” He shook his head emphatically.

Justin wasn’t quite as willing to let the matter drop:

“Christ, Chenine.” He held a hand to his lips. “How can you even *do* that?”

The girl’s voice sounded behind him, calm and composed:

“It’s just anatomy. Did you opt of sex-ed when you were in school?”

“Okay, yes, I don’t mean *how* in a physical sense: I get that. I mean how in a— well, *practical* sense...”

“It was practical for me back at Nash Ultima.”

A little thump sounded from the trash can next to Chenine; Justin twitched with discomfort.

“Whaddya mean by that?”

“I was almost killed by someone at a club.” The girl walked around into his field of vision and extended her hand: she held a very narrow metal case that glinted under the floods. “If it wasn’t for this knife, I’d be dead.”

“Then carry the damned thing in your pocket, Chenine!” Justin eyed the case dubiously: she’d dunked it in the sink and cleaned it quite liberally, but he took it with quite a bit of unease.

“But then I wouldn’t always have it with me, would I?” She shrugged, walked over to the circular wall and slumped down against it. “Call me paranoid.”

“I’ll call you more than that...” Justin gripped the case and set his thumb against the spring release. Despite the rather unorthodox source of the tool, he had to grin with pleasure as that wonderful four-inch blade flared out the case’s far end. He savored the electric hum that lingered in the air after the silver blade emerged: it sounded as beautiful as a katana ripped from its sheath.

“God damn!” Scott squirmed uncomfortably as he eyed the deadly blade. No doubt he was thinking about the thing’s fragile previous resting place.

“Shut up, Tabris.” Justin got up on the bunk and reached for the vent cover. “If you look a gift horse in the mouth too much it might just bite you. Now then, this bad boy can cut straight through one of your limbs by force of gravity alone, so pay attention...”

The men worked on the sealed vent for ten minutes. It was easy work, and damned near effortless: the blade sank through the rivets’ plastic casing like butter, and the well-nigh indestructible tool provided just enough torque to twist off all four bolts. Justin, for one, was giddy as a schoolboy:

“Behold: the most expensive screwdriver in the history of makeshift screwdrivers.” He rested the utility knife on his pinky with his finger exactly halfway up the grip. As with any perfectly-balanced AM utility knife the blade rested quite comfortably in that position. He took the grip up with his other hand and closed the blade, relishing the low-pitch noise it made as the case vibrated from the retraction.

With a new route open to them the trio discussed their next move. Tabris was eager to sidle out through the vent, and he naturally suggested that everyone get crawling. Justin, however, disagreed:

“That vent could go on for a meter, or a kilometer, who knows? We’ve gotta be sure about it before we all pile in there.”

Chenine agreed with him: “And if two of us stay behind we can keep the guards from sounding the alarm: if we prop up some pillows on one of the bunks we might be able to conceal that person’s absence and not raise suspicion.”

Scott nodded, appreciating that logic. “You better get started, Miss Chovert.”

“Where’s the logic in letting Chenine hit the vents?” Justin shook his head.

“Women and children first, Storm.”

“I don’t think so.” Chenine disagreed.

Scott wrinkled his nose: “I’m trying to be chivalrous here, you jackasses.”

Justin smiled: “An A-plus for the effort—”

“—but a C-minus for the execution,” Chenine motioned to the smooth door opposite them. “If the guards come in and find one of us missing, they’re likely to become angry...”

Justin tapped his gaze-clad forehead: “And they’ve already demonstrated that they’re not willing to take out that rage on a Raiden pilot: they need us, Tabris, both me and Chenine. No offense, but they might not need you, at least not as much as they need us. They’re more likely to make an example out of you if one of us disappears...”

“And what if you’re wrong, Storm? What if they’re equal-opportunity abusers?”

Chenine helped Justin remove the vent panel; a cloud of dust swirled around them when it finally slipped loose. The girl coughed, brushed her eyes clean and shook her hair as if she were a dog: “If we’re wrong, then this may be goodbye, JG.” She shrugged and motioned to the gaping hole above the bunks.

Scott tried to argue with this train of logic (less out of chivalry, Justin thought, than a fear of worming around those dark vent shafts all by his lonesome). In the end, though, the techie had to accept majority rule. He didn’t have to like it, though.

“Friggin’ Typers...”

Scott clambered into the vent (with quite a bit of help from Justin). The techie soon disappeared into the darkness.

“He’ll take his time up there.” Justin speculated. He faced Chenine and shrugged. “Well, what are two idle captives to do to pass the time before they get rescued?”

Chenine sighed, strolled over to the cylindrical wall and sat with her back to it. She closed her eyes and bowed her head. Justin rolled his own eyes and shrugged. He picked up a blanket off the lower bunk and followed suit, curling up his legs against the opposite wall:

“Chenine, what would’ve happened if that utility knife accidentally opened up at some point while it was— y’know?”

“I guess I’d be scrambled like an egg, wouldn’t I?”

“That’s not good...”

“It’s not a big deal. It’s not like I ever planned on having children, anyway.”

Justin huddled-up even tighter in his blanket, in part because the room was very cold, and in part because Chenine’s rationale was downright frosty. He tried to keep the conversation going:

“I guess the Aryl already knows I’m missing, right?”

“Yes.”

Justin nodded: “Then he’ll really bring out the cavalry once you’re missed, won’t he?”

“Yes, but I’m off-duty for the next two days: he shouldn’t miss me for awhile.”

Justin frowned: “Well, then who’ll miss you soonest?”

The girl looked off to one side and wrinkled her nose as she thought about it:

“I don’t know.”

“You aren’t, uh, seeing anyone right now?”

“I see lots of people.”

“I meant romantically.”

Although maybe she did too, huh?

“No.” She curled her legs up even tighter: “I don’t have a roommate right now, either, and I’ve taken a temporary break from the clubs.”

“What about family?”

“My father runs a small vineyard in the Keto Region. It keeps him very busy; he usually only calls once every few weeks, if that. Other than him, I don’t have any other immediate family: no siblings.” She drew a breath and rested her chin on one knee, “and my mother is dead.”

He sighed: “That’s a pity.”

“Not really,” Chenine’s words roiled under her breath.

They remained that way for some time, Justin lightly dozing beneath his thin blanket, and Chenine resting her forehead on one curled knee. An unhealthy coating of sweat eventually formed on her brow, and then the rest of her. Beads of saltwater ran down her cheeks freely.

“You’re sweating, Chenine.”

“Hadn’t noticed...”

“Damn it all, that’s incredible. Did the doctor ever find out what was wrong with you?”

“I don’t know the diagnosis.”

“How can you not know? Doesn’t she have to tell you?”

Chenine shook her head: “She had to tell me something, but she told me a lie.”

“A lie?”

“She said I had Malignant Hyperthermia.”

Justin perched his lips. “Sooo?”

“So it’s genetic, a dominant disease: one of my parents would have to have it for me to have it. My father is one of the healthiest people on the planet, even for a Ketoni. He certainly didn’t have it.”

“And your mom?”

The girl’s eyes narrowed. Chenine inspected one of her brightly-colored toenails. “Of all the things I inherited from her, that wasn’t one of them.”

Silence returned. After a time Chenine noticed how Justin was bunched-up beneath the blanket. One of his knees trembled at irregular intervals.

“You’re cold, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but only ‘cause it’s damned freezing. It’s probably about 17 degrees in here. You really don’t feel cold?”

“No.”

“Lucky you.”

Chenine got up from against the wall; she left a silhouette of sweat on the metal behind her. Justin didn't look up until he noticed her bare feet standing on the floor in front of him.

"What?" He asked.

She gestured with two fingers: "Spread your legs."

He blinked. "What?"

"I said spread your legs."

He blinked again. "I— huh? Are you planning on 'warming me up', or something?"

"Yes."

Justin couldn't help it: he blinked again. He complied with Chenine's request—more in temporary shock than active volition.

The girl turned on bare heels. She sat down in the space Justin created for her: "I'm going to warm you up and cool myself down at the same time." She grabbed the neck of her sweatshirt and pulled it off in one fell motion.

"What the hell're you doing?" Justin squirmed as the girl rested her bare back against his chest. Even through the barrier of his sweatshirt the girl's burning body felt like a hotplate coming into contact with his flesh.

"I can trust you not to look." Chenine's voice was deadpan, so Justin couldn't tell if these words were a statement of fact— indicating that she actually had his trust— or a question, which indicated an ominous warning.

And I don't have the heart to say that her knockers are old news to me...

Justin tried to come up with something else to say:

"You're very hot."

He mentally smacked himself upside the head.

"And you're very cold." Chenine sighed and hung her head forward. "It's most soothing..."

Minutes passed. While he relished the girl's excessive body heat Justin remained on edge, his muscles locked in sympathetic tension. He was fond of his personal space—very fond of it, in fact— and at the moment he'd lost almost all of it.

Chenine, in contrast, was much more relaxed. The word that came to Justin's mind was 'comatose': her calm and rhythmic breathing could only be the product of a very deep sleep. Justin stared up at the ceiling for a time, and then he looked down at the nape of the girl's neck: Chenine's shoulders were hunched forward.

"You really like being such a God-damned puzzle, don't you?" He sighed. He scanned the girl's offered back: it was a smooth wall of porcelain, untanned and doll-like. Justin always figured that Chenine wasn't the type for outdoor pursuits, and it looks like he was right about that. He noticed a blemish on her right shoulder-blade: it was a tattoo in the shape of a question mark.

How apt...

But Justin was forced to reconsider when he found an identical mark on the other shoulder-blade. This one was a flipped-over question mark: a mirror-image of the one on her right.

"Weird." Justin brought up his hand and touched one of the marks. He traced the serpentine shape with a slow and hesitant finger. The marks weren't tattoos: they were healing scar tissue.

But so perfect and even? That's friggin' unnatural.

Of course, the girl in question was rather unnatural as well. Recently Justin had his hands full trying to adjust to Samantha Rayne's entrance into their little clique. The Captain certainly brought her fair share of conflict into their operation, but it seemed that everyone's adjustment problems had ironed themselves out. Sam found a niche for herself at Base-10 (for the moment she was the de-facto SL for the *Tears' Shower Squadron*, a position that neither Justin nor Chenine was willing to put up much of a fight over). It didn't matter: the Captain was a born leader and she certainly had a winning personality about her.

If Samantha had come into his life like the ripples of a pebble in a pond, Chenine lingered in the mix like a stone in his shoe. The girl's behavior toward Justin oscillated on any given day, and it was damned contradictory: one day saw her ignoring him altogether, except to dig at him critically in mixed company (he called this behavior 'passive hostility'), while another day she might go out of her way to avoid him altogether to the point that—should he actually need her for something—he'd have to hunt her down like a frustrated kid playing a game of hide-and-seek (he called this infuriating behavior 'aggressive-indifference'). Justin was just smack in the middle of it all: a victim of Chenine's subtle hatred.

Besieged with behavior that's 'too black for heaven, and yet too white for hell'...

She didn't hate him, exactly, but Justin felt that she was very resentful toward him for some reason, whatever that might be, and until she confronted him with the issue she was going to continue being a fucking Rubik's cube.

In the end, of course, Justin didn't really care.

He sighed and continued training his finger over one of the girl's scars: whatever force made those marks was just as mysterious as the force that drove his squadmate's erratic behavior. The situation reminded him of another long-lost rhyme from his grade-school days: he softly whispered the one phrase he could remember:

"...what immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry', huh?"

Chenine's right ear twitched: "That's William Blake, isn't it?"

He pulled his hand from her skin as if she'd stung him. "You awake?"

"Obviously. You were feeling my scars?"

He flushed. "Yeah, sorry..."

She shrugged with indifference: "It's not unpleasant; you don't have to stop."

All the same, Justin kept his hands down at his side.

"How did you get—?"

"I'm not sure what they're from. I've had them grafted over a couple of times, but they keep reappearing."

"Reappearing?"

"It might be because of my Raiden." Chenine arched her head back. "Dr. Roont thinks that its pressure from the cockpit chair: my suit's often torn in those spots after I've been in the *Gazer* for long periods of time. I've cost the Aryl a fortune..."

"If your seat is slicing into your skin I think you'd feel it."

She shook her head. "Not if the computer is compensating by administering analgesics to me; JG Tabris told me that—"

"Tabris is a liar, Chenine: don't believe anything he tells you."

This produced an awkward silence in their cylindrical holding cell. The dripping sink beside them dominated the conversation. Justin eventually followed-up on his point:

“Chenine: the Raiden-Hybrids are overloaded with living Bydo flesh: it’s all wild-type, not denatured. Tabris told me so, but I had to beat the information out of him. They’ve been using us: they’re able to keep the tissue alive because it’s synched to our individual brain waves.”

The girl said nothing.

“Did you hear me? I said just that we’ve been lied to!”

“I know.”

It was Justin’s turn to pause: “What?”

She curled her legs up: “I’ve always known that the Hybrids weren’t what they seemed, and that the Aryl was keeping something from us.”

Justin balled his fists: this just took the cake! How could she be so God-damned cold to this news when it was enough to make Justin hot under the collar? Any normal person would be floored!

She’s your polar opposite, ain’t she?

“And opposites detract...”

“What?” Chenine cocked her head.

“I said that you should be more fucking pissed than you are.” He scowled.

“It’s not something that I’ve wanted to talk about.”

“Why the hell not?”

Chenine twisted her head around and looked at Justin with one brilliant blue eye: “I guess I’m like you: I wanted to pilot a Raiden, and I didn’t want my suspicions to disqualify me.”

He threw up his hands: “Don’t you even care about your own basic safety?”

Chenine faced forward once again: “Do you?”

That got Justin’s tongue: for one thing he didn’t know whom that quip referred to— himself or Chenine— and for another thing he wasn’t willing to answer either question. He responded only after a lengthy pause:

“You’re nothing like me, Chenine.”

“I agree.”

He nudged the girl off him, stood up and faced the far wall, waiting for her to put on her sweatshirt. He faced her when she was done:

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have flown off the handle like that: none of this is your fault.” He looked off to one side. “And, well, depending on who’s got us, we might not have a very long shelf-life. I wouldn’t want us to die mad at each other...”

“I’m not mad at you.”

He nodded: “Alright, good...” Justin debated a follow-up question, and ultimately asked it: “Chenine, doesn’t the whole thing about the R-H’s make you angry at all?”

She shook her head: “I’m... well I’m relieved, actually.”

“Relieved? Why?”

“It explains a whole lot, for one thing, and honestly I’d considered that hypothesis; after all, I knew that my *Gazer* was unnatural compared to other Raidens, but I just couldn’t tell how because I had no frame of reference: this is my only commission.” Chenine looked at the floor and curled her painted toes over the metal deck: “There’s

another reason I'm relieved, too: I was afraid that— well, I had a suspicion that the truth was worse than that." She looked him in the eyes: "Much worse."

Justin crossed his arms. "I take it back: you're *not* mellow; you might be even more paranoid than me. What could be worse than knowing that you're just an electrical incubator for a mess of unfeeling organic slime, huh?"

"There are worse things." Chenine sat on the lower bunk. "There are always worse things..."

V.

Chains rattled behind him as the massive hangar door ground shut. The noise echoed through the dark recesses of this massive chamber. There was only one lighted area: a small podium in the center of the room. Wraith hobbled across the floor, his clicking cane the only sound to be heard, and stepped into the light.

Another bank of floods came to life: a gigantic mountain of sleek, reflective metal stood before him like the smooth face of a glacier. A banner hung from the center depicting a black thunderhead cloud and, suspended before it, an oversized drop of rain, yellow and sparkling with power.

Two stories above that banner the mountain ended in a peak of oversized chairs, or more accurately gilded thrones. There were twelve seats lined up in a row, and eleven somber-faced men in purple capes occupied them. One of the middle seats was vacant, and it wasn't until Senegal Kröterohr— that little cockroach of an undersecretary— clambered up the metal mountain and took his place beside the empty chair that things got going. He wiped his sweaty forehead before making a grand announcement:

"This special session of the Allied Commanders is now in session; his most honorable Commander, the Senior General Reidemeister, presiding."

The other general got to their feet with varying degrees of spryness. A ray of fluorescent light blossomed behind the chairs: the door to the Senior General's private chamber opening up. Instantly the old horse-faced Reidemeister emerged and took his place in the center chair. The other generals sat down in turn, and then all attention was turned to Wraith. Reidemeister stared down at the RL from his perch with two cold grey eyes. Alonzo Schern, the general to his immediate right, was the first to speak:

"Subcommander Sven Wraith—" he began.

"Begging the generals' pardons," Wraith interjected, "but my choice of address is 'Raiden-Leader'."

The old men looked at one another in puzzlement. Reidemeister was nonplussed, but Schern was similarly affected:

"You *are* the subcommander of Base-10, are you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are aware that this title is superior to the title of Raiden-Leader?"

"Humor me." Wraith sneered. "I am an Aryl: all my other duties are irrelevant to me." He cracked one knuckle before placing it on the head of his cane.

None of the generals spoke for a time. Finally Reidemeister broke the silence:

"Very well, RL Wraith."

“And speaking of my duties as an Aryl: I’ve come here to demand the immediate release of the members of the *Tears’ Shower Squadron* that you’ve detained, as well as any other personnel from Base-10 that you’ve taken custody of.”

“That’s quite impossible, Raiden-Leader.” A bookwormish man near the end of the row folded his hands on the table. “It’s true that we have recently conducted raids on, well, ‘suspect’ individuals in connection with anti-military behavior, but we can’t divulge such classified information. As a matter of fact, I can’t even confirm that we’ve captured *any* pilots in our raids...”

The RL slammed his cane against the podium and glared at the old man in the middle: it was the first time he’d made any eye contact with him whatsoever.

“Damn it, Reidemeister: these theatrics are pointless! You want information in exchange for my pilots, do you? Well, I’m willing to give it to you.”

The old man leaned forward, his long face grim: “Information, RL?”

Wraith nodded. He ripped a mess of charts and blueprints from his duffel bag and slapped them down on the podium: “These are the original schematics for the Raiden-Hybrids: the *real* schematics and not the fakes we’ve been updating you with. They detail our work to establish a stable Bydo Coefficient—”

“—Test Unit.” The bookwormish general smiled. “And would that be R-Type units composed of 20-percent living Bydo flesh, perhaps?”

Wraith ground his teeth together.

Schern stood up and leered down at the man: “That’s old news, ‘subcommander’. We’re not interested in the sad story behind your woebegone vessels.”

The RL attempted to remain composed, but his voice was laden with anger: “Then what *are* you interested in discussing with me, sirs?”

Schern threw a sparkling object down from his perch. It hit the floor with a jingle and bounced to Wraith’s feet: it was a bracelet bearing the logo of the Antipathy Committee.

Wraith looked at the trinket, then at each general in turn. He smiled—a clear, genuine smile—before extending his wrist and rolling up his navy-blue uniform sleeve: an identical bracelet gleamed in the dark room.

Schern’s face darkened: “You, along with a small but influential contingent of scientists, soldiers, private contractors and senior military personnel are the members of an organization called the ‘Antipathy Committee’.”

Wraith’s smile widened: “You got the name right, general. My compliments! How many hours of torture did that take?”

Reidemeister pointed at the bracelet: “The owner of that: what was his name?”

Wraith shook his head: “I only knew him as Peyton Manning.”

“So you operate in anonymity?”

“Partially, yes.”

The old man threw a folder down at Wraith. The contents scattered across the floor: it was a writ of *habeas corpus* on behalf of Justin Storm and Chenine Chovert. The signatory claimed the highest level of clearance possible, ‘Cotton Thistle’, and on the line for the signature there were only two letters scrawled in delicate calligraphy.

Schern smiled. “Now it’s a strange thing, because *legally* we have to obey such an order, don’t we?”

“Only if you believe in the rule of law...”

“Tch! Well, RL: ‘possession’ is nine-tenths of the law, so the man who wrote that document may as well be pissing in the wind, eh?” He pointed at the folder: “Speaking of which: who is your handler in the Superior Joint Command, Wraith? Who is the coordinator of the Antipathy Project?”

“I can’t tell you.”

The general sneered: “Ooooh, yes you can, ‘Aryl’, assuming you want those pilots back in your lifetime—”

“I can’t tell you, ‘sir’, because I don’t know. The Committee is decentralized: we’re an organization of known operatives and anonymous runners that relay information—”

“Your message runners may be anonymous, but you do know all the *members*, don’t you Mister Wraith?” The bookwormish general perched his lips. “Including, of course, the name of your leader?”

“If one of the Committee members is a member of the SJC, I don’t know about it, and I certainly don’t have a name for you.”

Reidemeister glared at him: “Would you tell us if you knew?”

“I guess I probably wouldn’t.” Wraith admitted. He toyed with the black globe at the head of his cane. “If you’d like, I suppose you could try torturing the information out of me.” He looked up at the men with a horse-drawn smile: “Just to be sure, I mean.”

Eleven very stern scowls met this gesture. Reidemeister’s gaze was indecipherable. If there were such a thing as ‘cold fury’ then his countenance might qualify. He licked his dry lips and prepared to reply, but then he held his tongue, evidently too irked to make his raspy voice carry. He leaned over to his toady undersecretary and whispered in his ear instead.

Senegal Kröterohr stood upright and looked down at the Aryl. His pointy nose twitched like the beak of a crow, and his voice broke like a little boy’s as he called down a demand:

“Sven Wraith, the senior general is tiring of your ‘pointless theatrics’...”

Wraith had to smirk. The rest of Kröterohr’s cawing was as expected:

“At this time you *will* explain your behavior during the past twenty-three months: what is the Antipathy Project, RL, and what are your handlers hoping to accomplish by it?”

“The Project is a means to the end of the entire Bydo species, ‘sirs’.” Wraith scratched his nose nonchalantly. “And what we want to ‘accomplish’ is the genocide of the Bydo race, with the added benefit of embarrassing the hell out of you and the rest of the AM hierarchy, in all honesty.”

Schern put a hand to his chin. “Genocide? You mean this project aims to destroy all Bydo in the solar system?”

The RL held up two white-gloved fingers: they rested a centimeter apart. “That’s kind of small thinking, isn’t it general? The Antipathy Project is designed to infiltrate the Great Communion at Dimension 26.”

The bookwormish general blinked behind his glasses: “...and?”

“And to totally and completely eradicate them. The Project is not designed to strike a ‘blow’ against our enemy: it’s designed to *end* them altogether. We’re talking about total annihilation— and that’s every Bydo sprout, incarnation and core— dead as doornails, guaranteed.”

A chorus of murmurs wafted through the gigantic room: there were a few peals of derisive snickering, but mostly a steady drone of indecipherable chatter. Reidemeister cleared his throat, and then he did it again. This effectively killed the hubbub.

The faces that met on Wraith were laden with a mixture of skepticism and ire (the ratios seemed to vary, but skepticism definitely held the upper hand in all cases). If he were playing a hand of championship poker, Wraith knew, then his ability to bluff would be shot: a man without credibility is a man without recourse, after all. There was only one way to come out on top in such a case.

Let the cards do the talking...

The RL retrieved a small crystal ampoule from his vest and slammed it down on the podium.

...and show off your royal flush to the table.

The generals peered down at the vial with curiosity: they gazed at the tarry black sludge inside with ignorant eyes.

Well 'let there be light', then...

Schern tipped his chin towards the vessel: "What's that, then?"

Wraith smiled like a child with the coolest toy in show-and-tell: he could at least take some pleasure in this presentation, couldn't he?

"You wanted to know about Antipathy?"

"Yes, damnit—"

"Well, this *is* Antipathy."

More silence.

Reidemeister folded his hands beneath his chin and leaned upon his writing desk: "Go on, RL."

"Fifteen years ago Bydo Labs began a project to add a defensive wall around the planet. This 'wall' was to be chemical, unlike Epdin's electrical setup. Do you recall?"

Schern waved a hand. "Yes, yes: the poisoning of the Asteroid Belt. What of it?"

"Do you recall that project's name, sir?"

"'Dissympathy'." The general in glasses nodded. "And don't think we neglected that coincidence, RL. 'Antipathy, Dissympathy: our informants know that you see your project as some kind of successor to Dissympathy.'"

"Only so much as a human is a 'successor' to a field mouse: Antipathy is light-years beyond such a mundane effort, but it shares a similar foundation. Tell me: what did we learn when we unveiled Dissympathy?"

The bookworm rolled his eyes: he was clearly losing patience. "We learned that Antibydo's potency can be greatly enhanced by joining it to organic media. Combining it with a replicable stock of Bydo tissue creates a constant stream of 'hot' Bydo flesh, and when expelled across a great area a blanket of poison is formed; what was once a mildly annoying irritant becomes a very lethal poison."

Schern interjected again: "Yes, yes: the 'Flash-Cancer' toxin. We learned that we could make an organic 'pesticide' using the Bydo's own genetic material. What of it?"

"Yes, that's right: we made a 'poison'. Pretty impressive, huh?" Wraith licked his lips. "Now tell me this, 'sirs':". He leaned forward and spoke with a softer tone: "What... is... the... next... step?"

In a brilliant display of their competence, all twelve men sat as still as statues and mute as rabbits: they wouldn't dare berate Wraith for his circuitous explanation

because— like all great military-politicians— no one wanted to admit that they were slow on the uptake. Wraith spent this time placing odds on who would be the first to speak, when they would speak, and what they would say.

He nailed all three projections.

The general wearing the Coke-bottle glasses bucked in his chair as if a wasp had stung his rear-end. As it turned out, it must have been the wasp of knowledge:

“A contagion? The next step up from an atomized ‘poison’ is a bodily ‘infection’. Antipathy isn’t a conventional weapon at all, is it?” His eyes sparkled with energy.

Schern looked across the row at his excited colleague: “What do you mean ‘infection’?”

Wraith took the vial in one hand and spun it around his dexterous fingers: “The infection *of* infections: ‘Antipathy’ is a virus, generals.” He held the crystal ampoule in front of one eye: it sparkled like a column of blood. “And by that I mean *this* stuff is a virus: there’s been an ongoing dispute over its name. Most of us just call it the ‘Antipathy Virus’, but a bunch of techies in the Committee prefer to use the codename ‘Angelbreath’. Tch! Nothing eases the conscience like euphemisms, I guess. But I say that truth is good for the soul.” He looked up at the old men again: “Anyway, this is not just any little bug: specifically it’s a retrovirus, and a mercilessly ravenous one, to be sure. This motherfucker is able to worm its way into double-stranded DNA with less effort than it takes to attach an extra passenger car to a bullet train.”

Reidemeister didn’t betray an iota of emotion; he leered down at Wraith with stone-cold eyes: “Your organization has created a Bydo-specific virus, RL?”

“Bydo-specific?” Wraith blinked with sarcasm. “Of course not, sir. Do you think we’d hide that kind of miracle from the world? That would be impossible: the Bydo genome is impenetrable! They don’t call the bastards ‘constantly totipotent’ for nothing: if we just jammed any ‘ol virus into an incarnation then the creature would simply ‘edit’ the viral DNA out of its cells in no time at all.”

“Just so!” Schern scoffed. “It’s impossible to force any kind of virus into a Bydo cell.”

“When did I say that we were *forcing* anything into Bydo cells, sir?”

“Oh, and I suppose you’re hoping an incarnation will just *accept* a pathogen into its body?”

“Exactly right.” Wraith’s smiled widened: “Have you ever heard the fable about the wolf in sheep’s clothing that snuck into the fold? It’s easy to get someone to accept their damnation if they don’t even see its coming.”

“Trickery, you mean?”

“Yes, and the best kind. Our researchers picked up where the Dissympathy Project left off. We’ve only been fooling around with the construction of ‘Bydo Coefficient Test Units’ for a short time now; building the Raiden-Hybrids was actually very easy. There was no big scientific barrier to their creation, only political barriers: we *knew* how to create a living Raiden, but we couldn’t very much do it in the daylight...”

Reidemeister spoke: “How do these projects connect? What’s the link between your virus and the R-H units?”

“Isn’t it obvious, yet? The Antipathy Committee spent years perfecting the virus. I’m no scientist, but I know that their problems with the genetic engineering were

endless. We were doing the impossible, after all, and everything was pointlessly slow-going until Ains—”

Wraith stopped mid-speech; his lips curled in dread. That overconfident swagger had just cost him dearly.

“Until *what*, RL?” Schern glared down at him.

A drop of sweat blossomed on his brow. Even with the harsh stage lights on him Wraith had yet to break a sweat. For him the tension was thicker than blood; for some reason even that toad Kröterohr seemed to flinch along with the RL.

“I said that things were slow going until *answers* came to us: a massive breakthrough was made a little over two years ago that allowed the virus to be developed into its final stages. The thing was functional, and it only needed to cross one last ‘bridge’ before we could do a test-run. Once the hurdles with Antipathy were cleared we shifted gears: our request for a new fighter unit was submitted to your desk and the plans for the Raiden-Hybrids were drawn up.”

Wraith was on a roll by now. He was simply eager to conceal that earlier slip of the tongue, and as a consequence he was hemorrhaging information. The generals allowed this— indeed, it was what they were waiting for.

“Creating the R-H’s was a necessary evil in order for our plan to work. We needed to find a way to circumvent the Bydo’s endless number of genetic defense-mechanisms, and Antipathy was designed to do just that. One of our scientists told me that Antipathy isn’t a work of genetic research: it’s a work of art. Your average Earth-born virus has about 5000 base-pairs in its genome, but Antipathy’s got over 8 *million* base-pairs at its largest.”

The bookwormish general clucked his tongue: “Largest? A genome is what makes an organism an organism, Wraith: the number of base-pairs in its DNA is set in stone—”

“We broke the tablets then, because Antipathy is just as adaptive as it is ravenous. The individual capsids are designed to either lose or gain fragments of DNA at will: it always keeps the codes that allow reproduction— as well as two other small coding regions— but they’re only a *tiny* fraction of the genome. All the rest gets shifted and sorted between viral capsids like so much sand kicked up in a sandbox.”

Schern blinked: “There’s no ‘tell’, you mean? So it’s impossible for an antibody to attack the thing.”

“Antipathy ‘reads’ like ancient Sanskrit to *any* immune system: an organism can’t even make antibodies to combat it because it feels like the body’s being assaulted by over a trillion *different* pathogens. After a while the infected organism’s immune response goes away altogether.”

Reidemeister remained skeptical: “That’s a fact, is it?”

Wraith considered the men before him— kings perched in their lofty abode— and a small nagging pain roiled upon the nape of his neck: it was dread. He wasn’t accustomed to indulging such a paralyzing emotion, but the sensation was closely linked to shame, and Wraith could sense that emotion waiting in the wings, and it was rising up his throat.

He swallowed, and once again pushed his pangs of conscience away:

“That’s how the virus has progressed so far in our incubators.”

“Incubators?” Reidemeister perched his desiccated lips.

The RL moved away from his podium. He shuffled along with his cane, pacing before the generals' massive metal dais in back-and-forth motions. It was an aggressive gesture—almost predatory—but Wraith refused to let these irrelevant old cowards judge him.

“Even with its unprecedented sophistication, Antipathy was never built to be dumped unceremoniously into Bydo flesh. Any attempt to *coerce* it in would be met with instant eradication. We needed to force a situation in which a colony of Bydo cells would willingly merge with a third-party organism: an incubator whose body is already riddled with the disease. So long as the Bydo flesh bonds with the organism it would treat their genome as gospel, including all those bits and pieces that code for the Antipathy Virus. To trick the flesh, though, a significant amount of ‘trust’ needed to be established between the ‘flesh’ of the Bydo and the ‘blood’ of said organism...”

A general near the end of the row set two fingers upon his moustache: “In the merging, the virus would be incorporated into the Bydo genome, given their love of ‘adaptation’, right? There’s no way for it to realize what it’s sucking up...”

“The ultimate Trojan Horse.” Schern nodded.

It was the bookworm’s eyes that first widened. Wraith assumed it would be.

“You need ‘incubators’ to transmit the virus? Then— my god, man, don’t tell me! It can’t be! You’re using your own *pilots* to incubate the disease, aren’t you? You infected your own people with the virus!”

Murmurs quickly turned into a steady roar.

The hypocritical cries of righteous indignation...

It was Reidemeister who commanded silence, but this time it required the rap of his large granite gavel to quell his colleagues. Once silence returned the old man gazed down at Wraith:

“Is this true, Raiden-Leader?”

Wraith sneered: “Sacrifices had to be made for Antipathy, and yes: each member of the *Tears’ Shower Squadron* is a casualty of circumstance, if you like.”

Schern rose to his feet: “And to be so cavalier about the lives of three humans! This project is monstrous, and you’re playing the part of a monster: you sound like you’re giving us a weather report, for god’s sake!”

Wraith’s reply to this observation was not addressed to Schern. The RL’s slate gray eyes fell upon old Reidemeister. He didn’t just glance at the general like before: for the first time Wraith fixed his eyes on the man and leered venomously:

“As a child, I was taught that ‘the most heated assaults are launched from the most frigid of hearts’. Doesn’t anyone here believe that? Some time ago I came face-to-face with the proof for this idea: several years ago I was on a routine patrol with my old unit, the *Songoku Squadron*. We were cruising down the white coast of India, following the western shore. We passed by the Narbada delta, where the cold white river water meets the warm purple ocean brine.” He smiled. “I can remember that: the golden sunlight would set that whole place on fire in the morning! We made it down to the Deccan Traps by noon, about the same time the volcanoes up on the plateau started heating up. The whole thing runs like clockwork: all that afternoon soot drifts southward and fouls up the air. It forces the gulls and finches living in the sloping Ghats out onto the coast for the day. They’d often follow us for a while, drifting in the warm wake of our

exhaust tails. When we passed through that area it was like we had a ten-thousand-man escort with us...”

Schern frowned: “Do these colorful memories serve *any* purpose, RL?”

“I’m getting to that. You see: about an hour later we got a call from Regional Command.” He continued looking straight at Reidemeister, his eyes unwavering. “It was an order to investigate some ‘anomalous’ phenomena to the north, up in the mid-range Himalayas. The tone of the order lacked urgency, and we thought it was no big deal. At the time we were all as tranquil as lambs, and it was an idyllic day. Basking in the summer sun we greeted the seabirds...” Wraith’s gaze grew distant; then he smiled and scoffed. “Tch! But then we entered the demon’s den. It turns out that the Brass knew a *little* more than they were telling: there was ‘Moondust’ scattered around that cloud-choked wasteland in the north, hidden on the moody mountain peaks in black ice, and—well, let’s just say that the Sino-Confederacy couldn’t be allowed to get their hands on it, but at the same time we couldn’t just enter their territory and destroy that cancerous growth. Politics had to be played: the Sino-Confederacy needed to be *forced* to eradicate the Moondust—preferably with a ranged thermonuclear strike—and resist their natural temptation to collect it. Public sentiment had to be driven in the proper direction, you see, and well—”

Wraith could tell by the general’s faces that they understood his point: the young soldiers in the *Tears’ Shower Squadron* were not the first pilots to be blindfolded, painted with bulls-eyes and dragged to the slaughter. He sneered at the old men:

“Anyone who can’t sacrifice the most precious things for a noble cause isn’t a warrior: they’re a philosopher, at best. And the musings of philosophy seldom go hand-in-hand with the machinations of practical life. Isn’t that true? Besides, there’s very little actual cost involved in the Antipathy Project: as you gentlemen are constantly reminding me, my squadron is composed of a VR training washout, a captain who’s more suited to physical combat than piloting Raiden, and a girl who is *utterly* worthless to the AM in every way, shape and form. Yes, I’m using them as empty vessels for the Project’s end and yes, I am corrupting their little human genomes in the process, but for the most part these people are not likely to be mourned, and their ‘skills’ will not be missed: who better to use as raw meat than such a group, huh? Better to lose them than men and women like those in the *Songoku Squadron*: people we genuinely need.” Wraith returned to his podium: “*Corruptio corpus vile optima*, right sirs?”

The bookworm shook his head. “Is Antipathy really so fatal? In humans, I mean?”

“We hoped that it wouldn’t be—”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Wraith paused. “Our Prototype Test Subject is dying, and a little faster than our worst-case scenario predicted. I’m not sure what the mechanism is, but she’s burning apart from the inside out. She was injected with the virus several months ago.”

“Prototype Test Subject? Whom do you mean?”

Wraith explained: “Most of our pilots were selected in regards to how their bodies and minds might react to the flesh in their Raidens: Justin Storm was picked to see how a Perfect Fifth would interact with his vessel. Samantha Rayne was selected to see how a more ‘belligerent’ personality could affect the bond. Chenine Chovert was selected only because she could pass a Moro-Plantar test of reflexes: she is solely a ‘prototype’, and is

particularly disposable. At the time we were only interested in getting an RH unit to work, and we were uninterested in all the other variables until we had the basics down.”

The bookworm scoffed: “So you *are* conducting a bit of research on the side, eh?”

“A bit.”

“Are the others infected yet?”

“Yes: all three pilots carry Antipathy. Before you start screaming again, please understand that we have to run multiple tests: there are ‘flavors’ of this virus, and part of the Project’s expense is that we need to keep running tests until we succeed.”

“What is ‘success’?” Reidemeister asked.

“The transmission of the virus from the flesh of the R-H’s to the Core of a Bydo Mass. The story with these Masses never changes, no matter what we do: apparition, confrontation, defeat, and then retreat. It’s like the script to a bad video game; all we’ve done is added a step to belie this foolish comic-book story. After infection— and upon the Mass’s scripted defeat— it would go hop-scotching back home to the Great Communion...”

“And the virus?”

“That’s the real beauty of everything: we know what conditions are like down at the inner regions of the Great Communion. We know how much pressure there is, we know how hot it is, and we know what kind of cellular structure the Bydo use to flourish down in that hot soup: all those conditions are unique, and as soon as the fragmented virus is exposed to that environment it becomes ‘active’. Remember when I said that there were two other coding regions on the viral DNA? One of them is a ‘sensor’ to detect the proper conditions and to estimate the concentration of viral DNA *around* it, and the other is an ‘initiator’: it brings together all the scattered viral DNA around it and then causes the cell it’s in to literally tear itself apart. Once the virus is implanted— and after it gets copied about a trillion times over into the Communion— the ‘teeth’ come out. Before those stupid bastards know what hit ‘em they’ve got a runaway infection right in their midst, tearing them apart cell-by-cell-by-cell and thwarting their adaptive defenses all the while. The *least* that could happen is a cataclysm to rival *our* Cataclysm: there’d be a great dying in the Communion, but that’s only if they could somehow quarantine the infection before it killed them all. The more likely outcome is the total eradication of the collective in Dimension 26: the end of the Bydo Empire.”

The generals let this dissertation set in. The bookworm was the first to give his thoughts:

“A virus with a genome to rival small bacteria, with the intelligence to disassemble and reassemble itself at will, and with the power to breach the Communion...”

“Disassemble... reassemble...” Schern’s head wagged to and fro. His eyes were glassy, and they’d been that way ever since Wraith belted out his Latin phrase; he was obviously playing catch-up.

And not doing too well at it.

Wraith fished for a good analogy: “You generals like the Great City, don’t you? Do you spend a lot of time here? You ever go to the classic films festival in the Nash? Have you seen ‘The Man with the Golden Gun’?”

“I despise that kind of juvenile entertainment.” Schern growled.

“Really? I must admit that I love it.”

“I’m familiar with the movie: something about an assassin who goes around shooting people with a—”

“—‘golden gun’, yes, very good sir.” Wraith wasn’t pleased to dumb-down his spiel, but it was necessary. “Remember anything else about his gun?”

“He could take it apart, couldn’t he?”

“Not only that: it dissembled into a mess of innocuous things: a lighter, a pen, a cigar tube and other sundry items. Antipathy is like that.”

For some reason, when he spoke these words, Wraith *really* felt like shooting himself. He forced himself to stick with the analogy, though:

“Antipathy is like that assassin: let’s say he goes into a crowd. He’s not suspicious, and if a cop stopped him he wouldn’t have a reason to arrest him because the stuff he’s carrying doesn’t *look* dangerous at all. Now imagine that after a while there are hundreds of assassins in the crowd, all of them carrying their disassembled guns. If they wish to massacre everyone around them, all they need to do is wait for enough assassins to show up so they outnumber the crowd, and it’s a turkey-shoot. As soon as enough of them get there one of the assassins gives the signal and everyone assembles their guns, takes aim, and...” Wraith shrugged his shoulders and looked up at Schern: thankfully the man’s blank stare was replaced by a slightly more thoughtful countenance.

“Judgment Day.” Schern agreed.

“Just so.”

Another pause filled the air between Wraith and the generals. Reidemeister broke it: “This ‘trust’ you speak of between the ‘incubators’ and the flesh: it wouldn’t have anything to do with the radically altered appearance of your male pilot after Ganymede, would it? Most of the doctors who attended to Justin Storm seem to have died in various ‘accidents’ since the battle, but from what we know his body was quite a sight to behold at the time.”

“The flesh is excited into action by the pilots’ brain activity: it’s linked to their thought processes by the ship’s sensations-link. When the pilots truly begin to fear for their lives, or when any other very significant stressor taxes their brains, the flesh becomes active, and it takes a more ‘hands-on’ role in protecting the Raiden from any perceived external threat.”

“And just how does the virus get transmitted in all this electrical communication?” Schern asked.

“The flesh inside each R-H model was raised on a strict diet of glucose. Bydo cells may be adaptive, but they can be trained to prefer one ‘food’ over the other, and the Hybrids are gonzo for glucose. We keep a steady supply of it inside the ship’s reserves and feed the vessels just enough to whet their appetites.”

Reidemeister leaned back: “If it wants more, then, there’s only one place to draw it from...”

“Correct: when the flesh gets ‘riled-up’ by the pilots’ emotions it starts growing and building an organic framework; the effort makes it hungrier than all-get-out, and since it desperately craves glucose it uses the Raiden’s medical-support system to siphon out the pilots’ blood plasma. It takes up their bodily fluids, their sugars—”

“—and the Antipathy Virus.” The bookworm shook his head. “They’re a bunch of oversized mosquitoes, aren’t they? Bloody brilliant...”

Reidemeister shook his head: he didn't seem pleased by either the analogy or the pun. "You say that the Hybrids were 'easy' to construct, and yet your engineering team suffered a catastrophe with unit R-H-AUT."

"*Cross-the-Rubicon.*" Wraith scowled. "I'm not proud of that one: none of us are."

"What happened?" Schern demanded.

"We neglected to consider an important variable."

"In the design?"

"No: in the execution. At the time we assumed that the flesh would react appropriately if we only fed it the pilot's vital statistics through the computer. We didn't set-up an actual conduit between the pilot's minds and the flesh: the *Rubicon* did not have an on-board sensations-link."

The bookworm squinted: "What difference should that make?"

"None— we thought— but we were wrong. What we underestimated was..." the RL exhaled and looked skyward.

"What?"

He shook his head and picked a word: "We underestimated the flesh's need for *socialization*: our methods for containing the tissue and preventing a complete breakdown of the R-H's are, well, rather barbaric. The only available recourse against the ships going all 'grey-goo' on us is to surround the chamber holding the flesh with Karat Spheres: they're set around the flesh like control rods in a fission reactor and can be either pushed into the flesh or withdrawn from it, depending on how 'naughty' the flesh has been. That keeps the flesh segregated from any other living organism, and since it's unable to grow on its own we ran into problems. The flesh of the *Rubicon* matured as expected, but within weeks of its activation it gave us grief: problems with in-flight integrity, unpredictable rearrangements of the ship's infrastructure, and even a breakdown in the on-board computer system cropped up. Ultimately the Bydo tissue fell into a state of deep Autistic-Withdrawal, and it stayed that way for days. We took it down into our development center and ran several experiments trying to coax it out of AW..."

Schern waved a hand: "And?"

"It lashed out at us. The tissue exploded from the vessel and it went completely berserk. It turned the cockpit into a fucking Cuisinart: I doubt the pilot ever felt a thing. It nearly tore the basement of Base-10 apart before one of our workers managed to lure it over the 'scrubbing platform': we were finally able to drop the thing into a well of Karat slurry."

"So, now your vessels are in direct contact with the pilots' minds?"

"They are."

Reidemeister squinted: "This isn't troubling to you at all?"

Wraith shrugged: "We've all read the classified reports on Project Prometheus: we know that Bydo flesh has an excellent capacity for problem solving, and for integrating human behaviors and techniques into its processes, but whatever 'growth' the flesh displays is irrelevant."

"Because the little flying freaks are 'dead Raidens walking', huh?" Schern nodded.

Wraith rolled his eyes: "I wouldn't have put it quite like that..."

“Ganymede was a test of your virus, wasn’t it?” The bookworm interjected. “R-H-CRTS was placed with the Penetration Team, as I recall. Was that why the Galilean Mass lost its cohesion?”

“Ah, ah, ah!” Schern glared at Wraith with renewed contempt: “And what was *that*? Your Mass took off for the *wrong* dimension, Wraith: our last report showed it heading for the Burning Heaven Lands. Not really part of the ol’ plan, was it?”

“I never claimed we’d score a direct hit on the first try. This is like shooting bullets in the dark: you’ve gotta pull the trigger more than once—”

A bearded general beside Schern stood up: “Well, consider yourself ‘holstered’, monster! This whole black project is at an end!”

“I’ve still got two bullets in the chamber: general.” Wraith smiled. “If you’d like, we can go ahead and reveal all of this to the Council on Human Rights, as well as the public at large, and as everyone watches Samantha Rayne and Justin Storm’s bodies slowly deteriorate and die over the next few months they can think of me, my friends in the Committee and— *most* of all— the wonderful men in Allied Command who let this ‘monstrous’ experiment go on right under their noses.”

Schern’s lower lip quivered: “Or: we bury this whole thing and execute you for treason, you stone-hearted bastard!”

“I’d hardly call an effort to save my species ‘treason’, but if you really want my blood, Schern, then by all means take it!” Wraith glared at Reidemeister and held out his wrists: “It’s all yours, gentlemen, but I’ll warn you: it’s difficult to drain blood from a stone.”

Reidemeister said nothing. The bookwormish man looked down the line at the senior general, then at Wraith. He broke the silence:

“It seems we have each *other* by the balls, don’t we? Tell me, RL Wraith: how confident are you in your organization’s formula: how sure are you that this virus can be a success?”

“I trust it with all my heart and all my being: detestable though the details may be the future of humanity lies in Antipathy.”

“Naturally. Well, perhaps there’s a compromise...”

Schern glared at his colleague: “Compromise?”

The nerdy general looked at each of his comrades in turn; he was hesitant to brooch his idea, but he obviously thought it was a good one:

“What about it: shouldn’t they at least complete these remaining two trials?”

The bearded general, who still stood on his platform shoes, brayed like an indignant ass: “We cannot condone this madness!”

“But what’s done so far *is* done, isn’t it? Maybe we shouldn’t allow them to ‘reload’ their gun, but what harm could there be in letting them fire off their remaining shots?” He looked back down at Wraith. “You’d have two additional chances to prove this virus’s worth, and either way we’d be rid of our mutually embarrassing problems—the *Platonic Love* and the *Platinum Heart*— at the same time, wouldn’t we?”

Wraith nodded. He cooed like a parent consoling a kid: “Believe me, sirs: this would be a wise course of action. The cost-to-benefit ratio on your end is quite favorable.” He then looked at Reidemeister, who was clammed up at the moment. Wraith’s eyes laughed with black fire as he spoke: “All you’d have to do is accept a little bit of blood on your hands. Now: you can all do that, can’t you?”

There were objections to this idea: there were arguments, shouting and many whispered words exchanged upon that mountain of metal, but the bookworm had set the tone of discussion, and most of the men seemed inclined to agree with him:

That very day the generals of Allied Command entered into an uneasy truce with the members of the Antipathy Committee.

VI.

Eventually the meeting adjourned. The giant hangar door on the far side of the room rose up and Sven Wraith disappeared into a shaft of ungodly bright light. The generals scrambled out of their chairs and disappeared into Reidemeister's private chamber. Soon the main floods of the room switched off, leaving the empty place dark save for a few tiny yellow path-lights rising off the floor.

Those lights barely pierced the darkness and fell on a vent shaft standing two stories above the hangar floor. Behind the grate— with a face bathed in pale yellow strips of light— a person shivered in the vent. He didn't shiver from the cold; in fact there were a dozen beads of sweat dotting his cheeks like dirty freckles. The skin on his face was red, and it surrounded a pair of startled, wide brown eyes. His breaths were shallow and erratic: he had to force his dazed body to draw air into his lungs. And he did: for the first time in several minutes Scott Tabris managed to take a breath.

When he finally wormed his way back to the cylindrical holding cell he was greeted by Justin and Chenine.

"What'd you see, Tabris?" Justin helped him out of the dirty vent. "Did you figure out where the hell we are?"

Scott slumped down on the top bunk: his eyes were distant and dreamy.

"Hey, Tabris!" Justin smacked his leg.

Miss Chovert did a much better job of gauging his emotional state. She was standing with her toes on the lower bunk, staring up at him with those dazzling blue peepers:

"You've seen something, haven't you? Do you know what we should do now? What would be the right thing to do, JG?"

Scott looked down at her, then up at Storm. He wiped a mess of sweat from his face and shook his head.

"I dunno." He said. "The right thing? I don't know: I have no idea what to do now..."

VII.

Three men escorted Wraith to the second floor: two wore ridiculous black ski masks while the third man's head was uncovered. He spoke less than a dozen words to the RL, and Wraith was not inclined to press any conversation. They came to a large corridor bearing an endless row of smooth metal doors. The lead man stepped in front of one of them and pulled the handle open.

"Aryl!" Justin Storm bolted up off a ratty bunk bed. Chenine Chovert got up off the floor beside him, while Scott Tabris lagged behind the pair.

“My ‘highly-trained’ military personnel. No wonder you two failed your combat qualifiers last month.” Wraith shook his head. “Well, are you hurt?”

Justin blinked in confusion. The young man eyed both his RL and his captors, no doubt baffled to see them standing together so casually.

“We’re... we’re sorry if we caused you any trouble, Aryl—”

“Are... you... hurt?” Wraith repeated.

“Uh, no sir.” Justin looked back at Chenine and Scott. “We haven’t been mistreated—”

“Then come.” Wraith ordered the trio out of the room, and they were happy to oblige. He eyed Miss Chovert as she stepped through the door. “And I take it that *no one* has run into any problems with these ‘gentlemen’? No problems at all?”

“No,” Chenine walked passed the hoodless captor. “Except that I’ve come down with a bad case of Stockholm Syndrome.” She turned on her heels and gripped the man’s shoulder. “We’re madly in love, and the wedding is in a week.”

The steel-faced man sneered at her with tobacco-stained teeth and pulled away.

The RL shook his head: “Since you’ve got the wherewithal to make jokes I’ll take you at your word. Now, then: let’s get the hell out of here.”

Justin walked behind the RL, all the while looking around hesitantly. “Uh, Aryl: what’s going on?”

“The three of you were accidentally rounded-up in a security sweep: there was a clerical error with the Military Investigative Branch and your names ended-up on a list of known ‘Unity’ sympathizers.”

Chenine blinked: “We were taken by our own military?”

“Who else could be that efficient, really?” Justin scratched his head. “Well, no harm no foul, I guess...” His head shot up. “Shit! My hedgehogs—”

Wraith grunted. “Oh, yes.” He ripped two satchels out of his duffel bag: one of them held Justin’s hedgehogs secure in their individual sacks, and the other concealed Miss Chovert’s tarantula cage. He glared at the girl as he handed it to her. Leaning over, he whispered in her ear: “And, Miss Chovert, you can thank me later for not reporting you to the Animal Control authorities, alright?”

The girl perched her lips as she took the sack, but then she looked at the man and nodded with as much appreciation as a girl like her could give. The RL led the trio through a maze of corridors, moving so quickly on his cane that it was a chore for the youths to keep up.

Soon they emerged from an elevator and headed for the door to the facility’s roof. Wraith put a hand on this door, but then his skin crawled. He peered down the opposite hallway and there, his cape tangled up behind him, was Senior General Reidemeister.

Storm nearly choked on his tongue when he saw him.

“Oh, man: is that who I think it—”

“All of you, out!” Wraith snapped. He pointed at the door: “I’ve got a Streaker waiting for you on the landing pad outside; there are soldiers in the main cabin that will see to your needs. Now *move*.”

Once the door slammed shut behind his people Wraith turned to face the general. Reidemeister was already walking down the hall to meet him, and Wraith matched the man step-for-step until their hard faces were mere inches apart.

“Raiden-Leader.” The general said.

“General, sir.” Wraith replied.

A pause.

“I can’t fathom this... this ‘action’ of yours.” The old man shook his head. “Your taunts in there were inexcusable for as well: you must respect the chain of command!”

“Yes, general sir.”

“I don’t know what they told you— those people in your Committee— to get you to betray your own people so—”

“I learned from the best.” Wraith sneered.

The old man said nothing. Wraith finally qualified the barb:

“—‘general, sir’.”

Another pause.

The old man looked the RL up and down. “You look well.”

“Thank you.” Wraith eyed the man with cold, black slits. “Do you like my cane, general sir? I can probably wrangle one of these up for you, if you’re so inclined—”

“Sven—”

“Or, better yet, if the general is interested in sprucing up the old body with some prosthetics, I’ve got some former squadmates who can heartily recommend their reconstructive surgeons—”

“You still refuse to understand me, don’t you? Do you think I made that decision lightly? Do you have any idea the number of lives we saved that day? Your unit— your squadron— it was a tragedy, but—”

“It was a command decision, sir.” Wraith turned his head to one side.

Subconsciously, he scratched at the scar that ran along his cheek. “You have no reason to question it, and I have no right to fault you.” He leered at the old man: “But let’s both agree that you have precious little right to judge *me*: don’t you, general sir?”

“What I did I did in the blink of an eye, and I had a split second to decide. But this... this slaughter you’re presiding over isn’t just a momentary blip on the radar: you’re *choosing* to go down such a dark path! If you’ve learned anything from me I would hope that it’s—”

“The most important thing you ever taught me is that you were willing to sacrifice your own flesh and blood for a victory, general sir.” Wraith snarled. “And if you stand there and tell me that it’s wrong of me to serve up someone *else*’s flesh and blood for my own victory, well: there are those who would call you a hypocrite.”

“Would you?”

Wraith’s face went blank. Then his lips gradually rose into a wide smile. “Of course not, sir: it’s not my place to accuse a general of such a thing.”

“In my capacity as a general?”

“Yes, sir.”

Reidemeister clenched his teeth: “Then accuse me in a *different* capacity, if you want. For god’s sake, Sven: you never *had* to deal with all that trauma by yourself, and the last thing I wanted you to think is that you had to go it alone—”

Wraith turned around. “Each of us is really ‘alone’ in this world, sir.” He started walking off.

“Do *not* turn your back on me, subcommander!”

Wraith stopped. He didn't turn around right away, but slowly shifted about, keeping his cane in prominent display as he did so. "Was there anything else, general sir?"

Reidemeister cleared his throat. "I'm finished discussing this matter for today."

"As you wish, sir."

"Sven, I—" Reidemeister stopped, and then he began again. "Listen to me: Moira has been interested in meeting you, and you haven't been out to the estate in so long."

"No, I haven't sir: the weather in Leipzig doesn't agree with my leg..."

"I'm having a social out there next week. In spite of all this unpleasantness, I'd like it if you were there."

Wraith narrowed his eyes: "Certainly."

"You'd really come?"

"Of course: if the general is ordering me to attend then I have little—"

"If not an *order*, damn it!" The old man controlled himself. "It's a *request*."

"In that case, I'm afraid that I have other duties to attend to next week. My apologies." He turned around once again.

"Sven." Reidemeister persisted.

"Sir?"

"Does it hurt you? Is what you're doing to your pilots even registering with you? I'm not being coy, but I want to know: are you carrying that weight?"

Wraith looked at the old man out of the corner of his eye: "Tell me: are you?"

Reidemeister stretched one arm against the wall and supported himself with a venous hand. "I think you are affected, despite the image you wanted to project to everyone else in that room. I often asked myself why things never worked out between us. I always assumed we had that friction between us because we were so different from one another. But now I think I may have been wrong: we may be too similar for our own good. 'Like charges repel', they say, and maybe that's the reason you left."

"If we are at all alike then that means you felt *nothing* when you gave me and my squadmates up for dead in that ambush, because that's exactly what *I* feel when I think about what I'm doing to my test subjects: absolutely nothing."

He began shuffling off.

"Sven." The old man demanded: "Be careful about things like lies, especially the ones you tell yourself: they have a way of breaking down the reality around you. And the lies you tell yourself are the worst: they end up breaking apart the type person you've tried to become."

The RL shook his head. He stumbled away from the old general with clenched teeth and flared lips. When he finally spoke it was in an inaudible whisper:

"I'll try to keep that in mind, father..."

