



“...An eye all black and somber o’er a flightless, naked wing;
A caw for the unkindness, neither essence nor machine.
And He who made the tiger fierce, and He who bore the lamb:
Did God who cast the oceans blue so forge you in His hand?...”

From the Collected Works of Leith Paltry ('On a Hatchling')

Filial Affection

I.

Behind a panorama window, glittering in the morning’s light, a small pod of dolphins played in their pen. They leapt about behind closed walls, safe inside an artificial lake filled with pristine silver water.

Justin watched from the other side of the window. Men and women darted about in all directions behind him as he kicked one foot into a boot. In an hour, maybe less, those dolphins would tucker themselves out and start lounging around like fat otters. And in two hours, give or take, the sun would rise up over the Scottish lowlands and that silver body of water would transform into a most radiant shade of blue.

He took the laces of one midnight-black glove in his teeth and cinched them tight around his wrist. He held that hand up against the window, wiggled his fingers, and then shook his head. He had to laugh: a body of *blue* water was really too strange to think about.

Soon a familiar voice sounded behind him, shaking his thoughts back to the here-and-now:

“How’s the pen today?”

“Frolicsome, I’d say. What type of dolphins are those, Connor? Commons?”

“Not on your life, *Mo Cuideag Beag*: there’re genuine bottlenoses, each ‘n e’ry one. Part o’ the lot pulled from Moray Firth back when the water turned on us.”

“But taken here, to Base-Sruighlea?”

Connor chuckled and shrugged his large shoulders: “Our COs ‘ve always had a soft spot for ‘em, ya ken? And as far as mascots go, we could’ve done worse, eh?”

Justin adjusted the straps of his satchel pocket: “It’s a more fitting mascot for Base-10, don’t you think?”

The Scotsman laughed uproariously, his fiery hair wagging jovially with each bob of his head: “Dolphins in the open ocean? Ah, man: it’s all too strange to think about!”

Justin’s face became more serious: “Too strange? More Tommy Westphal stuff, huh? Don’t you think he’s done enough, already?”

“I see you’ve hit the latest intel.” Connor nodded. “If there is a God flittin’ about up there— as you so often say— then this is one joke I’ll not be sharin’ a laugh wi’ ‘im over.”

“Comet ‘20D/Westphal’.” Justin’s smile returned. “It’s so god-damned ironic that I can’t wipe the grin off my face.”

“Aye, an’ tha’s what I’ve come to talk to you about, boy-o.” Connor scratched at the nape of his neck and stared down at his boots. His nervousness was obvious, and this was an odd thing to see in the bombastic man. “I noticed that you cast your lot in wi’ Team Falkirk, did ya no?”

Justin nodded: “Did I yes, Connor.”

“Well, you see: Team Bannockburn’s a bit lopsided wi’ the new Gen-II Excels, and it’d be strategically sound to do some shufflin’. You might consider switching out with the *Ophaniel’s Wheel*: she’s a bonny new commission— the lady just retired out the *Thrones* last month, see— an’ it’s mighty powerful Gen-II—”

“And *I’m* a bonny-fucking powerful Striker-clone, Connor.” He shook his head. “I belong on a decoy mission, and you know it. If you want a Generation-II Excel-class Raiden on our team then why don’t you put your own chips on the table?”

A thick sneer clouded Connor’s face: “The brass won’t certify our *Cerviel’s Eye* for combat. Not yet, anyway. And until then I’m backup— a Command Ops strategic adviser— and you know that, boy-o.”

“And if you’re advising a Striker-clone to give up on any heavy-lifting in this little scheme of ours then you don’t even deserve that much involvement, ‘boy-o’.”

The pair stared out the window for a time. It was an awkward thing, trying to dismiss Connor’s own concern for him without actually *being* dismissive. In the end, Justin tried to toss him some rose-colored glasses:

“It doesn’t really matter, you know. The lag time between Team Stirling’s initial hit and their regrouping into Bannockburn formation won’t be too long, unless your squad’s plans all go to pot...”

Connor bucked: “The Salt-O-Scots never has a need for ‘plan-B’: what’s drawn up on paper is laid out in blood and sweat, exactly as advertised.”

“Then stop worrying about anything, Connor. If you can trust your squad to do right by themselves then I don’t see why you can’t trust me to do my part.”

“I— it’s not—” Connor blushed and shook his head. “Oh, aye, *Mo Cuideag Beag*: you’re better at bringin’ shame t’ my bones than anyone else. And just so: *cuir do shìol*— sow your seed, boy-o-mine— and don’t let me nag on you like an old woman!”

“Nah, you’re only 32, after all.” Justin smirked: “You’re an old *man*, not a woman.”

“You’ll do in spades, I know. All my whining, it’s just my duty to kin creepin’ in, ‘ya ken?”

“No, I’m not, actually.” Justin looked past Connor, towards the sleek white corridor leading to the Raiden launch bays: one of those cramped little guest bays at the end concealed his ugly baby, the *Platonic Love*, recently cobbled back together by a non-too-pleased engineering crew led by Sam Roont and Scott Tabris. He could see a few members of the Salt-O-Scots swaggering down the corridor, immaculate in their shining green *Goedkeuring*-class suits.

“Connor, if I’m really ‘kin’ to you and your squad then we’ll get along fine. Really, I’m the one that should be worried about this kinda stuff, right?”

The Scotsman got on his haunches and rested against the shimmering glass windowpane: “I’ve seen ‘ya fight, you’ll recall, and I’ve told ‘ya about my own style in the fray: losing myself in the moment, seizing up and latching onto the action like a demon might, ‘ya ken? I won’t criticize how you might go about things, and I certainly won’t go into Jupiter again— you well as anyone know that’s one of the reasons we love you, *Cuideag*— but I would like to put this li’l nugget forth: duty to kin is strong as anything can be, short of duty to blood, naturally...”

“Naturally.” Justin nodded.

“But try to remember that there’s also duty to oneself.”

The Typer smiled: “You think I’m too selfless behind the wheel?”

“I think that you’ve a demon in you, too. I’m sure of it, actually. But yours is less a driving force and more, well...” Connor scratched the back of his neck and smiled gently. “It’s more an insanity, truth be told. What I mean is that a corpse is no good to anyone, an’ if you lose yourself in the fight, and are *lost* as a consequence, you’ve done worse by my mates than if you ne’er reported for duty at all.”

Justin crossed his arms: “I don’t try to be a one-man band on the battlefield Connor. At least I don’t think I do. I’m not the best team player, but I try to take my own limitations to heart—”

“Without success, at times.”

“No more than you, I think.”

The Scotsman laughed: “Ay: *thig iomadh olc à aon olc*, they say. ‘One evil begets many others’, and while I can’t deny what you say, I can ask you to heed my words more’n my actions.”

Justin slid down against the window in turn, bringing his face closer to Trent: “But you’re wrong about me: I don’t have a demon inside me, Connor— no more than anyone else does— and I swear that we go out as a squad and we come back as a squad, same as you’d expect from anyone around here.” He cinched the second glove over his right hand, entombing the whole of his body in that dull black *Liefde* suit:

“*Nemo nos impune lacessit*, Connor Trent.”

Connor smiled as he watched Justin rise and saunter over to the Raiden wing. He called after him:

“As long as you’re latching onto our rhetoric, try to remember this one, if you will: *theid seòltachd thar spionnadh*.”

“That the recipe for your strawberry milkshakes?”

“It means ‘cunning will overcome strength’. Tactics are more ‘n a match for muscle.”

“I’m not smart enough to play a tactical game, Connor.”

“I see. Would you hold back on your arms, at least?”

“And let my photonic cannons do the talking?” Justin shook his head. “I’m not that stupid, either.”

The eight other Salt-O-Scots were already assembled in the main Raiden launch bay. Their squadron leader, the captain of the *King’s Mind*, was up on the gangway coordinating launch procedures with the deckhands; the base quartermaster did not deign to grace the floor with his presence, and even his assistant swaggered about with grand airs. The chain of command in Base-Sruighlea was far more iron-clad than that of Base-10. Being a backwater operation gave an organization a certain sense of egalitarianism, at least superficially, but the crisp and ordered machinations here in Scotland—like the iron-clad gears in a clock—kept everyone on their toes, and everyone seemed to know their place.

With one exception, perhaps.

Kelso, the second-in-command, stood on the wing of his vessel, the *Dominions*. He slapped the back of each pilot who passed him and nearly ripped each man’s arm off with the squad’s peculiar handshake. Justin passed him in turn, and the older man nearly repeated the gesture before first noticing Justin’s midnight-black flight suit, and then his face.

“*Thig gailleann agus sìon!* Is the window down?” His graying beard twitched with each word. “How else does a scrappy raven so scamper into our midst?” He crossed his burly arms and sneered. “*Deagh shlàinte*, Lieutenant Justin Storm; good health to you.” He bowed his head less than a hair’s breadth. “So, Connor ‘n the Brass say you’re fit to spread your wings with us, eh?”

Justin stared down at Kelso’s boots. “I suppose so.”

He scoffed. “*Cha chreid mi-fhèin sin.*”

“I don’t speak Gaelic, Captain Kelso.”

“It’s just as well.” Kelso motioned to the *Love’s* docking position with his head and Justin shuffled off, more self-conscious than a chameleon with eczema.

I do seem to have the wrong skin-color at the moment, don’t I?

“But when do I ever have the right one?” He muttered.

The bearded Scotsman called after him:

“You’ll remember, Lieutenant, that in the Salt-O-Scots we fight past quittin’ time: no breaks for any of us until the enemy has a break in its *back*, ya’ ken?”

“Since it’s my duty to kin: I can ken it.” Justin whispered this under his breath as he took a seat in the *Love’s* cockpit. Two minutes later a deckhand came by and, with operatic precision, wordlessly clamped down the canopy and saluted Justin through the shield.

Old Kelso wouldn’t slap me on the back, or even shake my hand...

He wouldn’t touch Justin at all.

“Just as well, really...”

He drew a sharp breath as the ship’s systems came online, awakening his senses to all the stimuli around him. He could hear the faint voices of the SL and the deckhands high above him on the mooring floor, taste the thin film of lubricant slathered along the cockpit canopy edges, and even see a cockroach scurrying across the discolored metal wall 100 meters in front of him.

He could also smell the stink of each and every human scurrying around the launch bay. They moved like insects, but at least the cockroach's scent was evanescent, and its movements inaudible. These people were noisy, mobbing his ears with their chaotic chatter. Even their background bodily functions were offensive to him: they were all a messy and disjointed mob, their warm bodies bathed his thermally-attuned eyes with boisterous color, clouding his vision with light pollution.

But, as Connor said, these people were his kin, were they not?

But am I my brothers' keeper?

It's true that duty to kin is the strongest bond possible, second only to duty to blood. Justin has no blood-relations in this fight, though: only the men and women around him.

Who treat me as if I were a leper...

Still: he had no other dog in this fight.

"Except for you..." Justin stroked the edges of his main console with a delicate finger. His eyes wandered all around the cockpit cabin.

"You beautiful abomination, you..."

He bowed his head and closed his eyes.

My hairs are counted, and my toes numbered.

Then— after drawing in two deep breaths— his eyes shot open and he curled his lips into a snarl:

"Now, touch me."

II.

The *Dragonslayer Squadron* thundered across the broken, irregular spine of the Andes Mountains, nearly invisible beneath a film of pitch-black snow. The convoy was an impressive sight in the dark night. A dozen azure flames tore through the night sky like dragonflies' tails.

Chenine kept a steady six-kilometer interval between herself and the Strikers. Per her orders she maintained absolute radio silence and neglected any of the normal courteous gestures one Raiden team might give another during flight. Twice she noticed one of the pinpoint on her starboard— perhaps the *Silene's Girdle*— launch into a playful barrel roll and hover on its belly like a mischievous dolphin, and even once the point ship firewalled their afterburner, sending brilliant purple plumage out behind their vessel, but Chenine ignored all the gestures of goodwill. Aryl Wraith's gag-order was stern, and he absolutely forbade her from acknowledging *anyone* during this mission short of her own squadmates— the pilot of the *Platonic Love* and Captain Rayne— who were at the moment 4,500 kilometers and 150 million kilometers, respectively, apart from her.

The dull mountains below grew smaller. Chenine had a hard time discerning geographical features through the black night sky— even with her link-enhanced senses— but the *Chaste Gazer's* powerful sonar signal echoed in her head. It exploded through her eyes with sharp contours and shapes and she could see a very deep valley far up ahead, absolutely dead in the night and covered with the toothpick-like ruins of felled skyscrapers and chewed-up roadwork.

Rappa-rappa-rappa-rappa...

Her right leg quivered against the main console. Chenine stilled it with her hand. She switched on her flight recorder.

“I saw a vulture in the sky.”

“293 hours ago the Stickney Crater listening post at Phobos detected the concentrated Active-System Scan of a large adult Bydo Mass. It presented itself well inside Elliptical-Orbit IV with extraordinary relative velocity compared to the terrestrial planets. Initial estimates predicted its transition through EO III and overlap into Venus’s orbit, but 37 hours after its appearance the Mass collided with comet 20D/Westphal. This impact event caused catastrophic damage to the Mass’ superstructure, but also radically altered its trajectory and increased its velocity. Based on new trajectory forecasts, as well as the Mass’ own limited efforts to steer itself in our direction, it is now predicted to pass within 1.25 million kilometers of Earth: by far the closest any Mass has come to the planet since the Cataclysm of the False Moon.”

The girl cast her blue eyes off to one side and blinked; her pale skin was highlighted by the warm red glow of instrument panels.

“Because of these circumstances the bogey is being called— somewhat incorrectly— the ‘Slingshot Mass’.”

As a matter of fact, that’s a horrible name...

Chenine shook her head: this really wasn’t the time to editorialize about people who misuse astrodynamical terms.

Captain Rayne seemed to enjoy calling it a ‘Slingshot’, anyway; anything to make reference to a weapon, I suppose. Well: she’d probably say I’m being anal-retentive.

“But then I might say she’s a philistine battleaxe...”

Chenine smiled to herself.

“She wouldn’t even know what a ‘philistine’ is, don’t you think?”

Her eyes popped open: Chenine hadn’t said these last words. The little voice that *did* say them belonged to a second speaker, sitting off to one side of the cockpit, perched atop the starboard navigation controls in a tattered pink nightgown and clutching a creepy stuffed bunny rabbit between pallid stick arms.

Chenine bit her lip and leered at the phantom child. For her part the girl blinked back at her through the swampy darkness of the cockpit— her myrtle eyes big but expressionless— as if she knew how Chenine would react to her presence.

How perceptive of her...

“Perceptive? No. It’s just that I’m not unintelligent.” The child said.

“You’re also not *real*, and you’re not of any consequence to me at all.”

The girl stared down at the misty green eyes of her bunny rabbit and blinked once again. When she returned Chenine’s gaze her ashen lips were perched in discomfort:

“You say that I’m not.”

“Yes: I do.”

“But I...” the girl’s fragile lips quivered. “I think I disagree...”

The Ketoni girl’s porcelain face contorted into a snarl. She lunged at the kiddie with a gloved hand; the child vanished— quivering into nothingness like smoke on the wind— even before she could make contact.

Chenine bowed her head, drew a breath, and then finished her roll-out report:

“Regardless of its name, the new Mass is expected to launch one Incarnation Wave Assault as it passes the Earth, after which any further coordinated attacks against

our planet would be ineffective because of its out-of-control trajectory: the Mass is going too fast for its own good. However, because the incoming bogeys from this assault are literally jumping off a speeding locomotive, their combined kinetic energy will be devastating.”

“The Epdin Raising Committee predicts that at the time of impact two weak spots in the web will be exposed to the assault: one in Western Greenland and one along the Chilean coastline. Satellites in this region are expected to be destroyed by the sheer glut of Fallen in the wave, and while an estimated 90-percent of all bogeys will be destroyed on account of their high-velocity impact with the planet’s surface there is enough concern about the threat posed by surviving incarnations to warrant the deployment of four Raiden squadrons to meet these threats— two in each region— in addition to this vessel: R-H-CRTS of the *Tears’ Shower Squadron*. This engagement is part of a larger scheme to combat and destroy the Mass called Operation *Ozymandian Veil*.”

Chenine’s rosy lips parted, despite her best efforts to conceal the grin. The girl had to admit: that *was* a rather good name.

“Probes have been set within the ruins of Santiago, Chile. Each of them is broadcasting a low-level, latent Active-System Scan in an attempt to lure any surviving fallen in the hemisphere directly to us. Both the *Dragonslayers* and the *Precious Metals Squadron* are operating in this theater in addition to myself, however I’m under orders from Aryl Wraith to maintain absolute independence from both teams...”

Her right leg trembled once again; Chenine had to strike it with her left foot to still it.

This is not a good idea...

She gritted her teeth: that was the phantom child’s voice lilting through her head. Chenine knew it was best to ignore the jabber, but she thought enough of the critique to answer it personally:

There’s nothing wrong with going it alone.

Isn’t there?

“It doesn’t matter whether there is or not, because I’m required to go it alone this time, and that’s all there is to it.”

The child’s answer— merely a whisper in Chenine’s head— was very quiet, like the naughty sass a disrespectful but fearful kid mouths behind an adult’s back:

I... I disagree...

III.

“Christchurch...”

“Watch your chatter over there, *Heart*.”

“She okay?”

“*Fucking* Christchurch...”

“She’s fine. Her engines are a bit maxed out on her...”

“Mine are, too. Hell: everyone’s engines are screaming. Why is she so woozy?”

“They say a link is notorious for letting people share in their ships’ pain...”

“Bloody *fucking* Christchurch!”

“Ooh: I see. Where would that pain register on her body, then?”

“Uh, I dunno. The last time I studied a machine-body homunculus was at the VR academy. Engine trouble would probably be... what: chest pain, wouldn't it?”

“Or a headache, maybe?”

“Nah: that doesn't sound right. Oh: what about the genitals? Say, Sam: is your—”

“The stomach! Engine trouble hits the stomach.” Samantha drew back in her seat and gripped her abdomen through the bulky spacesuit. She cut the snarky escorts out of the *Platinum Heart's* audio feed and turned her sensors in the general direction of Earth.

“Lookin' for kind words from the homeland, huh? You'll be there soon enough, won't you? We're heading there at 90 clicks-per-second, after all...”

These words were spoken through a pair of small lips in the darkness behind Sam's seat. She ignored the voice and instead ordered the ship's medical-support system to ramp up the kink in her guts; soon there was a wispy tube at her side, a silver syringe tip in her carotid artery and—mercifully—within seconds her intestines were a little deader.

When Sam looked up again she was met with a pair of blood-red eyes shining over a set of pointy baby teeth.

“Is that better?” The phantom child asked.

“You're blocking my view.”

The little harpy smiled. “Can I really do that? After all: I'm a hallucination.”

“That's *hallucination*, and yes: apparently you can.”

The kid looked out the cockpit window and rubbed her hands; her spiky teeth parted with an eager smile.

“You're animated, today.”

“Well: I feel that my life's really on the right ‘track’, at the moment...” The child's grin widened.

“Tch! Doubt that.”

Samantha shook the vision from her head and focused on her radio. It didn't take long for her to find something that piqued her interest. It came in on the *TSS's* private frequency:

“—hese circ—ances the bogey is being called— somewhat incorrectly— the ‘Slingshot Mass’...”

The amber-eyed woman smiled.

Let's not be so anal-retentive, Chovert...

Samantha was the point leader for her Penetration Team. She and her escorts traveled long and hard to get to the Slingshot Mass's backside; this trip included three jumps into skimland and one massive gravitational assist from Lady Venus. Now they were up to speed, and hurtling through space with the right trajectory, so it was down to a waiting game.

Samantha hated waiting.

A fortuitous Active-System Scan found her just before her cabin fever crested; she couldn't be happier about the source:

“Mi? Is that really you?”

“You know it, Sammy-girl.”

“Where'd they stick you for this fight, anyway?”

Her beau's scratchy voice came in after an annoying 30-second delay:

“Greenland, naturally. We’re staging about twenty miles off the coast, near the ruins of Old Godthab.”

“Ah. Well: *Godspeed*, then.”

“I saw your aunt out here.”

Sam blinked. “What: the *Platonic Love*, you mean?”

“Mmm. Call letters R-H-AGP?”

“That’s her, alright.”

“Seems that she was loaned out to those Scottish Crown boys, if that makes any sense...”

Samantha grinned: “Yeah, it does. Our squad’s been broken up into pieces for this engagement: I was sent after the Mass, Chovert went out to Chile, and our Yankee Y-chromosome was given his druthers. Storm’s got a major boy-crush on one of their pilots, so I’m not surprised he ended up with the Scots. They’re good hands, all in all.”

“What’s your job with the Penetrators?”

“Point.” Sam grinned. “I’m bound for the creamy nougat center. I’ll be taking on the Core *mano-a-mano*, and it’s a hell of a feeling, Mi: I gotta say.”

“Just so long as you come out again...”

“Oh, quit it. This Mass is barely holding together as it is; all the AM scans say the comet ripped apart its whole southern hemisphere. For all we know the Final Core Barrier has been exposed to space. This’ll be like shooting a handgun through a busted window.”

“Just don’t get cut on the glass, Sammy-girl...”

Their conversation got much more personal after this. Within minutes the brass called on the entire *Saltatory-Conduction Squadron* to mobilize and Miles was obligated to terminate his AS-Scan.

“Be seeing you, kid.” He said. “Is your little heart still throbbin’ for me?”

“Yeah it is, but only ‘till the end of time. Good hunting, Mi.”

“Good hunting, Sammy.”

The audio feed cut out. Samantha was alone in the cockpit for a time, her body bucking and swaying as her Raiden hurtled through space in the Slingshot Mass’s wake. They were riding a messy wave of oils and debris sloughing off the damaged Bydo creature. The rubble, and the turbulence, grew thicker with each passing minute.

Soon there was a whisper in her ear:

“‘Till the end of time’?” What’s up with that? Don’t you mean ‘ever ‘n anon’?”

“No: I didn’t—”

“You should’ve said that, ‘cause that’s really *soooo* much better, isn’t it? Say it with me: ever ‘n anon. Ever ‘n anon. It’s a pretty little phrase. Downright gorgeous, in fact! Hey: never mind that your biddy ol’ hick of a grandmother is the one who said it—”

“You’re pushing it, child...”

“—and that you changed the words ‘cause you wanted something ‘classier’...”

“*Enough!*”

She turned to face the little harpy, but was greeted with the empty darkness of her starboard cabin. Oil and debris screamed by outside, eclipsing the stars; there was no one to sass back at her. The only noise that greeted her was an escort on her ship’s scratchy radio:

“Hey: everything okay, *Heart*? Any other little, uh, ‘annoyances’ cropping up?”

Sam lay back in her seat and sighed:

“Little annoyances? Yeah: those seem to crop up ever and anon, boys.” She shook her head and closed her eyes.

Ever ‘n anon...

IV.

Tap... tap... tap... tap...

Dr. Roont lay sprawled in a chair, feet up on the polished metal desk. He gummed an unlit Caribe cigar between his lips— sucking at it as an infant would a pacifier— head tilted back in quiet ecstasy.

And if his feet remained as quiet Wraith would be a very happy man.

“Samuel, please.”

“It’s the nerves,” Roont opened one eye. “Spaceflight does that to me.”

“Tch! ‘Space.’” Wraith chuckled. “Satellite Alpha’s barely high enough above the Earth to be considered ‘orbital’.”

“Anything higher than a foot off the ground is ‘outer space’ to a man of my persuasion.”

“And perversions, hmm?” The stark green polygons on the long-range radar bathed Wraith’s face; the shadows highlighted the long, dark scar running up his left cheek.

His brow flickered as an image forced its way into his head: a cowboy, white hat and all, moseying into town atop his mount with spurs jangling against the horse’s flank. When he turned around he was met by a thin man dressed in white, immaculate in that ridiculous ‘civil administration’ uniform worn by all the Allied Military wannabes in EPDN Command.

Wraith sneered at the man and fired off a lackluster salute, all the while staring derisively at the clunky medals on his collar:

“Colonel Sabre, sir.”

“RL.” The man nodded. “The Chief Executor wanted me to make sure that your accommodations—”

“They’re fine.” Wraith stared out the conference room window, watching the Blue Marble perform its unending pirouette.

“You must be proud, being CO of the Penetration Team’s point-leader, after all, hmm?”

“Mmmm...”

The colonel squinted at Wraith’s console. “But why are you monitoring the Chilean conflict?”

“I’ve got a bird out there. That’s why.”

“Isn’t the Penetration Team’s progress more imp—”

“Thanks for checking in with us, Colonel; I’ll be sure to let the AM-proper know about your CE’s courteousness.”

When the young man didn’t turn away at once Wraith turned to face him:

“I’ll put in a good word for you as well...”

Sabre glared at Wraith, then turned on his heels and tromped out of the room, his medals jangling like spurs.

Adios, Tonto...

“There is one thing we could use, my good sir...” Roont grinned up at the man.

“That being?”

The good doctor’s smile widened:

“Coffee. Two cups, and very black.”

Sabre leered down at Roont, and then he galloped out of the room.

“That was not diplomatic.” Wraith’s grin belied the scolding.

“Hey: we demanded a private room to practice these ‘perversions’ of ours, didn’t we? Anyway, with that white dress suit I assumed he was the *maitre d’* up here.”

Wraith again focused on the monitor.

“By the way, thanks for taking my suggestion to heart, Wraithie.”

“About using Samantha Rayne, you mean? It wasn’t supposed to be her turn.”

The RL shook his head. “Honestly, tell me which situation bothers you more, Samuel: having the *Platonic Love* get within arm’s length of a Core, or having *Justin Storm* get within arm’s length of a Core?”

“Both, and either.”

“He really frightens you, doesn’t he? How pathetic.”

“It’s his brain that frightens me, Wraithie, and if that doesn’t frighten you, even just a little bit, I think you need a CAT scan.”

Wraith didn’t speak for a time. Then he said: “Justin Storm knows about the R-H’s, by the way. He knows what they are, what they *really* are.”

There was another pause before Roont answered.

“How interesting.” The doctor’s voice was noncommittal.

“If he knows, then Miss Chovert certainly knows as well.”

“And Lady-ERS?”

Wraith shook his head. “If Samantha knew about it then *we’d* know, that’s for sure. She’s certainly not the frightened chick that the other two are.”

“So they don’t care, then?”

“That, or the addiction to their sensation-links nullifies the issue.” The RL shrugged and scratched his chin. “It’s good to be a Raiden pilot, Samuel: I don’t think they really want to wake up from Wonderland just yet.”

Neither spoke for quite some time. Roont’s tapping foot and the tinny beeps from Wraith’s console overlapped in syncopated rhythm: a nervous soundtrack. Finally Roont changed the subject:

“Anyway, the *Heart* should prove a far superior test of Antipathy. Think of it: we’re talking about Core-to-Core transmission of the viral genome. It should be smoother than that business out at Ganymede, anyway.”

Wraith nodded. “That was like hooking a garden hose up to a fire hydrant, wasn’t it?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

Roont took the cigar out of his mouth: “On which one— CRTS or the Core— is the garden hose and which is the fire hydrant in your little analogy.”

“You overestimate the Hybrids’ power.”

“Not as much as you underestimate them, Wraith. Not *nearly* as much.”

“Well, I refuse to underestimate the power of a Core, at least. Getting rid of the *Platinum Heart* ASAP isn’t the worst idea in the world.”

“Unless that little bitch of a bird comes through like its mother.” Roont looked up at the RL, his glasses burning with reflected light. “Speaking of which: when does the axe fall on Little Miss CRTS, anyway?”

“Ten minutes ago.” Wraith smiled. “The fighting in Chile has really heated up. From what I can tell there’s at least three times the number of incarnations coming through the web than we predicted, though I can’t say why. The *Precious Metals* and *Dragonslayers* are running joint ops down there with conventional units, and they’ve just fallen back out of the ruins: they’re regrouping.”

“And what does that do for us?”

“Miss Chovert has not joined them.” Wraith stared out the window; the muted reflection of Earth glittered like a set of gray stones in his eyes. “Nor will she ever. And by the time she realizes she’s all alone out there it’ll be far too late.”

“A tragic breakdown in communication? Tch! Base-10 command’ll give you hell for that. The Lieutenant did ask to run tactical support for CRTS, didn’t she?”

“And I’ll be sure to tell Laura she was correct. I’ll bring it up when we attend Miss Chovert’s memorial service. Burial at sea sounds good, don’t you think?”

Roont shook his head. “But they’ll never find heads nor tails of that beautiful piece of tail, I’m afraid.”

Wraith leaned forward and entered new coordinates for the *Chaste Gazer*, each keystroke slow and deliberate: he sent her to the dead center of Old Santiago.

“I’m aware of that.” He said. “I suppose the funeral will be empty casket.”

“Not emptier than your heart, though?” Roont laughed.

The RL scratched at his face, then caught himself and returned all attention to his monitors:

“No: it’d be fuller than that, I’d think.”

V.

Jen didn’t really start feeling uncomfortable until the sweat came.

“What the hell, what the hell, what the hell?”

The Lieutenant sat beside her, already bathed in perspiration. Her fingers frittered across the main console faster than Jen’s eyes could process.

“Where are we, Miss Hayle?” Commander Faught paced back and forth before the Ops window, the sun sparking off his white moustache.

“Jen!” Laura barked.

“Sensors are reset: we’re back online.”

Scott Tabris horned in on Jen’s monitor: “It’s the Western Wastes, I think: 200 kilometers outside city limits!”

The Commander threw his white cape behind him and snarled:

“Out amongst the scrap-yard skyscrapers, huh? Well: I want corvettes, I want frigates, and I want half the Korangers out ahead of them.”

Laura jammed her headset on and got in touch with Plinshine about the deployment. She looked up only once:

“What are the specific orders for the engagement, sir?”

The Commander's wrinkled face contorted like cracked granite. "Tell them to get to the source of that broadcast and rain down on it."

"And by that..."

"*Sterilize* the whole god-damned place! Orders are to drop half-a-kiloton as soon as they get in range."

Jen looked up quickly, beads of sweat flying from her nose.

Laura remained more composed. "We'll need codes for that, Commander."

He grunted and clambered up the stairs to his office:

"I'll enter those presently."

The ensign spoke up as soon as Faught was out of earshot:

"We're gonna nuke the Western Wastes?"

Scott sneered as he worked his own console. "We're gonna kill those whacko fuckers is what we're gonna do, Jen. I, for one, feel pretty good about that, don't you?"

Laura got off the horn with Plinshine and wagged her head:

"Those AS-Scans they're using—and all the radio signals laced inside them—they're stimulating the Slingshot Mass's reproductive instincts: it's getting horny as hell. The damn thing's Autistic-Withdrawal Factor was twice the normal levels, and this Incarnation Wave Assault is *triple* a normal Mass's efforts, despite all that damage to its superstructure. Goddamnit!"

"Those bastards made the Earth look like a bitch in heat," Scott growled.

"Or a table leg ripe for humping, at least." Jen said.

"How the fuck do these people even know how to *do* these things?" Laura took a moment to wipe her forehead and rub her eyes, and then she set to work delegating tasks. Jen was ordered to reboot any systems that were still affected by the jamming signal they'd been hit with.

This was slow going, but within thirty minutes she had the last monitor under her control, and with a pleased sneer she wiped the screen clear of the image that had been burned into it for the past hour: a crudely-drawn carousel—empty and rotating on its axis—with the word 'UNITY' superimposed in the center.

Word soon came in that the pirate radio tower broadcasting Unity's modified Active-System Scan had been annihilated, though there didn't appear to be any personnel in the area.

"It was run by remote." Laura said. "Most likely all the other ones they're using are, too."

"Guess we won't be racking up a body count today." Scott shook his head.

"Should we expect incoming?" Jen asked.

"No," Laura said. "The damage is done. Those broadcasts were meant to make the Mass get 'frisky', and they did just that. We're not in any danger..."

"But the combat teams out at Greenland and Chile are gonna take it in the shorts." Scott gripped his head. "They weren't expecting the Fallen to come down in such numbers."

"So what about Justin and Chenine?"

"We were expecting a drizzle, Jen, and we're getting a maelstrom: right now they're both going through absolute hell, I'd imagine."

Faught returned soon after with orders from Allied Command: all base resources were to go into tracking this latest attack from Unity. It wasn't easy for the staff to shift

their gears so suddenly, but in truth there was nothing anyone at Base-10 could do for their Raiden pilots at the moment, and Sven Wraith was monitoring his ships from Satellite Alpha anyway, so their course of action was quite clear: turn all sights on Kenneth McCaul and his goons.

They had precious little to go on though, and after several hours of unproductive sensor analysis and guesswork the Lieutenant gave Jen a short break.

“Take a shower,” she smiled. “You kinda stink.”

“Pots ‘n kettles, ma’am.” Jen sneered back at the brunette.

The ensign got out of sight of Command Ops’ hot zone, unzipped her collar and pulled off her wrist cuffs then quietly slipped into an unused workstation. She toyed with the system for a few minutes until she got access to the satellite grid.

“I though I smelled a hacker in the system.” Scott surprised her. “For god’s sake, learn to cover your tracks, girl. I don’t think you’re nearly as smart as you think, Jen.”

“Maybe not, but I am more concerned about our Typers than you.”

“Don’t count on it; why do you think I’m here, nimrod?” Tabris slid into the seat beside her. “So what’re you picking up?”

The ensign shook her head: “Chile is a jumbled mess: I can’t make heads or tails of it. And I’m getting nothing from Greenland...”

“Describe ‘nothing’.”

“Nothing as in ‘nil’: zero. There’s not a functional relay station within a hundred miles of the combat zone near Godthab: someone turned off all the lights...”

“What: everything? That’s not possible! It would take a thousand legions of incarnations to rub out the network like that.”

“Or a bloody-fucking-marvelous electromagnetic pulse: look at all the ambient radiation numbers we’re getting from the relay posts.”

“That heat in the ocean? So the seawater outside the zone is contaminated...”

Scott played with the numbers in his head until he had an estimate of the radiological magnitude: “Fifty centigrays absorption? And what: that would have to be gamma radiation, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, but what puts out that much raw energy, huh? What in the world is going on out in the combat zone?”

Tabris shook his head, although there was a definite pallor creeping over his face:

“I dunno, Jen. Christ: the devil only knows...”

VI.

Chenine yelped.

No, it wasn’t really a yelp.

Her screams were more a whimper at this point, or better yet a mewling: her throat was dry and caked with salt, and her tongue as blistery as sandpaper. Sweat curled down her lip and she tried to swallow, to get some liquid down her throat, but the girl’s neck merely twitched with each attempt. Her body went into another spasm: arms, legs and head shaking uncontrollably. Each and every muscle in the girl’s broken, torn body cried out.

Chenine’s right eye was gone, squished into a sticky mess running down her cheek. It complimented the left side of her body, where she was missing a leg at the knee.

Deep, serrated puncture wounds dotted her back from the base of her spine to her buttocks; her rent lungs heaved with labored breaths as they filled with blood—

“Rrrrrgh!”

The girl wagged her head. She became nauseous, and then she vomited, but when she opened her eyes once again the macabre illusion had passed: her body *was* a sorry sack of quivering flesh encased in sweat, and she did have— at the very least— a large cut running down her right temple, but otherwise she was intact.

For what it's worth...

She was suffering mentally. It was her Raiden that suffered physically.

The *Chaste Gazer's* right sensor array was gone, blown apart by some well-aimed cannon fire launched from a Death Cap Opie. The lower aileron on her port side was shorn clean off. The ship's beautiful opal fuselage, now little more than a scorched network of exposed metal, was marred with deep and ugly puncture wounds, each one bleeding oil and coolant and anything else that might have been nicked by the blades.

She was alone, now. Those large, cumbersome *Dragonslayers* were all gone, as were the nimble little Raidens of the *Precious Metals Squadron*. There was nothing in the ruins of Santiago but a hoard of Bydo: legion upon legion upon legion of incarnations. All that and one very crippled, very battered little Dancer-clone.

She could not escape her pursuers, and there was no way she could reach the refuge of the other squadrons.

A rabbit has a better chance of slipping through a snare...

Or, better yet, a hangman's noose: the *Chaste Gazer* dipped, slowly at first, then more quickly until the ship's shattered nose-cone was pointed down towards the ground.

The cabin bucked with a regular rhythm as all the guts of the ship sloughed apart, venting steam and fluid in labored spurts.

Gunga...kunga...gunga...

Chenine's heart also thumped with a regular rhythm: its erratic beating gave was to a measured cadence to match her ship's own death throes.

Pulse... pulse... pulse...

She closed her eyes and her lips quivered, weak:

“*Je... l'arrêterais... seulement... si je pourrais.*”

A forest of metal and ash lay all along the ground; the *Chaste Gazer* plummeted towards this ruinous cradle of twisted steel.

No: that's not a cradle, you poor little pop-tart: it's something else...

It was truly a sight to behold: the collision was almost perfectly head-on.

The ship struck the ruins going slightly less than the speed of sound. The cockpit disintegrated, collapsed on itself and then ballooned out to either side; debris exploded from both sides of the *Gazer*.

Chenine didn't go out the side of the vessel: her body went forward.

She was stripped out of her seatbelts like a piece of wheat pulled into a thresher. Chenine flew head-over-heels into the refracted crystal canopy; it shattered under the weight of her back (crushing two of her metallic vertebra) and she continued forward, losing no momentum at all. A sudden, dazzling tingle enveloped her entire body as the canopy shards bisected her spine at the small of her back and the nape of her neck.

Her body flew beyond the carcass of the *Chaste Gazer* and out in the open air; Chenine felt as if she were moving in slow motion, spiraling through the sky like a bullet. In any other circumstance it would have been considered the ultimate pirouette.

Actually, in a way, it was.

It was the perfect requiem for a Dancer pilot, she thought.

Not knowing what else to feel at the moment, Chenine summarized her plight with a characteristically succinct expression:

I'm— I'm finished.

She sailed on for perhaps another two seconds; then something happened.

The pressure started at her leg: a tug so violent that it sent her whole body in a parabolic arc towards the ground. This impossible motion continued: Chenine's body swung up and around in a huge circle. That tingling in her limbs, then her trunk, and then her neck, intensified until she was sure that a swarm of locusts had settled on her skin.

Her back exploded with pain: merciless fire crackled up and down her spine. She screamed and flailed her arms wildly. The feeling of motion lessened.

Soon her body came to a full stop.

Chenine opened her eyes.

A burning light emanated from the *Gazer's* corpse, embedded in that tangled metal forest. Half the airframe was sloughed off like a snake's skin, and there was something beneath it. It was something weird.

It was something pulsing.

A humongous black cord had her at the thighs, piercing her tattered suit as if it were saran wrap. Where the cord ended and the girl began was anyone's guess.

Chenine, for one, couldn't tell.

But in the wreckage of that cockpit, in what was left of her cabin, the most striking sight appeared: a pale little body, translucent nightgown and creepy stuffed bunny doll in twig arms, faced Chenine, complimented by a pair of electric green eyes.

The child made a declaration: stern and resolute but in the faintest of whispers. Chenine heard this voice as clearly as if the kid were right up against her ear:

"I disagree."

VII.

The military's best estimates claimed that half the Mass' superstructure was 'significantly deformed'— as they euphemistically put it— by its little run-in with 20D/Westphal. Even for a euphemism, this turned out to be a gross understatement.

The *Zona Introverda*— that misty Active-System Scan field that swirls around a regular Bydo Mass like a chrysalis of vapor— was wholly absent on the thing's trailing edge. Beneath this was a hurricane: a chaotic but strangely beautiful and ordered storm of liquid and vapor Nostrum, roiled off the Mass's black ocean after the comet's impact.

The Penetration Team came up on the Mass' rear end with their retrorockets firing uninterrupted for a full hour as they struggled to match velocity. Sam's face was contorted in a sneer as the *Platinum Heart* rattled like a tin can trailing a car.

They entered the black hurricane about an hour later.

The pressure on Sam's ship was unbearable. No, scratch that: the pressure on Samantha *herself* was unbearable. Any modern Raiden is capable of surviving a little

over 1000 atmospheres of pressure: almost good enough for a trip down to Earth's Challenger Deep and back, if they were rated for underwater operations, which they aren't.

Samantha, however, wasn't even 'rated' for shallow sea diving, let alone the incredible tingles that crept all over her body as she experienced this runaway plunge into the abyss. She could only cope by dropping her devotion, and even though she got these numbers down to the single digits that quivering in her bones still lingered.

The *Heart* held back from its escorts while the Strikers cut a swathe for her. There was no organized greeting in this black hell: only bits and pieces of flesh and Bydo-tech spiraled about in the haze. Some were in more-or-less working order (like the jaw and right wing of a Fledermaus Opie) while many others were mere wreckage in the endless debris field (like the shattered face of a Ferryman which, Sam wouldn't be too proud to admit, nearly caused her to pee herself when it roared past their formation).

There were all manner of dead or dying incarnations in this place. The bodies of the Opies bobbed and weaved around in the murkiness, surrounded by lesser incarnation spinning about like moons in silent orbit; Sam couldn't see very far in any direction (and she was not nearly devoted enough to receive any translated visual data from her ship) but the macabre scene still made an impression on her.

"Poor devils: they don't have a cairn in the world..."

"What's that, *Heart*?"

She smiled. "Floating gravestones. Gotta love the view, right?"

Her escorts laughed at the quip. Sam herself let loose with a chuckle, but something odd sounded in her head a second later, ringing like a distant iron bell:

No, that's not true: this is not a grave, you cutie battleaxe: it's something else...

For a moment Sam got the sensation of pointy baby-teeth moving along her ear, and then the sensation was gone.

The intrusion was enough to jolt her back into a very dour mood.

The Strikers had little trouble cutting through the squall, especially given their sophisticated sensors. They fired intermittently, seemingly at random, but this gunfire was consistently followed by the shattered wreckage of some incarnation as it hurtled through their midst: dead and exposed. These Strikers were certainly worth their salt; Sam was reluctant to allow a pair of 'dumbbells' into her team, but in retrospect that override order from Allied Command was most wise.

"You see them clinging to that Ferryman's head on your three, *Heart*?"

Blood-red pinpoints, bright as laser pointers, dotted the Moai-headed corpse in groups of two.

"Cancer crabs." She grinned. "What a wonderful sight!"

If those spelunking parasites were floating around up here in the atmosphere then there was a *definite* loss of cabin pressure in the Mass.

The Nostrum hurricane ended over a 20-mile-wide trench, where it gave way to a tangled forest of reeds and vines.

"Adipose forest." Sam noted. "Bloody *fucking* Christchurch: the *Pellucida* is just a stone's throw away, boys!"

They descended through the cavern, into a blackness so pure and primal that Sam could feel the hair on her scruff standing at attention. It was devoid of any sights, smells or sounds, and she felt rather blind, deaf and dumb until she coaxed her head back into

the link. As her devotion rose, so too did her awareness of the structures, and of the *things*, all around them.

Needless to say, this didn't settle any of her hairs.

A shadow eventually fell over her shoulder; the red-eyed child was sitting on the starboard console, chin on her knee, staring straight forward and—for the first time Sam could remember—she did not appear interested in conversation.

However—and for perhaps the first time ever—Samantha was.

“Why do you like it, anyway?”

“Hmmm?” The kid lazily craned her neck in Sam's direction.

“Ever and anon'. That phrase. Why do you like it?”

The child cocked her head, perplexed, and then a chilling Cheshire cat grin spread across her lips. Those young, blood-red eyes sparked mischievously.

“No.” She said.

“No? ‘No’ what?”

“You just wanna talk ‘cause you're all jittery and you've got nothing better to do.” The ratty child leaned back against the bulkhead and put her hands behind her head. “Well, I'm feelin' cold as a cucumber, so there.”

Sam narrowed her eyes: “That's ‘cool’, for one, and for two: *why* are you so nonplussed when I'm so...”

“Jittery.” The girl repeated.

“*Stressed.*”

“Whatever.” The child toyed with the set of misty green balls dangling off one oversized boots. “I guess we're two different kinds of people, aren't we?”

That, or I'm a certifiable schizophrenic...

“Doubt that.” The kid shook her head in response to Sam's thought.

The team thundered on, descending deeper and deeper into the darkness. The writhing adipose forest gave way to dead skyscrapers of metal and bone, some many miles wide at their thickest and teeming with cancer crabs. After this there was the cold, empty space between the superstructure and the Final Core Barrier.

Sam aimed to steady her nerves:

“At least there's no welcoming committee.” She noted.

When she felt eyes on her she turned and faced the child: the little freak was leering at her with an unsettling sneer, her pointy teeth parted.

Sam had to swallow before she spoke up:

“What? What is it, huh?”

The girl leaned back down against the console and shrugged:

“There are seven No-See-Ums gliding right outside this window, you know...”

She tapped the crystal canopy with one boot, very matter-of-factly, and closed her eyes.

Sam bucked in her chair at this and dove deeper into her link. She glared out the canopy, squinting like mad (which is about as helpful as shaking a Polaroid photograph) until she picked up on the *Heart's* spectral displays. She cycled them in her head until, quite suddenly, she picked out seven bright shapes in the darkness beside her: all of them quite large, and all of them bearing the most graceful swan's necks.

One of those heads turned, very slowly, to face her Raiden. Its ‘beak’ parted in the beginning of a vicious scream.

Holy fu—

There was a noise like a freight train, faint at first, growing as it rushed forward out of the dark center of the Mass. That sound exploded across the void and culminated in a terrific nova of light: a shaft of energy enveloped the whole of the *Heart's* starboard airspace, blinding Samantha momentarily and knocking her noggin out of the link.

When she opened her eyes there was darkness once again, but two things were different: both the phantom child inside the cockpit and the swan demons on the outside were gone without a trace.

One of Sam's escorts came on the line:

"What in the holy hell was *that*?"

She exhaled. "I... I don't know."

Sam leaned back in her chair, her dry lips taut. Only the phantom girl's voice sang in her head:

Looks like you've got freeplay on this one, don't you?

She couldn't explain the behavior from the Mass' Core, but there was one silver lining: the child did not appear at any other time on their way to the creature's innards, and that was at least a small comfort.

The ships slunk into a trench hidden beneath the skeletal forest. Further on this pathway narrowed to a tunnel of less than fifty feet across, dominated by swaying reeds. At the end of this a wall of sparkling crystal bubbled and throbbed.

The Strikers took up their positions on either side of the *Pellucida* and then, with a belch of silver fire from her afterburner, Samantha drove the *Platinum Heart* forward with breakneck acceleration. The scant air in the Mass' interior crackled together like thunder as she broke the sound barrier, slammed into the *Pellucida* headlong and shattered the filmy net apart like a spray of blue sea foam.

The ship accelerated even faster once it was beyond the shield; behind it the corridor was already collapsing in on itself as it sensed a piece of 'backwash'— that being the *Heart*— in the pipeline. After all: it'd be a pity for any Bydo Mass to end up choking to death, wouldn't it?

Wouldn't it, though...

Sam arched an eyebrow. For now she ignored that comment. She needed to devote all of her energy on maneuvering, anyway. After following the many twists and turns of the collapsing corridor she crossed the Final Core Barrier, after which there were no more defense mechanisms left at the Mass's disposal: it was defenseless—

Not all 'defense mechanisms' involve cave-ins and tripwire, you know...

—and at the mercy of a most pernicious little Trojan horse, indeed.

And some horses have a nasty little habit of throwing their riders, don't they?

The *Heart* burst through a slimy mucous vesicle and entered a 200-meter-wide chamber, completely circular, bearing a twisted column of light shimmering in the center like a burning bush.

Sam angled her *Raiden's* nose towards the center of the Core, crossed her hands over her chest, then swiftly flung them to either side, jamming down her control rod panels. The four rods on her nose jutted forward like piledrivers and sent her white-hot Force Orb spiraling out from the ship like a missile. It impacted the Core's center and sat there, embedded in its white bubbly skin like a pimple on an angel's ass.

She smiled. “That’s an interesting analogy, Sammy-girl...” The Captain again crossed her arms and braced for electrical buildup: her wave cannon was primed and nearly ready to charge.

“Well, much as I’d hate to ream an angel...”

Her grin widened as she felt electricity flow around the *Platinum Heart*.

This would be surprisingly easy: Sam was already deciding where she’d make Mi take her for their victory dinner. The *Coeur Sanglant* would certainly fit the bill, though she didn’t know how well the bill would fit into Mi’s bank account—

Thunk.

Sam gasped.

The medical tube tore clean into her neck. The needle sunk into her left carotid and, within a millisecond, she couldn’t feel the injection site at all.

A millisecond after that she couldn’t feel anything else, either.

Her vocal chords lost their tension; Sam’s gasp faded into nothing. Her body slumped down in its chair and her head drooped to one side. Only her brilliant golden eyes retained any semblance of control, and they bulged with a mixture of both surprise and panic.

She felt something at her side; the phantom child slowly crawled up into her lap, red eyes shining with malicious joy, and craned her head close to Sam’s. She cupped the Captain’s cheek in one hand and patted it twice, a grin spreading over her face. She winked at the disabled woman, and then swiveled around to face the crystal canopy.

Outside, a mere 100 meters away, the Core of the Slingshot Mass blossomed with yellow light. Noises flooded the cockpit (whether they were being broadcast on the radio or simply forced through the ship like vibrations through a tuning fork Sam didn’t know). The noises were strange: like the scream of a humpback whale pierced by harpoons.

The child looked back at Sam, amused.

“Oh, please: you don’t even know what that would sound like.”

Sam tried to blink as she surveyed the child (though she couldn’t) and strained to look at her through the rising light: the girl was now naked, hands on her crossed legs as she leaned forward, all her focus on the Bydo Core. After several seconds of listening to the strange creaks and groans all around them the girl nodded her head.

“Yes... that’s right.”

Sam’s hearing faded in and out with her vision: there was an undercurrent to the little girl’s words. It was something guttural, akin to the noises broadcast by the Core, but much higher in pitch.

“Of course!” The girl spread her arms to both sides after listening to the Core’s blather. This call-and-response went on:

“No: not that I know of... yes: I understand... yes... yes...”

The girl looked down at her lap and snarled:

“No: I can’t. I don’t have—I don’t have *something*: I don’t know what, exactly...” She looked up: “But I *am* self!”

There was silence, and then more creaks and groans from the Core.

The girl looked up: “Y—you can? You can show me?”

For an instant, just one instant, her eyes changed into a different color, but they became red again almost immediately. The imp got up on her knees; Sam’s paralyzed body still registered the pain as the kid’s bony kneecaps dug into her thighs.

“Then *show me*.” The child demanded.
 More silence, and then more bleating.
 The child looked over her shoulder at Samantha, then back at the Core.
 “A puppet.” She answered. “Yes... that’s right, she did... no... yes...”
 The child lingered on a particular question: she faced Sam again, stared down her body and stopped at her lower abdomen.
 “No: she’s like me... that’s right...”
 Silence.
 And then more blathering from the Core.
 The child’s lips perched. She looked back at Samantha, then to the Core:
 “Is that necessary?”
 The Core’s screams intensified, and its color rose.
 “Really?” The girl blinked. “But... but why?”
 Those same noises repeated themselves, verbatim.
 “I can understand that, but—”
 The noises sounded once again, strong enough to make the whole cockpit quiver.
 The imp swung around to face Samantha and put her hand on the pilot’s forehead. She pushed back her head, exposing Sam’s slender throat. As the child manipulated her body Sam’s vision swam: at times the girl’s childish limbs were replaced by what appeared to be strange black tendrils, like wisps of smoke turned solid. Just as suddenly, though, there were tiny fingers, elbows and arms before her once again.
 She gripped Sam’s throat with one hand and squeezed. Sam felt something press into her flesh.
 And it was almost certainly *not* a little kid’s hand.
 Sam’s breathing became labored; she glared at the child first with anger, and then with panic. Her brow curled in a gesture of helplessness, a pathetic sight for such a proud soldier. Her golden eyes became pleading orbs, dilated to maximum. After a few seconds she was openly begging with everything imaginable except her voice.
 The child twisted her head in discomfort:
 “I’m... sorry... cutie...”
 Her grip intensified.
 “...but you... you *are* a battleaxe, you know...”
 Sam’s chest bucked involuntarily as her lungs and heart went haywire. The medical support monitors in the cabin cried out with alarms, but the little girl snapped her free fingers, quieting them without effort.
 “And battleaxes get broken all the time...”
 The tight fabric of Sam’s suit quivered as her heartbeat crested.
 “We’re all just creatures of instinct: you’ve got your own instincts, and I’ve got *my* own instincts...”
 The pilot’s skin grew white; her eyes became foggy and distant.
 “Yes... I do... ‘cause I am self...”
 A silver drop of liquid formed on the corner of Samantha’s eye.
 “...I am...”
 The liquid blossomed, became heavy and slid away from the socket.
 “...I *am*...”
 The teardrop rolled down her cheek, leaving a trail of glittering water in its wake.

The child bowed her head.

“...I...”

Her pressure on Sam’s throat subsided.

The Core sounded once again, loud enough to shake the *Platinum Heart* like a washing machine. Unlike the previous times, though, it did not stop howling right away.

The girl’s head shot up; she glared at Sam with furious eyes and screamed at her: “F— *Fuck!*”

She stabbed Samantha quickly, faster than the pilot could process. She tore into her neck with animal fury, powerful enough to send a train of blood bubbling from the wound. Samantha felt that wound.

She soon felt a great many other things.

The Core outside screamed with rage: that golden pillar at its center crackled with electric fire: it began to hum ominously. The noise sounded like a freight train.

The little girl whipped her head about and snarled like a wolf.

Two seconds later a wall of blue fire exploded from the rear of the *Heart* and sailed through the Core chamber, arcing about like an impulse across a nerve. It struck the Core head-on with enough power to dislodge it from the branches holding it in place. It fell to one side, and the white-hot beam of energy it threw at the *Heart* missed its mark by a matter of feet.

By this time Sam was up in her seat. She gripped her throat reassuringly: it had been run-through with a second medical tube. She sat there, like a deer in the headlights, staring down at the listing Core.

The demonic child’s voice growled inside her head:

Anytime, cupcake...

Then the kid was at Sam’s ear:

“Ever ‘n anon, maybe?”

Samantha spotted her Force Orb, still sticking out of the Core’s body, angled her nose and charged her wave cannon. She fired, and the shot landed true on the Orb. The resulting explosion sent the *Heart* screaming back out of the Mass like a scraper through a gas pipeline.

The *Platinum Heart* emerged from the *Zona Pellucida* with a violent explosion tearing in its wake. Her escorts were already up to speed, and together they raced through the decaying Mass with flames licking at their tails.

Sam was still dumbfounded. She piloted her vessel on muscle memory alone. At the moment all the higher functions of her brain were on vacation. She didn’t even pay attention to the little phantom behind her seat, sulking in the dark rear compartment: knees against her chest, head in her knees, and lip in her teeth.

...*fuck.*

VIII.

Jen sat back in her chair and took a lip in her own teeth.

“That’s kinda promising...”

Laura looked up long enough to check the monitor and shake her head.

“The Sea of Japan angle? No: we’ve nixed that idea. All the extrapolated data points end up in the water, not on dry land. It’d be hard for Unity to operate underwater, wouldn’t it? It’s just another signal relay station, Jen. Keep at it.”

“But my refined data’s trending east from all that. Like...” she scanned her map and shrugged, “I dunno, this place off the mainland: Okushiri Island, maybe—”

“Lieutenant!” A technician across Ops caught Laura’s attention. “We’ve got incoming.”

“What: bogeys?”

“No, ma’am: an R-Type. A dancer.”

Jen looked up: “The *Chaste Gazer*?”

“No, it’s not anyone from the *Tears’ Shower Squadron*.” The technician fumbled with his console. “And it’s not answering on any channel: I think the ship’s sensor array is damaged.”

“Is there any other possibility?”

“Well it’s not a mimicker, and the only other likelihood is that the person in the saddle doesn’t know their squad’s communication codes.”

“Tch! That’s not likely. You got call numbers?”

“R-D-AGX.”

Laura looked around Ops: “Where the hell is Tabris?”

“He’s trying to get in touch with the subcommander.” Jen answered. “But your incoming ship is the *Silver Halide*, if you want to know.”

The Lieutenant squinted at Jen. “Really? You sure?”

“Positive.”

“What the hell is a *Precious Metals* Raiden doing out here?”

Donald Plinshine ran past her workstation, clipboard in hand and headset to his ear:

“A better question would be ‘what the hell is R-H-AGP doing back here?’”

Laura’s brow arched. “The *Love*?”

Plinshine nodded: “Launch bay R-B just genuflected for it; the damn thing’s being pulled in by the automated retrieval system as we speak.”

Jen turned away from her console. “Why didn’t we detect it on approach? And for that matter why didn’t Justin say anything to *us* about his arrival?”

“Go see to it, Donald.” Laura ordered.

The quartermaster shook his head. “Sorry, but if I don’t ‘see’ to the 101st’s storage bays then we’ll have a whole bunch of Korangers circling the base before they can land; they’ll be back in less than an hour.”

“Eh.” Laura waved a hand. “Jen.” she pointed, “you go see to it. Find out what the hell Justin’s doing back here.”

“But my signal analysis—”

“—can wait. Justin might be hurt, or something else. Maybe he’s delirious.” She shook her head and grumbled. “That’s the only reason I can think he’d be 2500 miles away from his designated combat zone...”

Jen waited for the elevator door to close before she buried her head under her arms and screamed. Who did Laura think she was, dismissing her work so cavalierly? Jen’s analyses were spot on; they were *always* spot on. She had so much more ability to contribute than she was ever allowed to show in a pinch.

Does Hayle feel threatened? She thought. Her lips wound into a sneer as she considered it. *Maybe she thinks that if I outclass her I might leapfrog her butt altogether! And jump past four different command ranks at once?*

The ensign sighed and loosened her uniform collar. This was all nonsense. She was upset only because she knew that Laura had no real reason to drop everything and pay attention to Jen's analysis: what track record did she have working on the really big stuff, anyway?

She leaned against the back of the cabin and crossed one leg over the other, staring down at her heels and smiling at the irony.

You rebel at them when they don't let you out of the military, and then you rebel at them when they don't let you in on the big stuff. Which one is it, Jen? What do you need?

"I need respect." She answered her own question. "And I suppose I need to earn it."

The lift stopped in the R-Section of the docking ring. Jen tromped down the empty corridor, her heels clacking like woodblocks, and entered bay R-B.

It was dark in here, also. She was thrown by the atmosphere: a soupy mist roiled in the air and the humidity was unbearable. Her uniform was soaked before she'd made it even halfway to the mooring floor. She expected to find the *Platonic Love* idling on the ramp.

But when she got there she found a vessel she'd never seen before.

"What... what in the world?"

Jen's voice echoed in the bay as she stepped towards the strange shape: it was hard to see through the steam clouds, but it was nothing like that awkward silver ball that called this place home. This vessel was thin: jagged and stretched like a shard of broken glass. She circled the thing, wary of any sound or movement that might come from it, when her feet exploded in pain: a hot liquid covered the ground and was seeping into her soles. She danced out of the steaming black sludge and returned her attention to the vessel: there was some kind of light reflecting off the far wall of the bay, rising from the far side of the ship. She circled around and was met with a violent light.

It was yellow, and it was ungodly bright.

Jen started when the launch bay came out of genuflection: the mooring floor moved up and into the docking ring and the salty ocean sky outside disappeared.

The bay door locked down with a strong hydraulic hiss.

And then, slowly, ponderously, there was another noise, too: a very faint sound.

It was a voice.

Wide-eyed and tense, Jen stepped forward:

"H— hello?"

The light in the cockpit grew brighter.

"Justin?"

Two spare control rods in the corner of the launch bay bubbled over, and then exploded.

She took a step back.

That's when another noise filled the launch bay: this one much louder, much clearer, and far more disturbing.

It was also far, far less human.

IX.

“Guuu-huuuh!”

Samantha somersaulted out of the cockpit as soon as the *Platinum Heart* touched down at Mount Olivier. She landed hard on the concrete pad and scrambled in a backwards crab-walk until she was lying up against the edge of the platform, staring down a 50-foot drop-off.

Her throat undulated, and then a train of hot vomit fell down the spiky crag. When she was finished she lay supine on the cool ground, panting, with one hand over her throat.

There were too many other vessels landing all around the base for anyone to pay any heed to a sick pilot, and most of the base personnel were pointing up at the sky, marveling at a new star shining against the sunset: the wreckage of the Slingshot Mass burning away in the infinite distance.

The sight made Sam nauseous, so she looked away.

Ten minutes later a deckhand emerged from the giant earth-shelter façade of the base proper and sprinted along the cliff-face pads until he spotted the *Heart*, poked around in the cockpit, looked around the concrete pathway and finally spotted Samantha lying against the edge. He was nearly out of breath by the time he reached her:

“Captain... Samantha Rayne?”

“Yeah.” She muttered.

“From Base-10, right?”

“Right.”

“You need to check-in with your duty officer as soon as possible, ma’am. There’s been a... there’s been an ‘event’ back at your base.”

The Captain stopped panting and sat up on her elbows:

“What kind of ‘event’?”

The deckhand shook his head. “I don’t know ma’am: it was an incident—”

“I don’t need similes.” She growled.

The man sighed and crouched down beside her:

“Something’s happened, Captain, and it was something pretty bad. We don’t exactly know what. It’s enemy action to be sure, but that’s all we know, and our initial reports say that you’ve lost personnel: there’s several techies down, and at least two pilots, as well.”

