



Fool's Mate

I.

Jen's eyes wandered off her console for the last time: now she would strike.

She eyed her victim: the brunette Lieutenant stood far away on the other side of Command Ops, naive and unaware as she thumbed through a data pad, dishing out next week's duty roster for subcommander Wraith.

She wouldn't feel a thing, and she wouldn't know what hit her.

Jen swallowed her bubblegum. She smoothed down her spiky pink hair, and then she pounced. She set her teeth upon her target and then her body shivered with pleasure as warm, sweet nectar bled out the victim and into her gaping mouth. Jen ruffled her tongue in greedy motions as she fed on that stream of succulent juices...

"Since when do you drink 'Pop-Up' Cola? I thought that stuff was too sweet for you."

She flinched in surprise: the ensign almost dropped Laura's can of soda, but managed to stash it beneath the Lieutenant's workstation once again. Jen faced Scott and shrugged:

"It is too sweet, but it's also a kick in the pants. I've been getting into it ever since I started my full-shifts. I thought that being a private was hard, but now I kinda long for the good old days when I only had *one* boss to yell at me."

"But you used to tell me that Laura's such a hard-ass." He smiled.

"Yeah, well: not compared to the three new guys I've got breathing down my neck."

Scott sat on his desk. "Well, welcome to the Allied Military, ensign. And the first rule of conduct is that we don't go around stealing each other's soda."

Jen sneered: "Is there a rule about not getting captured by your own people?"

“Somewhere in the back of the book, maybe.” Scott mumbled. “Speaking of being a hard-ass, Plinshine’s been bugging me: I need that questionnaire you’ve been working on. You know, the one on peoples’ opinions about the new docking ring’s layout.”

“That’s taking forever, and each crew I talk to gets more pissed and disgruntled: *no one’s* happy with the amount of deck space they’re getting and everybody wants more. This job *sucks*.”

Tabris smiled. “It’s a glory-less, thankless, pointless job, but somebody’s gotta do it—”

“And it might as well be the new girl.” Jen scowled.

“Think of it as a ritualistic hazing.”

Jen’s scowl deepened: “Anyway, my interviews are almost done but I won’t have the report in until I get some opinions from the SJC.”

Scott bucked: “What? The SJC?”

“Yeah: *Samantha, Justin* and *Chenine*. I gotta talk to our Typers before I’m ready to hand in the report.”

“Cute.” Scott shook his head. “Well, that’s gonna be difficult right now.”

“Where are they?”

“About 150 million clicks out, or so: they were called up for inner-system patrol yesterday, so they’re jetting around EO IV.” He looked her in the eyes and smirked: “That’s Mars, for the layperson.”

“I know the jargon, twit.”

The young JG laughed, but soon he broke away from all these mock flirtations: he looked over at Dr. Roont, perched atop a desk in front of the panorama window, and glared at him with a scowl so hot it could boil water.

It made Roont shiver inside, even as he observed the gesture through the window’s reflection.

Finally Sven Wraith finished fraternizing with that brunette bimbo he called a duty officer and the two of them were off for the cold zone.

“Awfully friendly with our subordinates these days, aren’t we, ‘subcommander’?”

“Stowe it.” Wraith growled.

“I just think she’s a tad young for you, that’s all.” He laughed. “And since you gave me that same advice about Miss Chovert, I thought I’d repeat it for your benefit. Your attempts to nip my little romance with Little Miss CRTS are rather annoying—”

“Romance!” Wraith scoffed. “The only reason I gave you the ‘age’ speech is because I actually happen to know how old Miss Chovert really is.” Wraith nodded politely to Roont as the good doctor motioned him into his office. Roont locked the door behind them. “And I’d rather not have my lead scientist get himself killed because he felt compelled to act out some kind of adolescent fantasy with a viral vector.”

Roont emptied the pockets of his labcoat onto his desk. His grin widened: “Chenine Chovert is the fantasy of every swinging dick on the Blue Marble, my friend.” He stalked across the cold, grey room and approached the wall farthest away from his window. “And, as far as Angelbreath is concerned: I always use protection, Wraith.”

The doctor pressed his hand against the wall. Immediately the room’s light faded: the polarized glass windows tinted over, allowing only the faintest rays of sunlight in.

Roont's office sat catty-corner to Command Ops, and the operation center's giant windows were in sight of his, spaced apart by only 100 meters or so.

The false panels of Roont's wall parted like a sliding glass door: a small chamber rested beyond, doused in shadow. It was a sleek metal container that sloped downwards a good six feet. Six small jet holes protruded from the far side.

"What are you up to now: five baths a day?"

Roont scowled: "*Four*. Just a few minutes at a time: I need to keep myself clean—"

"Karat can be addictive, you know. There's a reason that we're *supposed* to restrict these pools to medical wards."

"Stowe it, friend." Roont slipped his labcoat off and glanced over his shoulder. "By the way, Scott Tabris seems a little frayed around the edges lately: have you noticed?"

"A product of his recent captivity, no doubt."

"Maybe. And speaking of that: are those old generals really going to leave us alone, now?"

"For the moment." Wraith shrugged. "They're listing Antipathy as a 'black op' on their books, but I get the feeling that they want nothing to do with it. They're eager to cover up tracks, too. Their biggest sticking point so far is getting rid of the *Chaste Gazer*, and I expect to solve that problem during the next Bydo assault."

"How so?"

"Miss Chovert will be going on a little suicide mission. A *real* one this time, as pointless as it is deadly." Wraith tightened his dry lips together; they sounded like leather flaps grating together. "Problem solved."

"What about the other three units, when we get them? Will the generals let us infect *those* pilots?"

"Whatever *they* decide is of no consequence to us." Wraith shook his head. His slate eyes flickered, and he put a hand to his earpiece.

Roont was in the middle of unbuckling his belt: "What's up?"

Wraith's lips puckered as if he'd bitten a lime. "There's been a change to our flight plan: the Brass is redirecting the R-H's."

"Where to?"

He held his earpiece for a moment longer, and then he growled:

"Ceresland."

"What? Why the hell would they do that?"

"I don't know."

Roont shook his head: "The research center spews out more Flash-Cancer toxin than all the other 'Thanatos Tails' combined: if the Hybrids fly into that mess head-on—"

"I'm not an idiot, Samuel." Wraith moved for the door. "I'll get them to approach from the leading side."

"Can't you cancel their mission altogether?"

Wraith pushed open the office door and shook his head: "No: these are rush orders. The *TSS* isn't supposed to be called up to service Ceres: the fact that they *are* being deployed indicates some kind of emergency." He licked his lips: "Offhand, I'd say that something very strange has happened out there..." He looked back at the doctor and sighed: "Carry on with your little bath if you like: I'll keep you posted, alright?"

II.

The golden glow of the distant sun sparkled off Samantha's facemask as she activated her flight recorder:

"It's 0445 hours on the eighteenth of October. Location is approximately 1.77 AU from the solar center, give or take ten-thousand kilometers. This is Captain Samantha Rayne, reporting for the *Tears' Shower Squadron* along with Flight Lieutenants Justin Storm—"

"Hiya." Justin interjected from his cockpit.

"—and Chenine Chovert."

"Present." Chenine's tiny whisper sounded in Sam's ear.

"Forty minutes ago we received orders to deploy to the Ceres planetoid after Earth-based communication with the research center was lost, cause unknown."

Sam puckered her lips and wrinkled her nose:

"And about twenty-five minutes ago a packet transmission came in for us from Aryl Sven Wraith. Our CO has ordered us to 'check-in' with him before we go..."

And, in the process, he's given us the independence of baby chicks...

"According to protocol we're going to check-in with our Aryl first, and then we'll see what's what over in Ceresland. Who dares wins."

Samantha's body started as she primed her Raiden for broadcast: luckily conditions in the *Platinum Heart's* Force Orb were optimal for an Active System Scan. The act of producing that kind of power surge did, however, take a toll on her body and brain.

A small, strong voice whispered in Sam's ear:

"Do you want some help with your aim there, sport?"

No. You stay out of this.

"Tch! Fine, but don't blame me when you end up talking to a Venustion instead of your people."

Sam sneered.

I said stay out of this.

"And it's pronounced 'Venusian'..."

"What was that, Sam?" Justin asked.

"Nothing, damnit: now stand by for transmission."

The *Platinum Heart* slowed and rotated around in the vacuum of space until its body was pointed towards Earth like the thin shard of a broken mirror. The Force Orb on the *Heart's* nose quickly rose in color until it glowed white-hot, and then a column of golden steam exploded from the front of the Orb. That pillar of energy cascaded through space for fifty meters, and then it faded into nothingness.

Physically, at least.

Sam's sensors immediately lit-up with activity. "We're on." She called to her squadmates. Her cockpit canopy swirled with dull color and light: soon both Justin and Chenine's faces took shape against the crystal shield.

"Bingo." She smiled triumphantly. "We've got contact with the AS-Scan, but our transmission delay is gonna be about fifteen seconds or so."

"Better than fifteen *minutes* or so." Justin noted.

Moments later the center of Sam's canopy swirled with color as well: Sven Wraith's face took shape between her squadmates' faces:

"I assume you want 'point' on this one, Samantha. What's your ETA to Ceresland, then?"

"Well, the *Love* is our rate-limiting factor. Once we tap our Gossamer drives I'd say about 250 minutes or so. That's *if* you want us to stay together: the *Gazer* and I could scout ahead and—"

"Negative. You'll maintain formation for the duration of the journey." The Aryl leaned forward: his granite face nearly eclipsed Justin and Chenine's. "What's your planned route?"

Sam shrugged: "At our current position Ceres' relative velocity is about 6 km/s and retreating, so I plan on making a bee-line and coming up on its ass. Regional Command wanted us there fast, after all—"

"Negative again: I want you to arc the approach vector: hit the EO ahead of Ceres and make your advance on its leading edge."

Sam blinked. "But that'll take *longer*, Aryl."

"But it keeps our Raidens out of Ceres' Thanatos Tail." Justin explained.

Sam sneered: "Aryl: we can approach a stellar body though that kind of interference. I'm *more* than capable of doing that: I've surfed through Thanatos Tails dozens of times!"

Wraith shook his head: "I'm not questioning your abilities, Captain: I'm giving you an order, and you will follow it. The Hybrids will not pass through Ceres' Thanatos Tail. Is that clear?"

"But why, Aryl?"

Justin narrowed his eyes to slits: "Because the spirit is willing, but the *flesh* is weak. Isn't that right, Aryl?"

Wraith's expression changed: his lips perched in surprise, but then his face became cold once again:

"You are exactly correct, Lieutenant."

"I know I am, *R-L*."

Sam leaned back in her chair: she wasn't prepared for this kind of combativeness between Justin and Wraith. The Aryl himself didn't appear prepared for it, either, because he soon terminated their communication altogether.

Thirty minutes later— with their course plotted and all Raidens hurtling across the shimmering gold river of counter-current space— the pilots had some time to themselves. Communications were wonky in 'skimland' and any ship-to-ship conversations were plagued with distortion and static, so everyone maintained radio silence.

Samantha dozed in her chair until she felt a sagging pressure on her upper legs.

"You, again..." She mumbled.

The child on Sam's lap rested one boot-clad foot on the Typer's thigh. She supported an arm on bent knee, and her other leg dangled lazily off to one side. The girl was 8-years-old, or thereabouts, but her unnatural facial features belied any accurate estimate: the child's big, shrewd eyes were blood red— not that sorry pale pink seen in human albinos, but *real* red like the crimson flesh of a pomegranate. Her hair was drawn tight behind her scalp and clipped short for a little girl's; it lay cinched up in a tiny ponytail. The color of the child's hair, too, was abnormal. She was a strawberry blonde,

but her fiery bangs were far too luminous for natural hair: they didn't just reflect her hair's color, but rather shone with their own latent radiance.

I guess she lathers-up with plutonium shampoo...

"...or you've got a leak in your fusion reactor." The child smirked.

"You've changed your appearance since last time," Sam noted. "Can't you pick a look and stick with it?" She lay back down against her seat. "It's bad enough I have to suffer these hallucinations: why did I have to get stuck with an illusion that can't even pin-down what it *thinks* it should look like?"

The girl shook her head. "I'm done with all that changing, now. I kinda like this look, don't you?"

"You look like a cross between a pre-tween vampire and a harpy nestling."

The child crossed her arms and sneered. "Well, luckily I don't really give a fuck what you think."

"Watch your mouth." Sam chided. "If I'm gonna be haunted by a phantom kiddie I'd rather not have her swearing like a sailor."

"Spank me, then." The child's laughing red eyes glowed with defiance.

Samantha looked down at the giant black combat boot on her thigh: it was easily twice the width of the child's ankle and covered with buckles, straps and miscellaneous pockets and compartments. The grossly-oversized footwear reminded Sam of her early days in SPAR, when she actually wore boots that could hold the equivalent of a lady's handbag each.

"The boots are a nice touch, though." She admitted.

The kid snickered to herself. "You *would* think so, wouldn't ya?"

Sam flicked the giant zipper of one boot: two of big glass balls were attached to the metal bracket, sparkling with a mysterious green luster.

"What's with that?"

The girl bounced her free leg up and down: an identical set of balls jangled on the other boot as well:

"I'm allowed to have nice things, aren't I?"

"Jewelry?" Sam shrugged. "Tch! Reminds me of myself a little: when I got out of basic training I'd learned not to mess around with girly trinkets— not that I ever cared that much for them in the first place— but after my indoctrination I stopped dolling myself up altogether. I even replaced the zippers on my combat boots with an old pair of my—"

"—favorite earrings." The girl nodded.

Sam rolled her eyes and put her head to one side. "Ah, yes. I forgot that I'm dealing with a—"

"—figment of your—"

"—imagination and that there's no point—"

"—telling boring stories to me and expecting me to be interested."

Samantha opened her eyes and glowered at the child:

"For my own imagination, you're really pushing it, kid."

The red-eyed girl sank down on Sam's lap, Indian-style. She rested her chin in her palms and looked out the starboard canopy window. The Raiden wobbled and droned softly as it careened through a sea of strange shapes and swirling colors.

"Wanna play 'I Spy'?" She craned her neck, hopeful.

"I want to sleep, kiddo. And, no offense, but when I wake up I really don't want you to be there."

The child's pointy baby-teeth parted in a malicious grin:

"I can do you one better, you know."

Sam winced as she felt a great lightness on her legs— a weight disappeared— and when she opened her eyes there was no little girl in her lap: she was alone in the cockpit of the *Platinum Heart*.

III.

"That's new." Justin observed.

"Huh?" Quint sat on one of the pilot's knees. The kid's legs were bunched up against the center console. His tennis shoes rested atop the ship's sleek metallic control panel but, of course, they didn't scuff-up the polished finish.

"That necklace: isn't it new?"

"Mmm. Yeah." The child's shoulders were hunched forward; all his concentration was focused on the *Love's* main monitor where a virtual chessboard resided.

Justin fingered one of the glassy green beads that dotted the child's throat. The strange, misty orbs were linked together on a thin string.

"It's tight for a necklace, isn't it?" He grasped one bead and gently pulled it: Quint's neck arched back in response. "It's more of a—"

"—collar than a necklace. Yeah: I know. It itches me, too..." The boy pointed at a square on the chessboard: "There, there: move my bishop!"

Justin dutifully touched the monitor and moved the phantom child's chess piece to the desired location. "Why would you wanna wear something so uncomfortable?"

"It's not my choice."

Justin arched an eyebrow. "Of course it isn't. Is it mine, then? Because if I'm fantasizing about little kids wearing collars then I might have more problems than I realize..."

"No: it wasn't your choice, either." Quint shook his head.

Justin moved his queen diagonally across the board and captured the child's bishop. This made Quint's rosy red lips part in a grin: he brought his rook up into the opening left by the queen's absence.

"Check." He beamed. "And mate in one move."

Justin said a very naughty word.

"At least you lasted longer than two moves this time."

Justin scrunched his face: "How the heck can I suck this bad against myself?"

"You say that I'm your 'survival instinct', right? Well: I've just got more of a drive to survive, I guess. That, and you hold on to your pieces way too long."

"And you indiscriminately sacrifice yours." Justin retorted. "It's almost like you enjoy loosing them."

"The king is all that matters: everything else around it is just water."

"Fodder."

"Whatever." Quint swiveled around and faced the pilot. "You should have brought your knight in to challenge my rook."

"Tch! Right: and then my queen would be dead in the water."

"It was the right move. A queen sacrifice would've killed my mate and put pressure on my defense: you could've force my king out of hiding. The queen stands alone: it's not what's really important. It's the king that matters: the king is kind of like 'self', you know? Everything other piece on the board that you have power over should be used to further your own protection and goals, either through using it to attack or by sacrificing it. You're way too reluctant to sacrifice the things that aren't 'self': it's not the proper way to do things if you want to continue."

"But you're way too eager to make that kind of sacrifice." Justin accused.

Quint smirked. "I won, didn't I?"

The pilot grunted in annoyance. Justin hung his head to one side and stared out the canopy. The shimmering, distorted frame of the *Chaste Gazer* met his emerald eyes.

Quint followed the Typer's gaze. "You're thinking about Ceres, aren't you? Communications are still down: no one's answering, like there's no one around to talk to us at all. What do you think we're gonna find out there, huh?"

"I dunno." Justin smiled "Why: are you nervous?"

"No!" The boy pouted and crossed his arms. "I'm just *interested*."

"Me, too." Justin admitted with a nod. "As a matter of fact, I'm feeling very 'interested' right now..."

IV.

The *Chaste Gazer's* cockpit swayed and vibrated with the comforting roll of a washing machine. Chenine turned on her side and sighed.

'Delicate' cycle: warm wash and no second spin, please...

She really hated these trips through counter-current space. Chenine loathed the concept of 'skimming' from the minute she got her GOSIMR engine installed, but lately she found herself growing quite fond of them. For one thing she was doing it more often, since their squad no longer seemed to be as earthbound as they had been. Aryl Wraith was more inclined to loan his pilots out for trans-planetary patrols these days, and for Chenine familiarity breeds contentment: she now dealt with the trans-dimensional highway as easily as a passenger on a subway car.

With the added benefit of not having a trashed-out cabin and urine-soaked floorboards...

Chenine pulled her legs up onto the seat cushion; she wrapped her gloved hands over the breastplate of her Class-III spacesuit. The girl's eyelashes fluttered a few times, and then she sank down into a foggy doze. She shivered twice very faintly as she lay curled up in the wobbly cabin.

Two minutes later a small pressure against her chest forced the girl up like a puma: Chenine cried in surprise and whipped her body against the port side of her cabin. A second, much smaller body went careening in the opposite direction: a wire-thin child impacted the starboard control panels. The bleached and tattered fringes of her pink nightgown disappeared as she tumbled beyond the dark footrests.

"Rrrgh!" The Keton snarled into the darkness, and finding nothing there she whipped her head around as far as her mask would turn: a pair of myrtle-green eyes stared at her from the rear cockpit compartment. The *Gazer's* Impingement Factor display provided the faintest of glows; it illuminated the pale white face of a young girl,

her sagging nightgown nearly slipping off a set of bony, gaunt shoulder blades. The child clutched a small doll in her lap: it was a tattered bunny rabbit with mottled fur and torn patching where a nose might once have been stitched. The only remarkable things about the stuffed toy were the eyes: two giant crystal orbs were literally stuffed into the critter's hollowed sockets. A strange green mist swirled within them. It didn't give the toy any semblance of life, but imparted a much more oppressive and creepy vibe.

"You were cold." The girl explained.

"Space *is* cold. And whatever I'm feeling doesn't really concern you."

"Doesn't it?" The little child looked down at the tuft of her rabbit's tail, then back up at Chenine: "I— I disagree." The fragile girl shook her head. She spoke in the faintest of whispers and clutched her rabbit doll tight with twig-like arms.

"It's not your place to disagree with me, is it?"

"I suppose not." The little girl stared at her bare toes.

Chenine squeezed her eyes shut and wagged her head back and forth.

Your head, girl: your head...

"Get... it... on... *straight!*"

When she opened her eyes again the emaciated child was gone, bunny rabbit and all.

V.

Ceres is a real dump.

That's a crude summary of the dwarf planet's importance in the Solar System, but it's accurate. Before the advent of the Bydo War this lonely piece of rock lacked any semblance of life, an atmosphere, water, interesting minerals or even amusing rock formations. The only properties this miserable celestial body possessed to distinguish it from the rest of the Asteroid Belt were its size (an impressive 1000 kilometers at the equator) and its shape: spherical, like a proper planet and not oblong like a common asteroid or comet.

But a worthless piece of rock— be it large and spherical— is still a worthless piece of rock. Before the year 2069 Ceres wasn't even on Earth's radar: it was the black sheep of the planetoid family, and due to its lack of strategic or scientific importance it seemed fated to be ignored forever.

Then along came the Kuiper Mass.

The first Mass to assault the Earth did so with the Bydo's trademark senselessness and ruthlessness, but it was unique: there were deviations in its behavior that haven't been seen since. For one thing the Kuiper Mass was destroyed *in toto*— Core and all— and its hollowed shell lingers on the fringes of the Solar System (but we've been over this before). Equally unique was the Mass's battle strategy: it created the 'Legion' incarnation.

Crossing dimensional boundaries is no trifle, and the physics of good old 'Dimension 1' are rather different from those of Dimension 26. Simply put, our region of space appears to be much, much younger than the Bydo's homeland. Little is known about the history and pre-Bydo conditions of Dimension 26 (assuming there *was* a time when the Bydo didn't exist there) but some facts are apparent: the stars are scattered thin, and most are red and sickly, a dying class of metal-poor stars known as Population III's.

Basically, the theory is that Dimension 26 is in advanced entropy: its stars had long ago ejected all their heavy minerals into space, leaving the once hot and energy-rich suns deathly cold. The vacuum between them is now laden with heavy metals and the universe itself continues to fade away in the last throes of thermal equilibrium (or, put another way, Dimension 26 is suffering a 'heat-death'. That sounds much more impressive, doesn't it?).

In any event, all this appears to have been mooted after the formation of the Great Communion: the Bydo created an artificial celestial body by rapid proliferation. They gobbled up metal from the nutrient-rich interstellar vacuum and then siphoned-off the remaining stars' light. As their colony grew supermassive it grew dense, and as it grew dense it grew hot, and as it grew hot it became a power source unto itself: a 'planet' of organic matter that grew into a 'sun', and a sun of organic matter that grew into a whole god-damned nebula. In other words, the universe scattered all its energy to the four corners of creation, but the Bydo Empire picked up the pieces and brought them back together once again.

Scientists only speculate about what exactly lies at the center of that hot soup they call the Communion: is it simply a solid core of rock and metal, or perhaps an unending inferno of plasma energy? Neo-religious yahoos and their gullible flocks adopted the belief that the Great Communion surrounds the passage to Heaven itself and that the Bydo— as spiritual moochers— survive by siphoning energy off God's holy light.

The most credible theory put forth so far has the Communion surrounding a dying supergiant star giving off a massive amount of energy from an overactive solar wind. Bydo Labs calls this the 'Wolf-Rayet' hypothesis, and if a Wolf-Rayet star does exist in the center of Bydo space then it would provide the creatures all the energy they would ever need: even after the sun's eventual demise into a 'collapsar' it would go supernova and disintegrate into a black hole, complete with a series of unpredictable and intermittent gamma ray bursts. These events would unleash more than enough energy to keep the Great Communion toasty for thousands of years to come (at the same time this process would vaporize an inconceivable amount of flesh, but given the Bydo's reproductive processes the amount would be, in effect, infinitesimal). Like deep-sea tube worms colonizing a hot thermal vent, the Bydo should have access to a staggering amount of energy.

Any analogy between Dimension 26 and Dimension 1 is, however, just that. The Bydo discovered this when they first used their powers to cross the dimensional boundary: the first incarnations launched from the Kuiper Mass were clumsy and awkward and just barely held together at all, like model airplanes stuck together with spit instead of glue. Of course there were millions of them, and the Bydo philosophy has always been quantity-over-quality, but it was apparent that the Empire was taken aback by the conditions of our homeland: a Solar System in its youth, and not one in an advanced state of decay.

The 'Legion' incarnation perfectly illustrates their confusion: it was a Core-bearing creature, and therefore it was an Outer-Parameter-Incarnation, but it was very, very unlike any other Opie ever made. For one thing it was big. Make that *very* big: over a hundred-times the size of a regular Opie, but due to the shoddiness of its design it was only about four-times as powerful (and, if you haven't already guessed, its abilities were set as the benchmark for measuring the power of a modern 'legion' of incarnations).

Legion was released along with the third incarnation-wave assault, sent hurtling down into the Solar center from the dark regions of the Kuiper Belt. Along the way, however, the massive creature dropped out of skimland and slowed its approach: while it had been coming for Earth, something else was coming for *it*, and this something else was moving lightning fast through counter-current space. The 'something else' in question was the R-9A *Arrowhead*: the first Raiden produced. Legion met the *Arrowhead* head-on in the Ceres orbital, and a battle was waged amongst the floating gravestones of asteroids...

After a brief pause in its journey the R-9A continued forward in its mission to destroy the Kuiper Mass.

Legion was left in the void, shattered and broken beyond repair. After a time the two severed pieces of the leviathan were pulled into the influence of Ceres' orbit. One of the chunks—the severely deformed 'head'—impacted the celestial body with the force of a 10-megaton bomb. The result was a fusion of the two bodies: the skeletal frame of Legion jutted from the spherical planetoid. It came to rest as an oversized mountain, laden with half-alive Bydo 'moss'—flesh that hitchhiked upon Legion from the innards of the Kuiper Mass that bore it.

The other half of Legion suffered a more interesting fate: this part was a semi-spherical body thought to have contained the incarnation's Core. The massive casing was somehow intact but inert: if a Core ever existed within this part of Legion then it was quite dead, now. The metal sphere fell into a stable orbit with Ceres; it had just enough mass to affect the planetoid's rotation and, along with the cataclysmic impact of the other part of Legion, it altered Ceres' rotational inertia so much that Ceres is now in tidal-lock with the Sun. In other words the planetoid doesn't really spin at all: one side always faces the sun and the other side always faces in opposite direction, towards its new sister in the sky. This new artificial satellite was named 'Consus'.

The dark, leeward side of Ceres contains the deformed remains of the Legion head. The immature flesh that hitchhiked on the deceased incarnation took root, and over time wormed itself down into the rocky core of the planetoid itself. Down in the cold depths the struggling Bydo colony created a 'false-Core' of densely-packed flesh, heated to a modest degree and fed by an inverted-root system that was extended away from the colony. This extension just barely broke the surface of Ceres and took up residence on the dark side of the sphere, where the deadly light of the unimpeded Sun could never touch it.

The Midnight Forest was born.

Years later the Allied Military would undertake Operation 'Burn and Bury', the aptly-named initiative to obliterate any remnants of the Bydo Masses that invaded the Solar System, from lost armies of incarnations all the way down to the tiniest piece of slime secreted about an asteroid or moon. 'B 'n B' is an ongoing plan, of course, which can never officially end until the Masses themselves stop coming to Dimension 1, but it has seen humans travel from the closest tendrils of the sun all the way out to the lonely fringes of the Scattered Disc to achieve its objectives. The Midnight Forest, however, was an exception.

Bydo Labs wanted to take the opportunity to study this struggling colony of flesh in detail. During the Dissympathy Operation Ceres was of pivotal importance in generating the Flash-Cancer toxin, but the Labs lobbied to have the actual production

apparatus installed on the sunward side of the sphere, where the Midnight Forest would not be affected by the lethal Thanatos Tail.

The Labs themselves set up a large research facility on the sloping edge of a precipice near the day-night boundary. An ambitious project was undertaken by the current Labs Chief: an attempt to manipulate the very growth of the forest itself. The rationale was that— assuming a Bydo colony's development could be guided by the hands of men—the species certainly wasn't as omnipotent as believed. Either way the value of research would be priceless. As the Midnight Forest was already struggling to survive, the Labs found it quite receptive to outside influence.

The first breakthrough came when the colony was coaxed into feeding on carbon dioxide, readily provided by the research station. The next breakthrough came when the Bydo foliage started expelling oxygen. After a time the tightly-wound 'Core' at the planetoid's center began to increase Ceres' gravitational pull. It could do this according to the CAT principal, or 'Core Attraction Theory', which is a property of tightly-coiled Bydo flesh that gives it stronger-than-usual attractive abilities. This was first seen during the Cataclysm: after the False Moon impacted Earth the final damning nail in our species' coffin— a dreaded 'nuclear winter'— never materialized. Most of the soil and rock ejected into the atmosphere during the collision boomeranged back down into the impact crater because of the strong attractive force of the shattered Core. This effectively safeguarded against the extinction of all mammalian- life on the Blue Marble (including humans) and in Ceres the CAT has done something equally wondrous: five years ago the cold little rock developed an appreciable atmosphere.

It would be a stretch to call Ceres 'terraformed', but surface conditions eventually became human-friendly, and while the rocky wasteland was certainly not Earth-like in any respect it was possible for a human to survive the terrain, provided one's exposure was brief— on the order of 24 hours, and generally no more than that. The heat rising through the ground from the false-Core warmed the planet to just above freezing, and in Ceresland— where the day-night boundary exists— those temperatures can reach a downright-toasty 15 degrees Celsius.

The few humans to tread on Ceres were still relegated to the research center until scientists finally figured out how to create an induced magnetic field around a planetary body (that was a no-brainer: the details of that discovery are far too mundane to go into here). The man-made magnetic field greatly reduced the amount of cosmic radiation hammering the surface, but didn't stop it outright. Of course, any mutations in a body's DNA can be cleansed through just a few hours in a Karat Pool.

Today the twin system of Ceres and its sister Consus has developed a reasonably stable orbital pattern. Ceres is definitely the big sister: her mass is seven-times greater than the barren wasteland of Consus. The sloping, rocky terrain along Ceres' day-night boundary was named 'Ceresland' to distinguish it from the Bydo-infested region within the dark hemisphere, the Midnight Forest. The great Bydo forest in the darkness below remains under the care— or rather the control— of the Ceresland Research Station, a special branch of Bydo Labs dedicated to understanding, cataloguing, and manipulating the great diversity of life within the dark forest. Ceres is, therefore, a vital center of research and development in the escalating conflict that is the Bydo Wars.

Facts are facts, however, and nothing can change this one simple truth:
Ceres is a real dump.

VI.

“Now that is interesting...”

Justin fired his retrorockets and the *Platonic Love* slowly descended into a knobby jungle of exotic-looking plants. Most were nondescript with black colored bark to match the night sky, though several bore strange sacs on their branches and trunks that pulsed with ruddy color. Vines were everywhere— ugly, browned things with massive black thorns— and the entire horizon of diseased foliage bore a nasty semblance of death, loneliness, and decay.

But it wasn't really dead: it was all *very* much alive.

The part Justin found 'interesting' though was certainly not alive: there was a narrow trench carved out along a straight line where no trees stood, and the ground bore almost no undercover. The rocky terrain beneath the Midnight Forest was fully-exposed, and the area stood out like a sore thumb.

It was strikingly odd, but it was also an excellent landing pad.

Justin ripped his seatbelts off as soon as he landed and wriggled out of the thin Class-I spacesuit; his trademark black *Leifde* suit lay underneath, complete with that narrow heart-design training down the front of his body like a red streak of symmetry.

“It's— it's quite an odd place, isn't it?” Quint commented.

Justin glanced at the little boy while yanking medical tubes out of his body. The boy's head was facing the window, one hand pressed against the crystal shield. All Justin could see of him was a faint reflection in the canopy; it distorted the child's features. Even Quint's big, wide eyes appeared to wax with a strange yellow light, like the kindling of a fireplace.

“Odd? Maybe. But 'evil' is the word I'd use.” He yanked a small IV out of his neck and smiled. “Wish me luck, kid?”

Quint looked at Justin, his blue eyes troubled and his little face somber: “You should be careful.”

“I always am.” Justin closed his eyes and assaulted the *Platonic Love* with his mind. He sent the ship a stern command:

Piss off!

The link between Justin's metal-studded spine and his Raiden disintegrated. When he opened his eyes again he was, of course, alone in the cockpit.

The surface's low gravity, in addition to his cramping muscles, threw Justin for a loop as he emerged from the *Love*: he managed to trip on his dismount ladder. Justin bounced on the fine dirt beneath him and clutched his stomach with one hand.

“Ulgh!”

Sam was already waiting for him:

“You're 'spacesick again', huh?” She grinned.

“And dead-tired of the jokes.”

“You're really nauseous? Haven't you had your guts 'kinked' before?”

Justin got to one knee and growled: “Yeah, and it's not the kinking that gets me: it's when the knots are untied...”

Chenine approached the pair. She'd taken the longest time to wriggle out of her massive Class-III spacesuit. The girl's jaw moved up and down in rhythmic motion.

"Is that a 'kickstarter'?" Sam asked.

Chenine nodded.

"Terrific. Mind if I have one?"

The Ketoni girl reached into a satchel pocket on her waist and produced a small pile of gum in multi-colored wrappers. Samantha fingered through the pile until she found a suitable candidate:

"'Pink lemonade'." She grinned. "Can't beat that." She motioned to Justin: "Give little Fiver one, too: his Raiden's chemical-support system appears to disagree with him."

Justin surveyed Chenine's outstretched hand:

"What flavor are the darker ones?"

"Chocolate."

He blinked: "Cocoa substitute?"

"No: it's real."

"You've got real chocolate?" Sam struggled with the *Platinum Heart's* external storage compartment as she spoke.

"I've had these for awhile; they were a gift from JG Tabris."

"Naturally." Justin snatched one of the dark treats from her palm.

"It's awfully bittersweet..."

"What isn't?" Justin rolled his eyes as he bit down on the gum. "But Lord: do I love that taste! Almost intoxicating..."

"It's the theobromine." Chenine explained: "It makes your brain release large quantities of serotonin—"

"Fascinating." Sam cut the girl off. "Now, then: what the hell do we make of this?" She motioned to the massive dead spot around them.

"It's like an impact trench." Justin got to his feet. "But we didn't receive any warnings about rogue asteroids in this region..."

Samantha crouched and surveyed the area with her cat eyes: "I'd agree with that. Looks like whatever went careening through here was about 200 meters wide." She looked back at her squadmates. "Anything else?"

"There's no debris." Justin motioned with his hands. "If something that huge gutted this place then there would be smoldering debris all around. The ground here is almost *perfectly* clean. And the fringes of this trench are too even. They're... they're—"

"Surgically cut." Chenine finished.

"Well put." Sam nodded. "This place hasn't been 'hit' by something: it's been precision-stripped..."

"A fireball?" Chenine posited.

Justin shook his head: "The trees here aren't scorched. Even Bydo foliage would still have burn marks from that kind of heat."

They stood together for a time, each one deep in thought. Justin finally broke the silence: he turned to Samantha.

"Well, what now?"

"We go to Ceresland." She fumbled with her electronic compass. "And we check out the research station. Right, the station is about three clicks in *that* direction." She stretched one gloved hands outwards, looked up, and realized that she was pointing right down the hollowed trench: it extended up the black silt slope as far as the eye could see.

Justin clucked his tongue. "How *very* interesting..."

“You’ve got five minutes to gear-up, squad, and then we move out. Put on your nasal cannulas and pack standard equipment.”

Samantha stared down the long black tunnel of emptiness while Justin and Chenine made for their Raidens:

“And bring your Aegises, too.”

VII.

Everyone was panting openly by the time they crested the last ridge dividing the Midnight Forest from the Ceresland plateau. The squat, low-lying research complex jutted from an upturn in the land— really a small mountain— and behind this shadowy mountain the sky glowed with a pale blue luster, like the Northern Lights on steroids.

“First time to Ceres?” Sam noted Justin and Chenine’s reaction to the sight.

“Yes.” Chenine answered.

“There’re five big generators behind the research station. They’re really a complex of factories attached to torus-powered turbines, all of ‘em churning out Flash-Cancer toxin. The generator complex is easily twice as large as the research station, and it makes for one god-damned massive Thanatos Tail. Even a full-sized AM warship can’t fly through the lower atmosphere here: the factories’ expulsion jets are like the world’s greatest updraft, and don’t even get me started about the interference they cause our instruments...”

“They’re linked though, right?” Justin asked. “The toxin factory and the research base, I mean?”

“Mmm: through a tunnel in that mountain.”

Chenine’s brows went up as a strange humming noise echoed behind them. Captain Rayne didn’t seem to hear it (go figure) but she could tell from Justin and Chenine’s reactions that they heard something.

“Someday I’ve gotta get me that super hearing of yours,” she grumbled.

“Don’t count on it: you may never get it, you know. Maybe you’ll lose your hearing.” Justin shrugged. “That sense could be your ‘Price’, Sam.”

“You think? But Sensations Links don’t always carry a ‘Price’, do they?”

“They usually do...” Chenine’s voice trailed off as she listened to the wildlife behind them.

“What was your Price, Storm?”

Justin tapped one eye. “My sight. It’s just a little night-blindness so far, but it’s starting to be a real bitch.”

“Bad luck...”

“I don’t mind it.” Justin shook his head. “But I was hoping that the Link would remove my—” his eyes flickered between the women: he became defensive. “Well: I was hoping it would deaden a *different* sense of mine...”

“I’ll bet.” Samantha nodded. “Well, what about you, Chovert? Which of your senses did the link kill off?”

“If you ever need to know that information, I will tell you...” Chenine looked back at Justin, quizzical: she was curious about the noise also.

Justin shrugged: he didn’t know.

“For god’s sake!” Samantha growled. “Just hum a few bars, why don’t you?”

Justin perched his lips and whistled: it was a soft, low pitch oscillation, almost like a sick, throaty nightingale.

"Your pitch is off..." Chenine interjected.

"Doesn't matter." The Captain shook her head. "I can tell you what it is: it's a borogove, okay? Just a simple borogove."

"One of the old-growth trees?" Justin squinted. "The ones with the sperm sacs on their branches? They 'talk' like that?"

"Mmm. They do that when they wanna mate with something. Another tree must be dumping hormones out into the air."

"Hormones?"

"Sure: the one making all the noise is getting turned on. The scent is probably really 'pinking its Floyd' and it wants to get it on with a little 'porn-groove' in the grove, okay?" Sam scoffed, then dug in her heels and made for the research station at a fast clip.

Justin came up beside Chenine. He smiled like a schoolboy talking behind his teacher's back:

"Her words get kinda—"

"—esoteric—"

"—when she gets angry. I can't for the life of me decipher that spiel of hers: somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas, only I don't exactly know what they are!"

"You wouldn't, would you?" Chenine wrinkled her nose.

The trio approached the Ceresland Research Station at the main entrance. Chenine perched her lips as the airlock hissed shut. The atmosphere outside was thin and static, like the moldy air of a dank basement. It reminded Chenine of the smelly storage caverns beneath her family's vineyard, where row upon row of gnarled oak wine casks were stored. She would often go down there to play when she was very little, much to her father's chagrin. She perched her lips now because she was surprised to discover that the air inside the visitor greeting center was no fresher than the air outside.

"It's depressurized." Justin stated the obvious.

"And dark." Samantha fumbled through the lobby with only faint starlight to guide her. A small reception desk sat before them, and behind this the foyer diverged into three different corridors. Samantha called out a greeting, but no one answered.

"Super." She growled. "Alright, might as well turn off our gas condensers for the moment."

Chenine fumbled with a switch on her backpack and pulled the nasal cannula out of her nostrils. She let the plastic tubing dangle around her neck. Ceres' atmosphere was fine for light walking and exploration. They really didn't need their oxygen condensers at this time and she could see the Captain's point: if they were going to get any kind of workout later on it'd be a good idea to let the condensers' batteries rest. After all: any strenuous activity in this atmosphere could wind a world-class sprinter after only a few seconds.

But just what kind of 'strenuous activity' will be required of us?

She subconsciously fingered the shoulder-strap of her Aegis.

"Let's split up." Sam declared.

"Oh, let's not." Justin shook his head.

“Time’s a factor, here. We’ve gotta round-up the research staff and ensure their safety. We know the power’s out, and we know that there’s massive damage somewhere in the building, so I’m not going to debate this.”

Sam looked at Chenine and pointed down a corridor on the right: it was well-lit with starlight, but quickly snaked into a corner and disappeared into the unknown.

Chenine looked back at Sam, uncertain.

“It’s the barracks and security rooms, Chovert: assuming the shit has hit the fan here that should be one of the safer places to search, don’t you think?”

“I’m not bothered by any of that.” She declared.

“Your fingers are.”

Chenine quickly pulled her hand from her shoulder strap and flushed, despite the very cold air all around them.

Sam motioned down the other corridor and nodded to Justin:

“Chemical storage,” she explained. “And for god’s sake keep an eye on your Aegis’ HUD: it should tell you if there are any gases floating around that might kill you.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.” He smiled.

“Where are you going, Captain?” Chenine asked.

Sam nodded toward the middle corridor: “The labs.” She growled.

Justin squinted. “You really wanna go there by yourself? What if one of their experiments got a little out of control? Something very nasty might be—”

Sam took up her Aegis and shrugged: “If I need you, I’ll give you a 10-gauge holler, okay?”

With all this settled the trio diverged down their separate paths. Sam trudged off for the labs and disappeared in the darkness until all that remained of her was the flashing red light of her earpiece bobbing in line with her head.

Justin set off for chemical storage with his Aegis perched on one shoulder.

Chenine glanced around the creepy foyer one last time before finally starting off for the barracks.

The air grew stale and even fouler the more she trod down the black corridor. Normally the purification generators would keep the innards of the research station fresh with an Earth-grade atmosphere but they— like everything else, apparently— were not working.

Ceresland Research Station usually holds a compliment of no more than thirty full-time residents. These include the researches, their assistants, a maintenance crew and a small compliment of soldiers from Lab Security. Though their statuses and ranks differ considerably, the cramped quarters of Ceresland managed to produce a vastly egalitarian culture with very little distinction in the living conditions between the most esteemed senior researcher and the lowliest grease monkey. As a case in point, Chenine had only two choices where to explore next: the *male* barracks, or the *female* barracks.

She crept into the male barracks, careful where she stepped in the pitch-darkness. The rail-mount of her Aegis burned with the brightest possible floodlight on its head. Her sawn-off could bear this extravagant perk because of Chenine’s reluctance to invest in flashy gun clutter like an extra string of slugs, a scope, or even a laser-dot display: she was lucky to handle the barebones frame at all as it was.

Even with the flood, though, her light seemed to just barely pierce the dusty air.

The place was empty, save for a few rows of simple brown cots with a footlocker apiece. The sheets of several beds were strewn about in carelessness, while others lay neat and regimentally clean with their corners fastidiously tucked in, the way they should be.

Some of the personnel were roused out of bed in a hurry...

The smaller female barracks were in much the same state, and soon Chenine was tiptoeing down another corridor, this one was lined with a row of scratched Plexiglas windows overlooking the plateau outside. The stars adequately lit her path, and the girl eventually came to a dead end: the main security station.

“Station personnel, please identify yourselves...” Chenine inched open the security door and stepped through. The young girl’s weak voice carried through the station like the echo of a voice through a crypt.

“This is Allied Military Aeronautics,” she called. “We’re Typ—”

Chenine blinked, shook her head and started over:

“We’re a Raiden squadron, deployed from the Western Branch. We were sent by Regional Command...”

She discontinued this spiel when it was clear that the only things around to hear it were herself and the half-dozen open lockers all around her. She tipped open a few: one of them held a half-consumed bottle of Pop-Up Cola, while a single bruised banana fell out of another. Yet another held a brown guard’s uniform. Chenine nearly slipped on a puddle as she reached for the next locker. This one bore a black-handled weapon: it was an Aegis, but nothing like hers. The weapon itself was much smaller, the barrel cropped shorter and a long black rail jutted a half-meter beyond the front sight. Her eyes scanned the ultra-shorn barrel:

Aegis, Mark IV. Her lips moved as she mouthed the words. Chenine had no knowledge of this kind of weapon: both her and her squadmates’ firearms were all *Mark III’s*.

Chenine wasn’t a gun-nut at all (quite the opposite, in fact) so she felt no admiration for this device. Also, she was a girl, so she didn’t harbor any phallic-driven inadequacies about her own less advanced model (she figured the Captain was a much better candidate for such adolescent ‘penis envy’). She cast the weapon back in the locker with disinterest. As Chenine rose up she wagged her left hand uncomfortably: a sticky dampness was soaking down through her glove, where it collected on her palm. The weapon’s pistol-grip was wet—left in a puddle— most likely the remnants of another can of soda.

“God, how I hate cola.” She muttered.

Other than providing Chenine with some bodily discomfort this little search turned up one very ominous fact: there was only one locker bearing a weapon. Chenine didn’t know just how many anti-Bydo weapons were kept in Ceresland, but there had to be more than just one.

So where is the rest of the station’s arsenal?

“And just what did they use it on?”

The girl nearly jumped out of her *Liefde* suit as the concrete floor rumbled. A few tinny emergency floods churned to life around her. They provided scant light, but soon her blue eyes were drawn to a far wall of the security room: a green-hued monitor sparkled with life.

Chenine sank down into a thick-padded chair. She kicked the wall in an attempt to face the security console but overestimated the paltry gravity around her: she made three full turns on the chair's wheels before friction took over and brought her to a halt.

The console was functional, but barely: only one out of six monitors was in working order, and even it was scrambled in an erratic mess. Evidently, what little power was now available was hardly adequate.

But perhaps enough for my needs...

Chenine had absolutely no security clearance whatsoever for this research facility: the place was Bydo Labs after all, and as such it was not wholly integrated into the Allied Military. Her military status was not, however, completely useless.

I wonder if they keep the backdoor open...

She called up the manual login screen and submitted a username: 'Carcharodon Carcharias.'

Instantly a red banner flashed along the bottom of the screen. The words 'awaiting transmission' stood in the center, and beside this was the logo of the Allied Military.

Chenine's lips parted in a grin.

Thought so.

This login was a catchall for military personnel: it was literally the 'jaws of life' for any AM officer who needed to hack a system in an emergency. As Lieutenant Hayle explained to Chenine, Bydo Labs was never happy about including it in their programs—they like keeping secrets, after all—but as long as they got funding from the Allied Military they had no choice.

Then Chenine's ear twitched involuntarily.

"Jaws of life?" She repeated, aloud.

The girl hung her head and catalogued this incident: a pun that terrible deserved a great deal of punishment later on.

Although it's tricky to get 'punished' when I don't have a lover, isn't it?

"Worry about that later..."

She pulled the data pad from her satchel pocket and set it to broadcast her personal security code. Seconds later the console changed: a sickeningly-sweet female voice spoke into the gloom:

"Thank you, Allied Military officer. This branch of Bydo Labs warmly welcomes you into our system. Your clearance of 'belladonna' is noted."

Chenine frowned, and then silently cursed that sun-shiny voice while thumbing through the menu options she was allowed access to: there weren't many.

Power plant access: restricted. Base-wide communications: restricted. Thermal surveillance / CO₂ detectors: restricted...

"Not making this easy, are we?" Chenine shook her head. Her brow twitched as she remembered Samantha Rayne: the Captain not only had a higher rank than herself and Justin, she had higher access. Her digitalis-level clearance might open up a few more menu options, though Chenine couldn't really say for sure: Bydo Labs' disdain for the regular military was evident, and even Aryl Wraith's own phalloides-level clearance would probably only grant limited access, too.

Just before Chenine called for the Captain, however, a small sidebar on the menu caught her eye: it was the control for the base's surveillance system. Chenine had

virtually no access to this system either—live video feeds were down, anyway— but there was one option highlighted on the screen: recording playback.

The girl scratched her head for a moment, and then she made her request:

“Call-up computer: access video records just prior to the base’s loss of recording capabilities.”

“Specify timeframe, please.”

She rolled her eyes. “I dunno. Let’s say *five minutes* before cut-off?”

“Specify location, please.”

Chenine grunted in annoyance as over two-dozen locations popped up on her screen. This was a moot point, as she only had access to about *three* of those cameras: the visitor center, the subterranean tunnels and the cryonics lab.

She picked the visitor center at random, and soon she was staring down at the reception table and panorama windows of the station’s lobby. The camera oscillated back and forth monotonously as it surveyed the lobby: it was empty as a tomb.

And why would there be anyone out there, anyway?

She was ready to cancel the playback when something caught her eye: the stars in the windows disappeared. A flash of light exploded far outside. It was a brief nova— not like a dramatic explosion but quite eerie in its inexplicability. Chenine’s head was in mid-tilt when a shadow occluded the room and a strange, silver tendril whipped out in front of the camera. The screen image bounced back and forth violently enough to give Chenine nausea, and then everything cut to static.

She perched her lips, and then went back to the menu and selected the feed for the cryonics lab.

Five workers were visible in the large, unfinished room. Dozens of sleek metal tubes sat in the background, each containing various cryo-preserved samples of Bydo flesh from the Midnight Forest. The workers, clad in turquoise maintenance suits, were busy loading up a magnetic-lift with machine parts. This went on for some time, and without the benefit of an audio track Chenine’s interest soon wandered.

Her attention was, however, drawn to something in the far background: there was a glass-shielded wall on the far side of the room, possibly the base’s main corridor. Two people were walking through it, their bodies severely distorted by the frosted glass panes. One of them wore that same turquoise maintenance uniform, but the other was dressed differently: a long, dark overcoat lay bunched over his body, and his head was shaped most irregularly. It looked like there was a dark banana in place of a proper head.

A hat? She speculated.

If that was a hat, it was one that Chenine had never seen before.

The girl leaned back in her chair and balanced the butt of her Aegis on one palm. She was pretty good at this, even under the full gravity of the Blue Marble. She’d been chastised on more than one occasion for playing with her handgun more than actually *practicing* with it, but Chenine’s philosophy was firm: she only loaded-up on the shooting range as much as necessary to keep up with her qualifiers, and refused to do more than that.

She kept her eyes trained on the busy workers, though nothing happened for several minutes. At one point Chenine thought the console was going out on her, but she realized that it was the overhead lights in the cryonics lab that were fading: the workers stopped their tasks briefly and looked up at the flickering ceiling. Things soon returned to

normal. Chenine yawned, picked out one worker from the 'herd' and followed him with her lazy eyes for the next two minutes.

Her head was folded down against one arm when it happened.

A waterfall of blood exploded over that worker's body. Chenine bucked in her chair. The girl's Aegis bounced off the concrete floor.

She wasn't sure what just happened. Chenine's lips grew white— drained of blood— and her gloved fingers curled over her mouth as she watched the man's body slide apart in two: the top half— split apart at the navel— crumpled down over the bottom like a rag doll.

The other workers were still reacting to this grotesqueness when the entire room turned into a living hell.

"Merde!" The girl's voice was a rasp. A hot stink rose up in Chenine throat. Seconds later she vomited right on the side of the console.

The lights in the cryonics room went out en masse, though several remained on and flickered with instability. A dozen fluid ribbons streaked through the room. They were black in the darkness, but looked silvery-metallic under the few lights that continued flickering. One very large tendril emerged beside the bank of cryo-tubes: it sailed across the room, slicing into the heavy metal cases and shattered them to pieces as effortlessly as a sledgehammer shatters an ice sculpture.

Chenine couldn't make out the remaining four workers, but as the dark tendrils sailed through the room like a living forest of vines she could see bodies writhing in the background, bathed in shadows: some missing an arm or a leg, and one, she noted with horror, bore no head on its shoulders. This body listed ominously to one side and then slumped over into a rising pool of blood and cryo-sludge.

A man's face appeared in the light, quite close to the camera. He was screaming, his mouth contorted in soundless terror. Half-a-second later his left eye bulged in the socket, then it rocketed out and bounced off the camera's lens itself. It left a sticky train of fluid on the screen as the man's body crumpled. A writing, silver tendril protruded from his now-vacant eye socket.

The girl was in dry-heaves when that face fell away to reveal another behind it: this man's skin was stretched out over his face unnaturally, as if his flesh were a mask of false skin instead of a real face. His body— ill-defined in the flickering hell around it— was black from the torso-up and snared in shimmering tendrils. But the man wasn't shrieking in pain. His expression was far different.

He was laughing.

The tendrils did not whip about his frame with vicious rage, but rather loving care: one of them caressed a nick on his chin. The blood oozing from it looked black, like motor oil, and no sooner did the tendril move away from the cut than the wound disappeared: it didn't even leave a scar.

As the vines behind the creature continued flaying bodies apart like beef in a skillet the entity's eyes simmered with a light all their own, bright as headlights.

Yellow...

"Yellow high-beams." She whispered.

These eyes weren't 'right': they were *not* human.

They weren't even *animal*...

The camera frame jerked to one side and everything went into freefall: the security camera was unhinged from its perch. Moments later the image cut to static as it landed in the bloodied pool that was the concrete floor.

Chenine leapt to her feet like a startled tiger. A loud screech accompanied this static: there was now enough power to run the audio track. The floods all around her flared to life, illuminating the whole security room in blinding light. She drew a tight breath as a shadow suddenly disappeared from the far doorway: someone had been watching her from the darkness, and standing right over her when the lights came on.

The girl steadied her Aegis at the doorway, but then she cringed as she surveyed her right hand: a mess of blood lay soaked over her fingers, garish as red clay on her dark glove. At her feet, in front of the locker containing the upgraded Aegis, the 'puddle' she nearly slipped on was revealed: it was a huge pool of drying blood with a large streak running across, as if something heavy were dragged through it. Chenine followed that trail to the far lockers: an unidentifiable heap of flesh lay in the corner with one arm stretched towards the weapon-bearing locker. Every finger in that hand appeared to be broken, in keeping with the rest of the body's bones.

The girl's lips quivered as she surveyed the nearly inhuman creature lying in front of her: how did he end up like *this*? She slowly stretched her hand towards the dead body's mottled hair.

"What in the world?"

Her fingers were centimeters away from the corpse when footfalls in the corridor again roused her: Chenine's eyes flittered back to the empty doorway as shadows moved across the lighted hallway. The figure was making for the visitor center.

And the main base door.... and the Ceresland plateau...

"And the Hybrids." She whispered.

The thought of her helpless vessel at the mercy of any kind of enemy was enough to override the girl's more intelligent analytical processes: she gave chase, with her right arm cradling her sawn-off shotgun at the ready.

Chenine bolted into the visitor center. It looked very different with all the lights on and its purification generators humming. A sun-shiny recording launched into a 'welcome to Ceresland' spiel. She ignored this and pushed out into the cold wasteland of the plateau, fumbling with her nasal cannula and oxygen condenser while keeping an eye on the shadow racing ahead of her.

As soon as she descended into the forest Chenine lost the figure, but was able to follow its path through the weedy rows of lethargic Bydo foliage. Once she got into the 'old-growth' trees this path grew cold, but the girl hoped against hope that she was still on her prey's path, at least marginally.

Let's acknowledge the good news, first:

She *was* on her prey's track. She was dead on, as a matter of fact.

Now, for the bad news: Chenine leapt over a large black tree root in her pursuit, and her body landed next to a bushy hedge. Instantly her eyes went cross: a heavy, blunt force impacted her on the base of the skull, right along the girl's occipital bun. The force of impact sent Chenine into a double-reverse somersault; her body took more than three seconds to land— unceremoniously and without dignity— in the forest silt.

But she was unconscious long before that.

VIII.

Justin poked at a shoe on the ground, but quickly recoiled when he realized that the foot in question was still in residence. He backed up against the wall of the room and tilted his head back; sweat rained down his exposed throat and collected along the collar of his suit.

He quickly brandished his Aegis at a noise near the doorway: Samantha Rayne emerged. The floods beamed off her sunny freckles, although her expression was grim.

"I got the lights working."

He scoffed. "Kinda wish you hadn't..." Justin motioned behind Sam: "What about the labs?"

"They're all dead." She answered. "To a man. And a woman, too." She examined the sticky horror all around them. "But they weren't god-damed *fricasseed* as bad as this..."

"Wh— what do you think killed them, Sam?"

"What, or *who*." She motioned to one decapitated corpse. "Bladed weapons were used. And no one was shot, either."

"You think *people* did this?"

"Bydo are ruthless, Justin, but they're also messy."

"This isn't messy enough?"

Sam shook her head. "I mean the cuts. Look at them: they're precise, elegant, even surgical— like that impact crater we landed in. The Bydo don't bother 'sharpening' their blades that much: someone put in a lot of style, here."

Justin growled: "You sound like you're talking about a sushi chef, or something."

"Or a butcher." Sam shrugged. "And if you can't look at this objectively, we won't learn jack-shit, okay? But there's another reason I know the Bydo couldn't have done this."

"What's that?"

"I'm pretty good at criminal character analysis, Storm: I've trained to read most criminal minds, and I think the people that did this were—"

Justin shook his head: "No: what's *that*?" He pointed to her right shoulder.

Sam frowned, but then she realized that he was motioning to the second Aegis on her shoulder. She unhooked it for him:

"This is one of the new model IV's. I've been on the Aryl to get some for us. Guess they were testing them off-world before putting them into service on Earth."

"Do you have to bother with that, now?"

"Firepower might be a good thing to have right now."

"But it looks like a regular Mark III." Justin shook his head. "I mean, except for that rod under the barrel, there's no real diff—"

Samantha ripped a black plastic sheath off the weapon's rail. The 'rod' beneath was a polished metal surface, lethally narrow. She quickly took the weapon over her head and, holding the reinforced pistol-grip with two hands, sent it down into the concrete wall, inches from Justin's head. The weapon's blade sank into the wall effortlessly, and when Sam let go the Aegis hung beside Justin, firmly embedded into the stone.

"It's gonna make our utility knives obsolete someday." She added.

Justin waited a full ten seconds before drawing a breath. "Are you bloody friggin' insane?"

"No: I'm bloody friggin' coordinated." She looked back at him. "But someone here *might* be insane."

Justin blinked until he got her meaning. "You think one of the staff went swashbuckler with one of these? But how could someone manage to do all *this* with one weapon?"

"They probably couldn't." She admitted. "There's another thing, too: some of these wounds..." Sam cringed as she spotted on particularly catastrophic injury. "Some of these wounds are too big: the weapon used was considerably larger."

"And more efficient..." Justin grimaced as he grabbed the wall-hung Aegis and attempted to jar it loose. "Where'd you find the gun?"

"The security room. I think some poor schmuck was trying to get at it. He wound up flayed to a stew in the corner."

"Nothing else of interest over there?" He asked.

Sam shrugged. "No. But what a poor bastard he was: his body didn't even look human, it was so deformed. I could barely even tell his gender."

"Was he the senior security officer?"

She shook her head. "Those guys are always old codgers, so no. I think he was like me: he was young."

"How could you be so sure about that if you could barely make out his sex?"

"He had Nalubaale Syndrome: his eyes were more yellowed than even mine are, and lord did the light reflect off 'em! Like disco balls, or something." Sam pushed Justin away from the Aegis and, gripping the butt with one hand, promptly yanked the weapon out of the wall.

"Loosened it for you..." He sulked.

One of the hydraulic doors behind them hissed open by itself: the noise made Justin jump and Samantha cock her head in alertness. The Captain's little head tilt jogged his memory:

"Isn't the control room near the barracks? You sent Chenine out there. What did she have to say?"

"I saw her boot-prints around the security room, but our 'fairer third' wasn't there. I assumed that she—" Sam's eyes flickered. She looked up at Justin: "I assumed that she double-backed this way. But she didn't?"

Justin shook his head.

"Then where the hell *is* Chovert?"

IX.

As soon as her eyes stopped flitting up and down uncontrollably Chenine let out a long sigh. She rolled her forehead in the grey silt and tried to clear out the cobwebs.

"Je me sens comme un préservatif utilise."

Setting her brain on the right language would be a good start...

She groaned and tried to rub the back of her head, which burned with an unholy fire. She didn't get far: as she tried to move one hand the other would invariable move

with it in synch. It took her a few seconds to realize she'd been tied up: her wrists behind her back and her legs at the ankle.

She rolled onto her back: the girl was no longer 'burdened' by her backpack. With further humiliation Chenine lifted her legs and discovered her own plastic cannula tubing wrapped about her bootless ankles.

'Shoeless', you dumb pop-tart. The word you want is shoeless; bootless means 'worthless' in English, doesn't it?

Her feet were shoeless.

It was the rest of her sorry, bound body that was 'bootless'...

She groaned again, and then a dark shadow rose over her. A boot came up under the small of Chenine's back and flipped her onto her stomach, as if she were trout in a frying pan.

"Facedown, darling." A sandpapery voice ordered.

"Who—"

"And mouth shut."

"Wh—"

"Mouth *shut*." The boot pressed down on the back of Chenine's head. A wave of fire exploded along her skull. She buried her face in the silt and tried to keep quiet, but the man must've realized how much discomfort he was causing.

"Sorry, honey. But I'll bet it don't hurt one *one-hundredth* as much as those techies got hurt, do you think?"

"What do *you* know about the att—"

The man took his boot off Chenine's head; the loss of pressure produced just as much pain as it did coming down. The thug kicked her backpack, which sat a few feet away from Chenine's head.

"I know enough to be wary of wackos in black suits. Now, I'll bet you've got some duct tape in this sack— or something like that— and I can put it to good use, so this is your last warning."

Chenine glared up with curiosity. She couldn't see the man's face clearly (the fact that she was still seeing double from the blackjacking didn't help) and she parted her lips with another question. At the last minute she thought better of it and closed her mouth.

"Good girl." He snarled. "You're not pregnant, are you?"

Chenine rested her forehead in the silt and slowly shook her head.

"Good." He cooed.

The man's boot jabbed her in the kidney. Chenine cawed like a crow, more with surprise than actual pain.

But make no mistake: pain was certainly there.

The man unzipped her backpack, rummaged around and then retrieved Chenine's long, flowing rain slicker.

"Now, then: let's put on a good performance for your little friends..."

X.

Justin arched an eyebrow: "What the hell is a '*préservatif*'?"

"What?" Sam knelt down on the ground, examining the weapon they'd found at the bottom of the plateau. "I have no idea: I don't speak frog."

"I thought I just heard Chenine in my 'phones."

"But she's not answering now?"

"Well, no."

Sam shook her head. "That's not good..."

"That gun might not be hers." Justin posited. "What if another Raiden team left it behind after their last patrol, or something?"

Samantha shook her head. She turned the dust-coated Aegis over in her hands.

"No way. Just look at this thing: it's a 20-gauge, for one thing, and Chovert is the only Raiden pilot I've ever met that uses such a weak slug."

He shrugged and adjusted the cords on his nasal cannula. "A standard 12-gauge *is* a little harsh for someone with Chenine's, uh— 'physique'."

"That's why she's got this cushioning on the rail." Sam showed Justin the wad of blue padding all along the sawn-off's top. "Haven't you ever watched her on the range? She lets the gun kick up into her shoulder with each shot; that's how she absorbs the recoil. Not efficient, really, and it really screws-up her reacquisition time, but on the bright side it keeps the thing from breaking her little wrist."

"So it's her gun?"

Sam turned it over again: "It's got an ultra high-beam flashlight, the tritium sights have been stripped out, there's no HUD in the butt, the grip is reinforced with rubber and the barrel's a good three inches longer than regulation: this weapon's been fully-customized for Chenine."

It was an ominous sign, but Justin recalled the footsteps leading out of the research center: Chenine had been chasing something, and running like a banshee, so it was understandable that she'd lose some personal effects in the effort.

But to drop her only means of defense?

"She's still got her poison tongue, if nothing else..." he mumbled.

A few paces into the woods they found more footprints: they led through the silt beside a large patch of Bydo foliage, but they moved in odd directions, seeming to ramble erratically. Justin followed them step-for-step, jerking his legs about as he tried to stay in line.

"Is she drunk, or something?"

Samantha watched him work, and then came up on his left side and clamped an arm down on his shoulders: "Yup: or something..." she motioned to her own feet: they were firmly planted in the thin strip of black moss where no footprints could be left.

"You think someone's with her?"

"I think someone's *leading* her." Sam grit her teeth. "And someone who doesn't want us to know that they've got her leashed."

Justin scrunched his lips as they stalked on; Samantha kept him low to the ground.

"I hope this guy knows that tigers don't do well on leashes..." He muttered.

"But pussycats? Yeah, they do."

"You don't really have a high opinion of Chenine, do you, Sam?"

The girl's golden eyes sparkled in the dark forest. "I value her for the assets she brings to the table, and hand-to-hand combat ain't on that list."

"What's one of her assets, then?"

Sam paused a moment before answering. "Her 'cool' under pressure, I suppose."

"That's not always such a pleasant thing..."

"It's a damn fine thing to have in a dogfight."

Justin knew he'd regret the question, but he asked anyway:

"And what about me? What asset do I bring to the table, huh?"

She grinned and leered at him: "Oh, *your* asset is very important: you look adorable in a *Liefde* suit."

"Seriously..."

"I'm being serious." The woman's smirk widened as she stalked through the foliage.

Justin perched his lips.

Seriously?

He had to pull his head from his ass as Samantha yanked him down by the collar; she pulled him down into a bank of swaying reeds: there was a clearing ahead of them, and standing in the middle of it was their long-lost squadmate.

"She looks okay to me..." Sam appraised. "Except that she's standing right in the middle of a big, open, exposed area. That's ripe for an ambush..."

"If she really is in 'check', you mean." Justin looked at the girl, standing perhaps 50 yards past the bed of reeds, but in the end he had to agree with Samantha's assessment. "She usually stands with her hands folded in her lap, not behind her back like that."

Sam turned over on her back and sighed. "Well: what do we do, then?"

An old borogove tree cooed in the distance. Justin got an idea: he whistled in imitation of the foliage.

His terrible pitch didn't go unnoticed by their squadmate.

Chenine's head instantly came up and her eyes locked on their general location:

"Trap." She called.

That's when the gnarled tree nearest the pair exploded; it sent Justin and Samantha tumbling through the reeds. The air around them suddenly reeked of gunpowder.

Hullo, Zeeba neighbor!

"Holy hell!" Justin cried. "What in the—"

"Devastator slug." Sam called. "And no 'whistle' with it: we're talking a rifle, I think."

"Hello, in there: muck-crawlers!" A gritty voice called out to them. Justin looked up, and sure enough a man had joined Chenine in the clearing. He wore a ratty brown overcoat, bore a brown, spidery moustache and more wrinkles on his face than Commander Faught.

'Laugh-lines'?

Or the equivalent: he seemed to be younger than the commander, anyway.

"Or maybe it just seems that way 'cause he's got a young lady on his arm..."

The man played no games: he stuck the scratched-up, oversized rifle barrel underneath Chenine's chin and issued his ultimatum:

"We'll make things simple, boy and girl: come out where I can see you in the next ten seconds or else..."

He pulled the barrel off Chenine's chin long enough to fire three shots. Smoke and tracers flared from the gun's second barrel: he was firing conventional live rounds. The noise startled Chenine off her feet: she fell to the ground and the man had to grab her

with one hand to get her upright again. This was Justin's first indication that her legs were bound, as the rain slicker draped around her shoulders managed to conceal this. During her time on the ground the girl managed to get her bound hands up under her legs, but hands tied at the front are nearly as useless as hands tied against the back.

"I'm counting, muck-crawlers!" He called. "One..."

"What the hell're we gonna do?" Justin demanded.

"Two..."

Sam shook her head and motioned for him to get down lower: "I'll tell you in eleven seconds."

"Three..."

"We can't let that son of a bitch *kill* her!"

"Four..."

"If he shoots her, Justin, then we're gonna kill him, and he knows that. There's no way he's gonna gun-down his only bargaining chip. Let's see what the guy does next."

"Five..."

Justin grit his teeth: "Samantha!"

"Six..."

"Could you *humor* me and go along with military protocol on this, Justin?"

"Seven..."

He glared at her: "'Protocol'? Think they did that in Ceresland right before they got themselves sliced into neat little *cubes*?"

"Eight..."

"Chovert'll be fine as long as we have our sights on the guy from a concealed—"

"Nine..."

Justin rolled out of the weeds and set down on one knee, his Aegis trained on the codger.

"—location..." Sam buried her face in the reeds and shook her head. "You idiot..."

Justin looked at her out of the corner of one eye: "Sorry, but I've never been able to stomach a queen sacrifice." He got to his feet and stepped forward, his Aegis extended outward with one hand:

"Evenin'." He smirked at the mysterious stranger.

"Idiot..." Sam repeated with a snarl.

"You alright, Chenine?" He called.

She raised one eyebrow: "Time will tell."

Justin looked back at the older man: "That's our squadmate, mister. You go get your own." He raised his weapon even higher.

The mustached man scratched at the stubble on his cheek. He took the rifle off Chenine's chin and rested one arm on her shoulder:

"That's a fancy weapon." He complimented.

"Thanks."

"Aegis Mark III, isn't it?"

"You've got good eyes for an old man." Justin smirked with confidence.

The old man nodded sagely, and then smirked himself: "Better to be an old man than a young fool."

Justin puckered his lips: "Well: people get old, and they tend to become assholes."

"And better an 'asshole' than a filthy mass-murderer." The man sneered.

Chenine turned her head: "We *didn't* commit the murders at Cer—"

"Shut up, girl."

"Don't you tell her to shut-up, monster!" Justin stamped one foot.

Chenine faced her squadmate: "But *he* didn't do it eithe—"

"Shut up, Chenine." Justin growled. "Now, pal: either you let her go, or else—"

"What?" The man snickered. "If I know my firearms, then your Aegis is chambered for devastator slugs, am I right?" He held up his rifle. "And those mass-produced kiddie toys don't come with any useful 'add-ons', do they?" He squeezed Chenine even tighter: "So, when you shoot at me— assuming you can even *hit* me with that handheld cannon— the slug'll vaporize the better part of my body and send pieces of your little 'squadmate' raining down all over your fancy black suit."

The color drained from Justin's face.

"Didn't think of that, did we?" He sneered.

Samantha mumbled a few more choice words from the reeds; this time she was questioning Justin's maternal pedigree.

"So, little soldier boy: are you willing to cut off your squadmate's nose to spite my face?"

Justin grit his teeth. "Guess we've got a stalemate, buddy..."

The ratty man pointed his rifle at Justin:

"Not quite." He raised his voice, addressing Samantha directly: "I've got a 'counter-offer' to make, girl. I'll give you two seconds to come out here before I gun this guy down."

Sam emerged, but unlike Justin she didn't lower her Aegis; she kept it trained on the assailant and his captive. The man blinked as he eyed the silver heart logo over Samantha's left breast, as well as the 'thin red heart' of Justin's suit.

"I'm surrounded by demented Care Bears..."

"We don't have tender hearts, though." Sam assured. "And you know what they say about sticks and stones: at least we're not cold-blooded killers!"

Chenine grit her teeth and rolled her eyes: "Captain: he *didn't* commit those m—"

"Shut up, Chenine." Sam ordered.

"What? You're gonna pin your crimes on me, eh?"

"Are you senile, or just stupid?" Justin demanded.

The mustached man smiled: "I was competent enough to snare your accomplice. That must count for something."

Samantha glared at Chenine. Her eyes were hardly sympathetic:

"First that incident with the Military Investigative Branch, and now this. You've got a penchant for trouble, Chenine. You're quite the damsel-in-distress, aren't you?" She looked back at Chenine's captor: "But better that than a dotty twit!"

The man sneered and pointed his weapon at the pair. "I was gonna let the authorities take you all in for a trial— after I asked you my *own* questions, of course— but I suppose I can get the information I need out of this girl. I should off you both right now..."

He manually cocked his weapon.

Suddenly he doubled over: a large weight landed on his shoulders and a slender white hand wrapped around his neck. Another hand came up on the other side: this one held a Raiden-class utility knife. The blade rested a centimeter from the man's throat, snug against the collar of his stained overcoat.

"That would be an unwise decision." Chenine countered.

"W— Ah!" The man barked in surprise.

The girl looked at Samantha out of the corner of her electric blue eyes: "And I am *not* a damsel, Captain."

Justin laughed: "Tch! Don't you know you should never turn your back on a queen, especially if you give her an open board to work with?"

"How the hell did you get loose like that?" He demanded.

"Unimportant." Chenine hissed.

"Right, but I *would* like to know..."

Chenine kept the blade snug against the man's neck and looked at Justin and Samantha with dagger eyes:

"This man is not responsible for the slaughter at the research base."

"Could've fooled me." Justin growled.

"And *we* did not attack anyone up there, either." She addressed the man.

The guy's moustache twitched. The long lines around his eyes cemented into an incredulous sneer: "So you say..."

Samantha stepped forward and held out an empty hand. The man took the hint and placed his large double-use rifle in her palm:

"That might be safer with you, for the time being." He glared at Justin and Sam.

Chenine dismounted from him, like a rider sliding off her mount.

"I suppose you plan on killin' me, now?"

Justin ripped the ID card from his breast pocket and shoved it in the codger's face:

"We're Allied Military, you jackass! Our mandate is to kill Bydo incarnations, not sons-of-bitches like you!"

Samantha shook her head: "Pipe down, both of you. Chovert seems to know more about this than anyone. What say we all catch our breath and have a little palaver, huh?"

Justin arched an eyebrow.

"A talk." Chenine explained as she closed her utility-knife.

"Ah..."

Sam prodded her Aegis against the man's back. She squinted at Chenine as she walked past the girl:

"What's that on your blade? Is anyone hurt?"

"We're both fine." Chenine answered as she pocketed the knife. "The blood is my own."

"Huh. Okay, whatever. Good work, kid." Samantha slapped the girl's shoulder as she walked past; two seconds later Chenine tipped over like a felled redwood and landed in the silt.

"Ah, hang on, Chenine." Justin apologized. "Lemme cut your ankles loose..."

XI.

Both the elder man and the Typers struck each other with their best tactics, most wolfish posturing, and unnecessary bravado. In retrospect no one could laugh about the situation, because it was a miracle that no one had been killed.

Mister Velasquez— or ‘Eddie’ as he demanded he be called— was certainly a fish out of water in Ceres, but not in a criminal sense as the Typers believed. He was out of his league in a political sense.

“The *Loxosceles* medallion?” Sam held Eddie’s silver pendant up before her eyes; it sparked in the roaring fire they’d built.

“Loxosceles?” Chenine mulled the word over.

Samantha held it against the campfire light: it was a patchwork of eight silver shards, arranged like the legs of an arachnid.

“That’s the genus name for the brown recluse.” She explained. “Fiddle-back spider.”

“You’re a spider?” Justin said. “You’re a long way from Epdin, Mister Velasquez.”

Eddie acknowledged this. As it turned out he was on special retainer for the civvies at EPDN, and it was his investigation that brought him out here, albeit in a roundabout way.

“Just my luck that I run into a school of idiot sharks.” He looked up: “No offense, of course.” Eddy rolled the chocolate-flavored ‘kickstarter’ around in his mouth. “And thanks for the sweet. Tch! Good flavor, too: my daughter used to love this crap. She was always trying to hook me on the stuff. Sheesh: I can’t say what it is about humans and chocolate, but—”

“It’s the theobromine.” Justin said.

Sam and Eddie stared at him, their eyes askance.

“What?” He blushed. “It is...”

Chenine broke the long pause:

“Did you join-up with the Epdin Raising Committee after your time with Metro Police?”

Velasquez pulled a cigarette from his pocket. “Now, how in the hell did you know about that?”

“The way you frisk a person.” Chenine answered. “You use the same technique as the Police Department in the Great City.”

“You were awake, huh?”

“In and out.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry about the whole, uh, knock on your noggin’. And everything else, I guess.”

“It’s okay. You were professional, at least.”

“You’re familiar with Metro Police’s frisking procedures?” Samantha grinned incredulously. “And just how *did* you manage to wriggle out of those bonds, Chovert?”

“Don’t ask.” Justin advised. “Just *don’t*.”

“Anyway,” Eddie continued, “one of my leads died a few weeks ago. He was military, and being ‘sharks’ yourselves maybe you knew him.”

“What was his name?” Sam asked.

“Joe Dastarke. He was a corporal.”

The three Typers shook their heads in turn.

Dastarke, it seemed, had something strange in his head that was found during autopsy (something *other* than the shard of kiln-fired clay he jammed into an eye-socket), and Eddie somehow managed to 'procure' a sample of it. It didn't take too much analysis to reveal what it was.

"You guys'll appreciate this." Velasquez lit a cigarette in the roaring fire. "It was a little shard of Bydo flesh. How about that?"

"You're kidding." Justin scoffed. "You confirmed this?"

"I have a few sources at the Labs. One of my techie friends is a former high-level contractor for them. Well, when I start coming around with this stuff *someone* took a notice, because within a few days I get a summons to appear at the Hamburg branch."

"For what?" Sam asked.

"To meet with the lab's senior researcher, if you can believe that. Some high muckety-muck Doctor so-and-so: Alletalen, I think. That's right: Dr. Bunic Alletalen."

"Alletalen?" Justin scratched his chin. "Now that name sounds familiar..."

"He's the head of Bydo Labs, after the Lab Chief, of course." Chenine explained.

"Yeah, but I'm thinking of something else. Where have I heard that name before?"

"You must've seen him in the paper, or something, because he's not exactly the kind of guy you meet bar-hopping, Storm." Sam motioned back to Eddie: "Why did he send you here?"

Eddie shrugged. "He didn't exactly explain the significance of the alien shit in Dastarke's brain, but he seemed pretty surprised. Hooey, that's an understatement: it nearly gave him a fainting-spell! He tells me the junk is probably Cerean, and gives me the name of his expert out at the research lab."

"Doctor Alletalen didn't put you in direct contact with the researcher?" Chenine asked.

Eddie shook his head. "Nah: he said that if I wanted to pursue this lead then I should go to the source. He said it'd be more 'convenient' for an analysis."

Sam wrinkled her nose. "Couldn't see how *that* makes sense."

"He's got the PhD's, not me, so I went along with it. A lead's a lead, after all. Anyway, civilians don't have a snowball's chance in hell of making a trip like this, and the good doctor said he couldn't get me passage on a supply ship until just the other day. Just my luck, huh? It's the story of my life."

"If you believe in coincidences, then yes: you were royally screwed by the fates." Justin shrugged.

Samantha leaned forward: the roaring pyre of shorn Bydo foliage simmered on her yellow eyes (that was a benefit of the Midnight Forest: the dry, chemical-rich 'wood' burned readily and brightly, even in the reduced-oxygen atmosphere).

"What happened up here, Eddie? What did you see, and why did you think we did this?"

"Your little friend here seems to know as much as I do. Maybe even more. I saw things, and I can tell you about them, but not everything makes sense to me."

All eyes turned to Chenine. She was eager to hear Mister Velasquez's account of events, however, and only provided the barest details of what she'd seen. As it was, she could sum everything up in one sentence:

“The creature responsible for this ...” she looked at Justin, but then avoided his eyes. “The creature I saw in the monitor bears a strong resemblance to the ‘Antithesis’ Entity. Based on the description, I believe that it was him.”

Eddie scratched his chin: he knew that name shouldn't make any sense to him, and he was squarely uncurious.

In contrast, Sam's head came up as if she'd been shot.

Justin's reaction was unique: all the blood seemed to drain from his face. He was on his haunches, but at these words he sank back down onto his rear and rested two limp arms on his knees. If Samantha looked like she'd been shot, then Justin looked like his very soul had been kicked in the spiritual testicles.

“Antithesis? Are you sure?” Sam asked. She looked at Justin: “You're kidding me: that thing was *real*?”

Justin didn't answer.

Eddie's account of events was more detailed, if less straightforward. He met with the head of Ceresland research, and was shown as much courtesy as required for an acquaintance of Doctor Alletalen's.

“The lab rats didn't want me here, and I really didn't wanna be here, either.”

“What was your first indication that something was amiss?” Sam asked.

“When the lights started going berserk.” He grumbled. “I was in the can when everything went to hell. When I came out the world was turned upside down. So I started ‘tracking’.”

“You went after the perpetrator?”

“I was trying to hit the exit, actually, and ended up getting lost in the factories behind the lab. When I managed to double-back through the dark I caught sight of it: something was tromping through the corridors, and it was strange enough to chill the blood. Slow as a snake, and more confident than a scorpion! I couldn't see the thing's mug, but its eyes: whoa...”

“They were somewhat luminous.” Chenine guessed.

“Tch! Like a small pair of suns! The thing went down towards the barracks, and I went the other way.” He looked up at the soldiers: “Don't call me a coward: I was going to try the radio back in the factory, but it was out. My next move was to check-in on that thing again, make sure it wasn't going to double-back and hunt me down.” He motioned to Chenine: “When I discovered your squadmate in the security room beyond the barracks, typing on the system's computer, I quite sensibly assumed that I had found my ‘perp’. And when I saw *your* golden peepers later on, I naturally figured that you were all peas in a pod...”

Samantha nodded. “Of course. And that I understand. You probably wouldn't know about Nalubaale Syndrome, would you?”

“It isn't contagious, is it?” He smiled.

She shook her head. “No. About thirty years ago there was an ecological disaster in Africa, near New Kenya on the shores of Lake Victoria.”

Eddie nodded. “Yeah: the ‘black water’ incident. I remember reading about that.”

“What the newswires don't like to talk about is what happened next: the contamination spread from the lake and into the water supply. Any settlement within a hundred clicks of the water's edge was affected, though we didn't know it at the time.

The result was the 'Lake Victoria Babies': children born with what came to be called Nalubaale Syndrome."

"I see. And did it do anything else besides bronzing your eyes?"

Sam poked at their fire with a stick: "I'm not comfortable discussing my other symptoms here. I hope you understand..."

"It was rude of me to ask." He apologized. "But I hope it's not a pisser for you."

"It'll kill me, someday. I came out of the womb with an expiration date stamped on my ass, but so does everyone else. All that matters is how we use the time we're given." Samantha rubbed her face: "Look, Eddie: how in the hell could you mistake a human, 22-year-old bottle blonde for a Bydo incarnation?"

Eddie tapped his knee with one finger. "Because I saw something earlier in the day..."

"During your tour of the station?"

He shook his head: "No: on the trip over. I hitched a ride aboard a light carrier. The crew was making a routine pass of all the inner belt stations, then Ceresland and after that they went on to Hansha-Fürste. There were a few dozen grunts, researchers and civilian contractors coming along to rotate out crews along the way. I guess the first problem we ran into was headcount: during the trip out our captain got on the comm. and told us we were one person too many."

"One over? Didn't they do a 'ticket-check' on the ground?" Sam crossed her arms.

"And at each port of call. We'd been to several stations over the last 40 hours, and I assumed that an extra person stowed aboard along the way. But it was strange: the ship's 'warm-body' sensors didn't pick out anything unusual before our approach to Ceresland."

"You mean the extra person got onboard when you left the last port?"

Eddie shook his head. "That's not possible: some grease-monkeys spent a few hours servicing the listening array in Stickney Crater, Phobos, and there's no manned outpost there. We jumped into counter-current space to get out here, and as soon as we dropped out of the trans-dimensional highway the ship's sensors went apeshit."

"They didn't register the discrepancy until then?" Chenine cocked her head.

As Eddie explained it, the captain wrote off the incident as a system malfunction: in addition to an extra 'warm body' the transport ship's cargo sensors were registering extra weight.

"And when I say 'extra weight', we're not talking kilograms, either..."

"Tons?" Samantha scoffed. "The cargo reading was off by *tons*?"

"By a few. That's what you'd call a serious error, I guess."

"Did you notice any other passengers in your compartment?" Chenine asked.

"Not at the time." He shook his head. "But in retrospect, yeah: there was another person there."

Samantha arched her brows. "How can you be so sure, 'in retrospect'?"

Velasquez coughed uncomfortably. "Well, there was this girl: she came and sat down in the chair in front of me. I didn't think about it at the time, but now..." Eddie looked at the trio of Typers in turn: his face was grim.

Justin sat up and spoke for the first time in awhile:

"What did you see, Mister Velasquez? *Who* did you see?"

Eddie tossed his cigarette in the bonfire and snorted. He pointed at Chenine: "It was her: the extra person was her, to a hair on the head."

XII.

The two women spoke with Eddie for quite some time while waiting for their transmission to reach Regional Command. The old guy was evidently quite a cut-up, and Samantha got along with him particularly well. Justin had initially mocked Velasquez's shoddy-looking gun, but only because of his naiveté: when Sam turned it over in her hands, with her eye for customization, she appraised it as one of the finest, tautest weapons she'd ever surveyed. He did the handiwork himself, and that was another point of idle chatter they could go on about.

Justin stood far apart from all this, his head resting on the mirror-finish of his Raiden. Soft footsteps approached from behind, and Chenine's silver hair sparkled in the light of the distant bonfire.

"I thought you'd be relieved." She said.

"Nothing I've seen up here gives me 'relief'. Why should I be relieved, huh?"

"You're vindicated." Chenine explained. "At least your story is."

"Because no one believed me before, huh?"

"No, nobody did."

He slumped down on the ground and started buffing one of the *Love's* talons. This was mere busywork, but it was good for his nerves.

"I'd had hopes in the back of my head, Chenine. I was starting to believe..."

"Believe what?"

He looked at her with sparking eyes: "I thought it all might have been some kind of dream: I thought everyone might be right about me. I'd have welcomed that."

"But life is not a dream." She observed.

Justin bowed his head and sighed.

"This isn't easy for you to process." She noted.

"No, it fucking *isn't* ..." his voice trailed off. "Ugh. I'm sorry. Forget it."

"Why did you go back to the station just now?"

"To check the security room. That corpse you saw—the 'unrecognizable' one with the yellowed eyes—is gone."

"You shouldn't have gone up there by yourself—"

"Fuck that." He snarled. "The son of a bitch is *gone*. He left."

Chenine bucked at Justin's anger, and she noted the watery glint in his green eyes. She wandered over to the *Chaste Gazer* and examined her own landing gear.

Guess she's in the mood for some busywork, too...

"Captain Rayne has her own thoughts..."

"Does she? Tch! How trustworthy is *her* assessment? She thought that a human was responsible for this massacre!"

"The Captain explained that to me..." Chenine stared down at her boots. "And this 'Antithesis': he isn't a typical Bydo soldier. Samantha had a reason for thinking that a Bydo didn't commit this crime..." She looked back at him. "She needs to know more about your encounter at Deimos to complete a profile—"

“Yeah? And why the hell is that?” Justin shouted. His anger managed to stun Chenine into momentary silence. “Well? Are you just leaving me in suspense for some kind of idiotic dramatic effect or can you not even remember how Sam tried to back out of her fucking misreading of the situation?” He sneered like an animal. “Tch! Maybe Sam does have an excuse for being wrong, but what excuse could *you* have for being so slow on the uptake?”

This angry farce was as brutal as it was juvenile: he was really just looking for a fight. Chenine crossed her arms, but she didn't take the bait. The girl rubbed the back of her head and shrugged.

“I *do* have a concussion, you know...”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry.” Justin crumbled down against his ship.

“It's okay.”

“No, it's not. But the whole thing with that monster, whatever the hell he is, it's like a bad dream. Why *didn't* Sam think a Bydo was responsible?”

“It's the way she read the crime scene. She thinks the killer acted... well, that he *didn't* act with dispassion.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“The way the murders occurred, and the methods used... the time it took for everyone to die, and the massive suffering inflicted—”

Justin leapt to his feet. He snared the girl by the throat with one hand:

“*What about it?*” He screamed. “What's your point?”

He thrust Chenine's body against the hull of the *Chaste Gazer* and squeezed at her windpipe. The girl tried to cough; she held his arm with two limp hands.

“Why can you never seem to *get to the point?*”

Her fingernails scratched at his arm, tearing Justin's *Leifde* suit. He took hold of the girl's head with both hands.

“Get... to... the... *point!*”

With each word Justin rammed Chenine's skull up against her own Raideen. After the second hit a froth of blood poured through her lips and nose. By the fourth strike he heard a crunchy sound, like an egg-shell being stepped on, and her eyes went askance in opposite directions.

“Rrrgh!” He snarled like a beast and struck Chenine's chin. This act forced her slack jaw to open.

A waterfall of blood streamed out her pale lips—

Justin flinched. He wagged his head to and fro.

“The person who did this acted sadistically.” Chenine explained. “Captain Rayne believes the perpetrator derived great pleasure from the act: it was not with a sense of ‘duty’ that he acted, but desire.”

“You mean sadism, and passion.” Justin slowly enunciated these words.

“The ‘forbidden fruits’.” Samantha came up behind the pair without either of them hearing her. “The dark stuff. Hate ‘em all you want, but normal Bydo don't possess those feelings.”

Justin nodded. “They're property of the children of Eden.” He said slowly.

“Yeah, well Antithesis picked them up somewhere in his travels. I'd say the thing took a pretty big bite out of that apple, too, 'cause the way it did things up here— all that pleasure, and all that bloodlust—”

“—was all too human.”

Sam wrinkled her nose: “I wouldn’t have put it quite like that, Storm. What do we think Antithesis wanted up here, anyway?”

“Who knows?” Justin growled. “But he got it all in two masterful little moves: stowaway, then slice ‘n flay.”

Samantha noted her squadmate’s shaken state— Justin wasn’t smiling at his own jokes, and it was *never* good when Justin refused to laugh at his own jokes— as well as Chenine’s overall unease.

“Hey: are we all okay, here?”

“No.” Justin answered after a moment. “No we’re not: I think we’re in *big* trouble.”

