



*TYPERS:*

*The Galilean's  
Shame*

Chapter 25:  
**Fruition**

## Fruition

### I.

Along its equator the barren wasteland of Mars takes on two forms: to the North lies a massive smooth plain of silt and dust (the only remains of the prehistoric 'Great Ocean'). The Southern hemisphere is dominated by a land of endless craters. Between these two lies the sloping remains of the coast. That's where one can find the *Cydonia Mensae*.

135 years ago a rusty little space probe called *Viking 1* pattered its way into the Martian orbital, sent from the Earth to take a little peek at the Red Planet. The clumsy box pointed its primitive camera at the surface and snapped some hasty shots. Its lens happened to wader over *Cydonia Mensae* during its sweep, getting a nice picture of the region. That little picture caused quite a stir back at mission control: the grainy shot they got back revealed a barren, sloping costal plain.

That, and a massive human face jutting out of the earth.

The strange formation was gazing upward from Mars. It bore a vapid, ineffable expression. To all observers it appeared to be staring, disinterestedly, at something behind the probe's camera. Most people said the face displayed absolutely no emotion, while others said it bled a hint of sadness: it was compared to the enigmatic gaze of the Venus de Milo (only, where the Venus bore no arms, this lonely face had no body).

Of course, this mystery- and all the foolish romanticism that came with it- couldn't last forever: the Mars Global Surveyor eventually proved that this supposed 'face' was a mere trick of shadows and light when it again photographed the spot with a much higher-resolution camera: *Cydonia Mensae* was a featureless pile of rocks and debris.

To understand what a 'Ferryman' looks like, one should think of that hollow facial structure on the Red Planet. The body of this massive O.P.I. looks identical to a cicada's molt (one can find these morbid little insect shells clinging to countless trees on Earth, at least one could back when the oceans were blue). In place of an insect's head, however, it bore a gigantic stony face, or at least the *appearance* of a face, so similar to that grainy photo of the face on Mars that the resemblance moved beyond 'eerie' and well into the domain of 'creepy'.

The Ferryman drifted across the Sea of Nostrum. It was ponderously slow-moving. The very tip of the thing's stony tail skirted the oily ocean, kicking up waves 20-feet high in either direction. A legion of headless Oboli surrounded the Ferryman in a phalanx; countless Momeraths swarmed about each of these spear-throwers. Two-dozen Raidens scrambled through the cold air, alternately attacking and retreating in semi-organized strikes. Twenty minutes ago there were 30 Raidens in the air: six of them now lay deep beneath the black ocean.

Two Dancers swooped in for a stealth strike on the Ferryman's head. Suddenly, unexpectedly, a six-hundred foot long tentacle whipped up from the thing's stony body. It was heading directly into the Dancers' flight path.

The appendage exploded in a shower of golden light: it was severed at the middle.

The *Principalities* soared past this amputation, its force orb blazing violently following the wave cannon discharge. A second massive tentacle swiped at the retreating

Raiden, clipping Connor's rear and smashing his head against the side of his ruined cabin.

*"Is mór mo dhiobhail!"* He screamed into his facemask, writhing in pain.

The *Principalities'* cockpit hung from the rest of the airframe by a few half-crushed support beams. His canopy was gone; half his chair was sliced apart and an Oboli spearhead was lodged in the cabin, mere inches from his body.

That spear had come down hard on the Raiden; it split the left side of Connor's chair clean through when it fell. His right shoulder-harness, armrest, and seatback also disappeared beneath the cruel black spear tip.

Connor had not been seriously injured.

Now, his body exposed to the cold stale air, his only protection against the atmosphere was that thin, *Class I* adaptive spacesuit. He manned his controls with one arm, but it was like trying to keep a determined Ouija planchette still: the ship kept trying to wobble towards the Ferryman, as if the demonic entity were a magnetic pole and Connor's controls a compass needle.

As a matter of fact, that was *exactly* the situation: the more the Raidens pulled away from the Ferryman, the stronger its influence over them became. Deep inside the incarnation's body a massive spine runs its length: it isn't composed of bone or steel, but *iron*. A dense soup of highly-charged cells surrounds this column, suspended in a liquid medium; the fluid sits in small tubular chambers, running the whole length of the spine in intricate helical patterns. At the monster's leisure, this soup heats-up and swishes about that rod of iron, agitated like a massive washing machine.

The result is an electromagnet. It is a very *strong* electromagnet, powerful enough to draw a metal Raiden close to it.

The ships could certainly slip into 'skimland', if they wanted to, but the torsional strain on their ships would shear them into a trillion little pieces: as long as the Ferryman controlled that electromagnet, there was no escape from the incarnation's grasp.

An there was no way to leave the Galilean Mass.

*One of the Penetration Teams must be engaging the Core by now.* The Scotsman reckoned. *This Mass isn't long for this world.*

And if the Mass's Core erupted while Connor and the other pilots were still on the surface?

They might as well be lobsters.

*'Cause we'll be boiled alive.*

It was past time to go: the decoy mission was over. But the terrible Ferryman would prevent them from doing so until the Mass's death.

*Or until its death, I suppose.*

Connor banked his Raiden: the *Principalities'* airframe could not survive another hit, but he had little choice in the matter.

*'Needs of the many', after all...*

Connor charged his wave cannon: he planned on striking the demon's face. He also disengaged the safety mechanisms on his engine's fusion reactor: sirens blared in the cockpit as the control rods surrounding the engine core retracted.

*Just in case I am hit.* He smirked: in that case, the Ferryman wouldn't outlive him for long.

Two Oboli swooped in front of him, blocking Connor's path with their massive harpoons.

Connor swore bitterly.

*So much for heroics...*

Then a deafening sonic boom exploded all around his ship. A brilliant silver sphere thundered down from above the *Principalities*. It leveled off well ahead of Connor's damaged ship and accelerated even faster, a bright blue tail of fire blazing from its rear: the thing was a Raiden. The heat of its exhaust trail made Trent flinch in pain.

"Gah! What the hell?" He yelped in surprise.

Two thin arms spread to either side along this new ship's frame. It passed between the two Oboli. The ship's thin frame easily cleared the space between the two headless demons, while its spike arms caught each one by the breast. The spikes ripped open their chests while the Raiden continued accelerating past the devils, carrying the flesh of their trunks with it as it rocketed down towards the Ferryman.

Both Oboli spun wildly through the air in response to the insult. One smacked Connor's starboard wing as he passed it. The *Principalities* spun out, and only Connor's expert maneuvering saved him from falling into the drink. He corrected his attitude and swung back around to face the Ferryman. The spherical Raiden was well on its way to reaching the incarnation.

Connor suddenly recognized that ship.

*I never forget a lady... especially not that one.*

"The *Platonic Love*." He muttered. Connor cocked an eyebrow. "Justin Storm?"

That scrappy runt from Base-10: he was the *fear boireann* who didn't stop to render aid to Trench's squadron after they were ambushed by the Raiden-Killers. The two of them shared drinks together in the Southland Isles, after which Storm 'shared' the back of Connor's fist.

Now he watched as the young pilot drove his Raiden headlong into the Ferryman's influence.

*What the hell is he doing?*

## II.

"-'an- 'an the braids get setted like *this*."

Fireplace: living room.

*On her tummy...*

Flickering: warm.

Roll over: cool mosaic floor.

Delightful on her back.

*Mmmm...*

"-d'ya see, Mamma? See?"

Smile.

Then a grin.

Table: chair and window.

Rain. Cold wind.

A groan.

Arm on table: head in arm.

“...not now, Chenine.”

Traipse. Tiny shoes. Tiny feet.

*Pitter-patter.*

“Here, mamma: *here*, you see?”

Arms extended; braids out over shoulder...

Pretty, pretty, pretty locks!

*See?*

“Mommy’s not feeling good, right now, honey: mommy’s in-”

*-a valley.*

“-a li’l valley, baby.”

*Oh, mamma.* Toothy, girly grin. “Oh, mamma!”

“Can’t you climb-”

*the spout*

“-again, mamma? Like-”

*like the itsy, bitsy-*

“-like you always do!”

Again: a toothy, girly grin.

“Not now, Chenine.”

Head on table: moan.

“C’mon, mamma:”

*I can-*

“I can help! Let me help like before. Like-”

*always-*

“always!”

Cuddle. Nestle.

Pause.

One leaden arm: set out, and stretched.

A hand on her head.

Ruffle-ruffle.

“Mamma!” Chiding. “Not the braids!” Giggle.

“Let’s go to mommy’s room.”

### III.

*Pitter-patter... pitter-patter.*

Bare feet on tile floor.

Toe in... foot... leg... waist... chest... neck... head-

Chenine’s eyes flared open. She yelped and flailed her limbs wildly. The girl based her fist right into the *Chaste Gazer’s* center console.

“Urgh!” She moaned as her mind snapped back into consciousness. The girl cradled her bruised right hand against her breast.

Her facemask was all fogged up: the interior of her Raiden was a steamy, dripping sauna. There was nothing but darkness all around her.

Sweat poured down her neck; her hand throbbed in pain.

*I’m still alive*, she deduced. *But where?*

She remembered the horror back at the midnight savannah. She was yanked down through that field of terrible weeds, down into the darkness where she lost consciousness.

*I was screaming: she reasoned, I used-up my suit's air faster than it could circulate the oxygen.*

But she had a good reason to scream: the Mass had her, now.

But why was she still alive? And where was this? It was utterly dark, and felt very lonely. During their descent through the Galilean Mass Chenine never, for one second, felt that they were alone: dozens of eyes seemed to leer at them through the darkness. If she couldn't always see them, she could certainly feel their gaze.

She felt nothing here: only darkness. Wherever this was, it was somewhere far, far away from where she'd been abducted from her Penetration Team.

It was somewhere much deeper than that.

Chenine looked out her cockpit window: darkness met her eyes from all directions.

*Would it be any better if I could see what was out there?*

She felt weak, drained physically. The girl made a few half-hearted attempts at powering up her Raiden, but nothing worked. Eventually Chenine made the decision to pop her canopy and see what was out there, but her cockpit release lever was jammed. She considered the Aegis weapon behind her seat: she *could* use it to destroy her canopy, but in all likelihood the explosive shotgun slugs would be insufficient against the refraction-corrected crystal.

*And even if the shells did have the power I needed, the blast would also damage my spacesuit to the point of uselessness.* She'd be at the mercy of whatever environmental air existed in the Mass. This was a fairly important point: Bydo Masses had plenty of atmospheric gasses, but precious little oxygen.

*And a little too much ammonia and sulfur.* She thought about having to breath that caustic solution into her lungs: it would burn like bleach going down. Chenine didn't particularly want to die like that, so she abandoned any thought of shooting out the canopy.

She was completely helpless: a prisoner in this absolute darkness. She couldn't even try to contact her teammates.

*In a way, it kind of helps to know that I'm helpless.* With absolutely no way to escape this black purgatory, or contact the outside world, Chenine resigned herself to the moment.

She folded her hands over her midsection and closed her eyes.

Minutes passed. Then hours. A few times Chenine felt a fearsome twisting noise within her airframe: these creaks echoed through the lonely cockpit, much like deep water pressure squeezes against a submarine, haunting the vessel with mysterious squeaks.

With nothing better to do, she slept. Eventually she began tossing and turning in her seat. She scrunched her eyes, then tried to cover her face with one arm. Suddenly she realized what was disturbing her: light.

Chenine sat up: a faint, dawn-like light was rising out of nowhere about 100 yards in front of the *Chaste Gazer*. Within a minute that light had grown into a radiant blaze, bathing the entire cavern with beautiful, golden light.

Chenine was too distracted by this mysterious light to notice that the *Chaste Gazer's* systems were powering up; the Raiden was again coming to life.

Then she could see the chamber that she'd been brought to.

"Oh, I see." The girl mumbled. "This... is not good."

Chenine's Raiden lay on a thick bed of reeds: both wings were hopelessly bound to the ground. The chamber was spherical, with a diameter of perhaps 200 yards. When she considered how far down inside the Mass she must be, Chenine started to get very claustrophobic.

Then she recognized the burning pillar in the middle of this chamber; it was suspended by pulsing tendrils from both the floor and the ceiling (these looked curiously like smoldering tree branches). The whole apparition reminded Chenine of that giant, pulsing fusion reactor back in the bowels of the *Hapherobe*. And, curiously enough, this massive column served the same general purpose:

It was the Core of the Jupiter Mass.

Chenine knew that she should feel something: terror came to mind, perhaps. But as the light in the chamber grew brighter and brighter, she found herself growing lightheaded: her limbs were leaden and weak. As a matter of fact, the first emotion to spring up in her head was *apathy*. She didn't have the energy to care. It was as if her body had been injected with a strong cocktail of tranquilizers.

The reeds beneath the *Chaste Gazer* rose: they lifted the Raiden slowly, dreamily, up into the light. Chenine felt a heavy, oppressive force surround her body: she could barely breathe.

The nose of the Raiden rested mere feet from the Core's surface.

The monitor indicating Chenine's Impingement Factor spiked. Three seconds later the screen malfunctioned, then cracked apart.

The link fed small bits and pieces into Chenine's brain: she could smell the bright golden surface of the Core. It smelled 'electrical', like the crisp evening air smelled during a lightning storm.

Her breathing became harsher: something was happening on the surface.

The wall of the Core liquefied until it resembled a brilliant sea of smelted gold. The surface shimmered, then rippled. Two round spheres slowly emerged from that vertical pool. They were attached to a glowing, beautifully symmetrical chest and abdomen. A long, bird-like neck emerged next, impossibly twisted about itself. The head on top was long, narrow, and ill-defined.

The slit of its genitalia peeked out beneath all this: it was ridiculously large in proportion to the rest of the entity. Copious amounts of glowing gold fluid dripped from its vaginal lips. It bled a similar radiant fluid from both mammary glands.

Chenine's pupils dilated to maximum.

She caught her breath and held it; her skin prickled into a mess of rough gooseflesh. Despite her nearly paralytic condition, she slowly, ever so gently, turned her head to the right:

The Keton girl was not alone in the cockpit.

A cheek rested mere inches from her nose; humongous green eyes stared straight ahead in unwavering, adoring attention. The little girl appeared entranced: her creepy eyes glistened in the light.

Chenine's lips quivered as she stared at the ghostly child.

“W... h-” She couldn’t manage any words: she was having trouble just keeping her head level.

The little child extended her arms: they were extremely pale and sickly-looking. The rosy color in her cheeks, however, blossomed into an unadulterated blush. A translucent nightgown clung to the girl’s lithe body.

She stretched her arms outward and groped with her hands.

Chenine blinked, and the child was gone. She looked back at the terrible bird-thing, and the child was there, lying in the creature’s hands. The golden entity cradled the little girl in its arms, rocking her from side to side like a baby. For her part, the child looked up at the thing’s narrow, nail-like head with adoring green eyes. She buried her face against the monster’s moist breasts.

The next thing Chenine heard was a soft sucking noise.

*What is this? What’s going on?* Chenine willed herself out of the link: she struggled to move some power into her *own* body, if for no other reason than to maintain consciousness.

When Chenine withdrew herself from the link the scene before her changed. When she looked back towards the ‘mommy-bird’ monster she saw it, again leaning out of the Core, but this time with arms splayed to either side: half-a-dozen black, whip-like tendrils lay embedded in the glowing demon’s ‘flesh’.

These tentacles had *pierced* the entity’s brilliant skin. The tips lay within the monster’s flesh. Chenine followed these cords back to their source with her drugged eyes: she realized that they *all* circled around her canopy, running towards the rear of the Raiden.

*The tentacles: is there something behind me?*

No, she knew that there wasn’t.

But, then, that meant the source of these tendrils was...

*No, that’s impossible. Wasn’t it?*

As Chenine debated this, her mind inadvertently drifted back down into the link. Looking back up, she lost track of all those vaporous black cords. The creepy, wide-eyed child was there again, however, still sucking reverently at the ‘mommy-bird’ monster’s breast.

The demon bent its horrible, impossible neck down towards the child. With its ill-defined beak, it began nuzzling the little girl’s midnight-black hair.

*Grooming...*

Chenine suddenly felt *very* nauseous: she wanted to throw up.

This disturbing display went on for another three minutes: then something very, very strange happened.

With no obvious provocation, the ‘mommy-bird’ incarnation suddenly reared its head. Chenine noticed the thing’s eyes: they were bulging out of their tiny orbits.

*“Screee-eeeeah!”*

Chenine cried in pain. She instinctively covered her ears (forgetting that she was wearing a full-on spacesuit). The demon’s piercing cry was horrible: it was like a whole flock of eagles screaming in unison.

It’s claws seized the little girl very tightly: the doe-eyed child’s body tensed in alarm: her face contorted with surprised terror.



The bird-demon screamed again, pushing the child away from it as if she carried the bubonic plague. The kid tried to hold on to one of its arms, but the entity violently flung her away.

Chenine recoiled as the small child hurtled through the air and sailed straight for her cockpit. She shielded her face (knowing full well that a little-girl-projectile, no matter how fast she was thrown, wasn't too likely to damage the canopy, but given this entire experience Chenine wasn't about to take any chances).

She waited to hear that inevitable 'thud', but none ever came. When she opened her eyes again, there was no little girl to be seen. But the 'mommy-bird' monster was still out there.

The thing was writhing and thrashing about insanely. The light emanating from the Core intensified; Chenine could feel the temperature of the small Core chamber rising. Hot bubbles began boiling up and popping all along the Core's liquid surface: the massive bed of weeds restraining the *Chaste Gazer* started to shrivel and brown-up. Then they died.

*This is absolutely, positively not a good thing.*

Chenine's sweat pores opened anew: saltwater bled through her skin and danced over every part of her body.

The ground began to shake.

"*Screeeeee-eeee-EEEEEAH!*" The bony-necked bird demon extended all its limbs out, splaying itself spread-eagle against the boiling wall of the Core. It glared *straight* at R-H-CRTS; Chenine would swear that its beady little eyes were clouded with something akin to malevolence.

*Hatred, even...*

She had no intention of watching this macabre spectacle any longer: Chenine emergency-started her engines and wobbled up and away from the shriveling vines below. It was getting hard to see: sweat poured over her eyes, stinging them with caustic salt.

She was already panting: if she didn't get out of this inferno soon she would be immolated by the sheer heat. That's when she discovered a major problem:

*Which way is up?*

The circular chamber had dozens of passages leading to and from it; each of those passages probably branched into twenty tracks apiece further down the road. Chenine did not know how to get into or out of a Mass's Final Core Barrier.

One of the spongy holes in the chamber suddenly exploded. A Force Orb sailed through the hole and embedded itself in the far wall of the chamber. The *Silene's Girdle* burst through that hole.

"*Gazer!?*" The woman radioed Chenine, astonished.

"*Captain.*" Chenine noted with similar surprise.

"*How the fu-*" she began, "no, never mind: Get the hell over here, now!"

"*I suggest you do what you need to do to the Core so we can go.*"

"*Negative, negative,*" she barked: "there's something wrong with the Mass. It's sloughing apart at the seams: the *Zona Pellucida* fell apart sixty-seconds ago. I thought someone managed to ice the Core, but this *isn't* how things're supposed to go down!" The *Silene's Girdle* turned to face the Core. Chenine did the same with the *Chaste*

Gazer: she discovered that the ‘mommy-bird’ entity was gone, the only thing left in the chamber was that massive pillar of light, now boiling like a bed of cooking oil.

Pieces of goo began raining down on the Raidens from the ceiling.

“Goddamnit, *Gazer*: move your skinny little ass!”

“Roger.” Chenine didn’t need much coaxing.

The two Raidens rocketed through a narrow, tubular tunnel. The temperature immediately started dropping, for which Chenine was eternally grateful, but then a light rose up behind them, radiating malevolent energy throughout the superstructure. It lit their path until Chenine believed that the sun itself was rising behind them.

She looked over her shoulder more than once, but not to see the source of that terrible white light: she needed to assure herself that there weren’t two big green eyes glaring at her from the shadows of the rear cabin.

“Just a bad dream... just a bad dream...” Chenine weakly mumbled this credo, but she was thoroughly unconvinced.

*Just a terrible nightmare... just a nightmare...*

The light grew to unbearable levels, then it overtook both Raidens.

#### IV.

Connor flinched in his tattered chair: the scream that reached his ears was blood-curdling.

Communications came back online just a few minutes ago: whatever the Penetration Teams were doing, they were doing it *fast*. Trent banked the *Principalities* sharply, came up on the tail of an Obolus and shelled it down with his photonic cannons: the incarnation bucked and shuddered in a grisly ‘dance’ as the photonic bolts tore its skin apart, shredded its bony wing sets, and sliced into its leg propulsion. The hell spawn spun down into the Nostrum, limp as a noodle.

Another one of those hellish screams filled Connor’s ears. He toward the monstrous Ferryman.

The *Platonic Love* was there, angling in for another strike. Storm slammed headlong into the thing’s massive, ambivalent face, driving those two silver spike arms deep into the Ferryman’s cheek. Immediately a column of noxious purple gas exploded from the wound, coating the silver Raiden.

“*Geeeeeeeeeeah!*” The pilot screeched like a wounded eagle. The fuming geyser tossed the *Love* backwards into the air, but no sooner did Storm regain control of his Raiden than he circled around for another strike.

*Is he completely insane?* Connor thought as he watched the spectacle. This senseless aggression defied explanation, but in reality their situation was beyond desperate. The Oboli were engaging every single available Raiden, including Storm, preventing anyone from landing any blows of consequence against the Ferryman.

Except, that was, for the *Platonic Love*: Storm was either too stupid to see the half-dozen Oboli chasing him, or he didn’t care. Either way, the lad was assaulting the Ferryman like a mindless animal.

*If he can even possibly prevent that behemoth from pursuing us, I’ll give him the chance.* Connor really had no choice: the *Principalities* was too damaged to do anything but support the other besieged Raidens in their fight with the Oboli: the sooner that

headless herd was thinned, the sooner the Raidens could coordinate an assault on the Opie. If that electromagnet-wielding Ferryman couldn't be forced to disengage them, then no one was going anywhere:

They would all die on the stormy seas of the Galilean Mass.

Connor gunned down another spear chucker as it prepared to impale a fleeing Dancer. When he looked back at the Ferryman he again saw the *Platonic Love* slashing away at the vacant face. Large chunks of the stone mask fell away into the oily ocean.

A swift-moving Obolus swooped between the Raiden and Opie, drew its spear back, and plunged it into the Raiden, *twice*, before Storm could swipe open its belly with one of his pointed arms. The disemboweled incarnation fled in agony.

More screams bounded through Connor's speakers. The cries were loud enough to rise above the howling wind dancing around Trent's body.

*Mo chreach! That scream... it's inhuman...*

Two Excels were tangling with a trio of incarnations. Connor maneuvered between the devils and, with some fancy flying, managed to get one of the Oboli to harpoon another. Connor then gunned-down the third Obolus while the other Excels killed the wounded incarnation and the idiot harpooner.

"*Ghhhhhhh-aaaaa-AAAAAH!*" Connor flipped around again: the *Platonic Love* was bleeding coolant from a massive slice all along its port side. An Obolus twirled around in the air, one of its serrated wings dripped with the Raiden's fluids.

*But how it bleeds!* Connor thought as he watched the Raiden. *How much coolant could it possibly have?*

On second thought, that tarry black fluid was a touch too dark to be coolant...

The Obolus returned to strike Justin again. The *Love* didn't react to the assailant: the Raiden continued hammering away at the Ferryman's face.

*Goddamnit, lad! Pay attention!*

A Momerath flew into Connor's cabin, whipped out its acid-laced tail and nearly pierced the pilot through his facemask. Connor took evasive action and returned to his battle against the Oboli.

Before he did, though, he thought he saw something *very* odd out of the corner of his eye: the Obolus that was coming in to strike the *Love* raised its spear over its head, but then suddenly dropped it into the Nostrum. More than that, the harpoon *flew* out of its claws.

Connor was a long way away from the scene, but he could've sworn that he saw something flare out of the *Love* during this phenomenon: it looked like two thin black tendrils suddenly flipped out of the dorsal section of the ship, slapped the armed Obolus in the chest and arm, then retreated back inside the Raiden as quickly as they'd appeared.

*Impossible.* He chided himself.

It was an illusion: an 'arterial' spray of fluid and fuel out of the damaged Raiden, spurting off at an angle.

*An' that certainly makes more sense, doesn't it?* Connor dashed off to contend with the petulant swarm of Momeraths.

*But, Christ, that daft boy,* he considered Justin. *He's striking that thing with blind, completely unthinking recklessness! He won't live much longer at that pace.*

Connor could criticize Storm's stupidity all he wanted, but the short-tempered Scot could remember quite a few times that he *himself* was dismissed as blindly reckless (though, truth be told, he never went so far as to take on an Opie mano-a-mano).

*Give him a mark for enthusiasm, if nothing else,* Connor chided himself.

Another savage, inhuman scream blared over Connor's speakers. The insanity of Justin's cries intensified.

*Insanity? Really? Is what he's doing really so insane, though? Most people define 'insanity' as doing the same thing over and over again, only to meet the same failure each time: is that a good definition? No: I think not. After all: look at your history, lad! What did Sir Robert the Bruce do after having his ass handed to him by the Brits on a regular basis?*

Connor answered his own question.

*Well, actually, he slunk into a dirty little cave and hid his battered and bruised arse well out of sight, but only until he discovered his 'roommate': a pathetic little spider struggling in the confines of that black hole. It desperately tried... tried... tried to climb up the side of the cave wall with all its might. And when, after three futile attempts, that impudent little arachnid finally reached the top, bonny old Bruce was spurred into action.*

Bruce was inspired by shame: shame at the fact that a puny little spider like that could manage to achieve its goals, with patience as its only ally, while he, a grand Scottish Lord, was ready to throw in the towel out of sheer exasperation.

Trent looked back at the sprawling Ferryman- with its wall-like face- and the little silver 'spider' dancing along it. He considered his own Raiden: the broken cockpit, damaged airframe, and leaking valves.

*But I can still bloody well fight, can't I?* Connor smirked derisively. He gazed back at the *Platonic Love*: Storm was still blindly swinging away at that cold, featureless face.

*Tch! I've been shamed, indeed, my little spider, haven't I?*

Trent tightened his remaining seatbelts, grabbed his controls with one steady hand, and accelerated towards the massive Ferryman.

That's when four things happened, almost at once:

The *Love* thrust upward with both arms, dislodging the final layer of rocky skin along the Ferryman's cheek.

Then two Oboli swarmed the *Love* from behind: one stabbed the ship in the side with its cruel spear. The other prepared to strike, but never got a chance.

The Ferryman, enraged by its facial disfigurement, swished at the *Platonic Love* with one massive bodily tentacle; it took out the second Obolus in the process. The tentacle went on to crush the *Love*, tearing one of the Raiden's arms clean off: amputating it at the rotator cuff.

The fluids that exploded from that wound were unbelievable, almost as unbelievable as the pilot's mindless, inhuman bawling.

Connor flinched again. The pilot's voice seemed to 'devolve' with each cry: that last cry had absolutely no trace of humanity in it at all.

That was when the fourth thing happened: this was, by far, the most interesting event:

The Ferryman's face started to collapse in on itself: sealing its open cheek wound by distorting its features. The *Platonic Love* rocketed into this closing space and jammed its one remaining arm into the top, wedging it open. The ship, now little more than a glorified pincushion, bled a dozen kinds of fluid down the Opie's cheek.

Nothing happened for several seconds. Connor continued racing towards the David-and-Goliath duo, his heart beating a thousand times a minute in his chest, when suddenly all the wind was literally *knocked* out of his lungs: a massive negative pressure pulled the air in one direction. The *Principalities* shuddered in the sky: a *very* strong force pulled the air towards the Ferryman, as if the sky were filling a vacuum. One second later everything went back to normal. For a tenth of a second it was all quiet.

Lightheaded from the rush, a silly nursery-rhyme somehow invaded Connor's head.

*The itsy, bitsy...*

Two seconds later the *Platonic Love* vanished in a blinding flash of white light.

The shockwave hit Connor like a ton of bricks: without his canopy in place the heat radiated through his suit and nipped his flesh, charring some of his arm and leg hairs.

"*Ciod!?*" he screamed into the whirlwind of light, heat, and sound.

The light died down, then disappeared.

The *Platonic Love* hung in the air, its vertical engines barely keeping the ship aloft.

The Ferryman drifted backwards lazily. Connor's heart skipped into his throat: he could see daylight through its massive shattered cheekbone! A few seconds after that, Connor's controls became *much* more responsive: there was no longer any magnetic interference.

*The spine*, he marveled, *that fat bastard sheared clean through its spine!*

But it was impossible: the combined fleet had barely managed to *scratch* that Ferryman. Even if Storm's Raider were a Striker-clone, there should be no way for it to inflict that kind of punishment.

One word- and one word only- graced the mystified Scotsman's lips:

"How...?"

He didn't have long to contemplate this question: even as he gazed at the battered *Love*, the sky between the two Raidens clouded-up with fog. Then the fog became a mist. Connor swore: the Ocean of Nostrum was starting to boil over. With the Ferryman's electromagnetic spine severed all the remaining Raidens were busy rocketing up into the outer atmosphere, skimming for the safety of space.

"Hey, there: boy-o!" Connor cried into his headset, "Magnificent bastard, you! I think I owe you *another* drink, an' this time without the punch." He tried to be cheery, but Trent was more ashamed than anything. In general he didn't bear shame very well, but he also didn't like being in someone's debt.

The *Love* hung limply, its one remaining arm dangling lifelessly to one side. The stump where its right arm once sat still bled freely.

"Well, *say* something lad! Anything!"

There was no response.

Explosions sounded beneath them: this part of the Nostrum was already gone; the black sea bed was revealed. Massive earthquakes rocked the earth, fracturing it into

thousands of pieces. A mountain of rocks suddenly burst forth from deep within the Mass and parted: a volcano of fire with a plume like a solar flare burst out of them.

The Galilean Mass was falling apart. Connor again considered the spherical Raiden and its unresponsive pilot.

*Son-of-a-bitch...*

V.

He breathed again.

That deep gurgling noise was repulsive; the pain was overwhelming. Each breath sloshed through his trachea like bleach. He dreaded having to take another.

*Do I need another, anyway?*

Justin's head hung low. He expelled the breath, sending another trickle of frothy pink blood out his lips and nose. It collected on his facemask, which was fractured into an intricate spider's-web of cracks.

The chaos of the dying world outside intruded into the dark cabin from two large circular holes in the airframe: one where an Obolus pierced the top of his Raiden-damaging two of Justin's control panels- and the other where a second incarnation speared the ship from the side. That spear had found Justin's flesh.

The very tip of this spear protruded from the left side of the pilot's abdomen. His adaptive spacesuit lay bunched-up and cemented around the object, keeping his shivering body encased. A deep, massive pool of dried blood lay crusted all around that site.

*Pretty neat-looking, really: like the Great Red Spot on Jupiter, isn't it?*

This made Justin laugh, weakly. The effort sent pain all over his body: from the linear skull fracture above his forehead, down his shattered right arm, and into his anklebone, which was broken clean through after getting caught under his footrest.

He breathed again.

Justin couldn't see worth a crap anymore. Blood tricked freely over his eyes. Every one of his muscles screamed in agony: his right arm tingled and throbbed like a phantom limb. It didn't matter, though: he was almost beyond the pain. With ponderous efficiency, his body was starting to shut down. At this point it was a real effort to even think straight.

The atmosphere boiled over outside; the heat inside the disheveled cockpit rose to unbearable levels.

Vaguely he sensed the Opie, looming large before him, as it sluggishly descended into the evaporating sea below. The body twisted in on itself as it sunk beneath the boiling waves like a shellfish's tail curling up on a barbecue grill. It's mysterious stone face exploded like a dynamited hillside as soon as it touched the burning ocean.

The atmosphere misted, then bubbled: it was burning off. The temperature inside Justin's cockpit spiked; massive heat waves curled through the holes in his airframe, filling the cabin with unbearable warmth. Justin's suit acted like a thermal coil: first-degree burns blossomed all along his clammy skin. His silver necklace sucked up this heat. The metal pendant smoldered against his chest; it scorched his flesh like a branding iron.

*That felt kinda warm, the heat of battle.*

It was like being underwater.

*But another kind of water: boiling water.*

“Hey, over there: lad! Off your arse, then! Wake the hell up!”

That *must be how a ‘shark’ does it...*

“Get on the ball, boy-o! Man your controls!”

*The way a real warrior operates...*

“Did you hear me, soldier!? I said *move* your worthless ass!”

*The fruition of my grand little plan...*

“...good... I’m a... warrior, then...” his whispered with a rasp.

*If not a real human...*

Of all the ways to go, dying as a shark didn’t really seem so bad.

“...there... are... worse ways t- go...”

“Get up! Goddamnit, you piece of shit: *get up!*”

That buzzing noise in his ears...

It was so annoying.

Justin didn’t want to listen anymore; he only wanted to sleep.

“Sleep...” he whispered, then coughed a mess of sticky black goo into his helmet.

He breathed again, once.

Then he closed his eyes.

He went to sleep.

The sunlight didn’t even wake him.

The grass was green down below, but the river that ran through it was now a deep, chunky crimson.

The platinum-blond boy hovered before Justin. His two blue eyes bled emotion. Those pale, skinny arms dangled to either side; his lanky little legs dangled in mid-air. The kid’s body levitated effortlessly before him.

Justin could not fall down, but he couldn’t stand, either: he simply stood with his head dangling limply in front of him. There was no spacesuit, and there was no flight suit either. He vaguely grasped the concept that he was naked: blood poured out of his body from a half-dozen rips and tears in his frail human frame. The fluid dripped down his legs and into that once-silver river.

“Nnnnnuh...” he dreamily groaned.

“We have to go, now.” The little boy quietly ordered.

The Typer’s head lulled sickly to one side: he knew that voice, didn’t he...

*So bad with faces...* he mused, *and names...* who belonged to that high-pitched, boyish voice?

“My name is Quint, you know. At least you should.” The child reminded him; he was in no way annoyed, though. He put his small bare hands on Justin’s shoulder and brought his face closer to the pilot’s. “You’ve been-” he paused, searching for a word, “you’ve been damaged.”

The child looked down Justin’s body, then back up . “Badly, badly damaged. I tried, but I couldn’t stop the damage, not all of it...” Quint looked him in the face again: the boy’s eyes shimmered. “But you need to move now: we can’t stay here!”

Justin mumbled something; all that came out of his mouth, though, was a small stream of pink blood. It glopped into the ruddy red river below them. The grasslands around the river began to shrivel-up from the heat.

Quint nipped his lower lip with two baby teeth.

“You won’t even try...” He surmised. The little boy’s face turned resolute. He scowled determinedly. “There’re other ways to move ahead: if you work with me we can *continue!*” He placed both tiny hands on Justin’s bare chest, one palm over his heart and the other on his lower ribcage.

“This frame of yours: it’s failing, but you still have a will. *I* have a frame, but a will?” The child looked to one side sheepishly, “I don’t really understand that sort of thing. If we could become one, though, then we can move ahead. We can go!” Quint looked down at Justin’s chest hesitantly. “But, then we won’t-” he paused, then started over: “After that, we won’t be able to continue like before: this individuality, separateness- this *oneness* that your type experiences- the same kind of existence that *I’ve* been forced to experience- that’ll all wash away if we join together...”

The grass began to melt: the river bubbled and steamed.

“-but it *is* a way to continue!” Quint grasped Justin tighter. “You have to get rid of *all* the closed door’s you’ve got left in you: I’ve stepped into your head so many times, now let me *use* it!” The boy’s facial features changed: his eyes started glowing a bright yellow; those cute baby teeth blackened and curled into fang-like razors. Black saliva spotted-up around the corners of his lips.

*Surrender...* Justin thought, distantly.

*Yes, that’s right; that’s it exactly.*

Quint’s words reached Justin’s head without the child ever opening his mouth. The boy pressed his hands even harder against the Typer’s chest.

*How?*

*Will me in.*

*What?*

*Will me in...*

*Will you... in?*

*Let me...*

*Let you...*

At this point, held so firmly in the grip of death, Justin hardly cared *what* he did. But the feeling of the child’s hands on his chest and ribs was comforting somehow.

*I’ve felt this comfort before:* Nash Ultima; those steady little fingers clamping over his shoulders.

*Comforting...*

*Cool...*

*Like being underwater all the-*

Justin cast-off any and all resistance he had to the child’s touch. Instantly Quint’s hands pierced his chest wall. It was an abrupt, unexpected occurrence: the boy pulled back a little as it happened, as if he didn’t really expect the penetration to be that effortless.

No blood escaped these wounds. In fact, they weren’t actually *wounds* at all: as the child’s hands slid into his body massive rays of white light blared out of the puncture sites, radiating from beneath the delirious pilot’s skin.

“Oh...*oh...*” Quint’s face contorted in surprise: his eyes re-solidified into those cute baby-blue peepers. “What is this?” His hands stopped digging into Justin as the growing light glittered across the boy’s face. The light was mixed with something else,



too: deep, long shadows also flared from under Justin's skin. It was almost an 'anti-light': like the cold waves of a night ocean rising and falling beneath a lighthouse, the darkness rose and fell in step with the rays of light.

"This power..." Quint salivated. His face completely reverted back into a cherubic little boy's: he pushed deeper in. "We can be one... we can be *more* than one... we can..."

Justin twitched, absently, as the boy pressed down into him.

Without warning a loud siren pealed in the air; seven vicious pinpricks of light popped up between the child and the Typer. Within seconds the lights flared to life: each sported a translucent, spherical shell around it. It looked like there was a green liquid- or gas- suspended within those spheres.

Quint cried out in agonizing pain. He snatched his hands out of Justin and recoiled as a child does when they touch a hot stove. It was more than that, though: tiny black cracks appeared all over the kid's face and body; they multiplied at a terrible rate until the boy drew himself well away from Justin's limp frame. When he did so the cracks re-sealed themselves; he had massive burns on his hands, but the wounds scarred-over within seconds. Shortly after that they were healed completely.

The Karat Spheres disappeared soon afterwards.

A sooty smell filled the air: the grasslands burst into flames all around them. The Great Apple Tree far away in the distance darkened; several leaves wilted and shriveled up.

Quint grabbed Justin's shoulders, though much more gently this time.

"We can't join together." He lamented, bowing his head. "The wall: I would be destroyed before we could."

The boy glared at Justin adamantly. He shook the Typer as stridently as any 10-year-old child could shake an adult. "But *you* can give *me* what I need to save us both."

Justin slumped down into the water; his naked knees bent and settled under the brook.

"No, not that: that's not enough! I can't do anything with your submission: I need your *will!*" He dropped from the air; his tennis landed in the sloshing brook. "I need that heartbeat, your *adamancy!*"

The pilot didn't say anything; Justin fell forward and rested on his side in the rushing water.

"All I have to have is your will, but I *do* need that! I need you to try for me. Think about the times you gave me your heartbeat: you gave me power, you've used it to both tie my hands and give me strength."

Justin didn't respond.

"Untie my hands, now!"

*One time you used your heartbeat in desperation...*

*the other time you used it in anger...*

*So use... it... now...*

Quint cupped Justin's jaw with both hands. "You *think* that you don't want to continue, but you do. I can *tell* that you do! Give me the emotions you're holding in. Light, dark, in-between: I *don't* care. Just give me that adamancy. Your adamancy. Your adamancy..."

The conflagration flared around them. Smoke billowed from the earth itself. The river actively boiled over.

“Your adam-”

*-pulse*

## VI.

Sven Wraith clomped down the metal corridor, his boots loudly booming down the hall. The stomps were punctuated by the violent clap of his cane. He literally ran down the hallway, despite his handicap. Massive, full-length windows reflected starlight off his hardened, coal eyes.

The RL literally smashed a doorway open with his fists, the hollow boom of the doors echoed through the dimly lit room. Sam Roont stood at a window; behind him a gigantic man in a maintenance worker’s uniform leaned against the wall casually, with two tree-trunk arms folded across a ridiculously large chest.

At the sight of the man Wraith did something that he wouldn’t do for anyone else: his feet slid on the floor, grinding to a halt as he eyed the behemoth with a look of genuine fear. The giant turned his head in acknowledgement of Wraith; his eyes shined with an eerie blue fire. The golem shot the RL a wry smirk.

Wraith soon recovered. Glaring at Roont with rage, he rapped the window as hard as he could with his cane, gesturing into the night sky.

Jupiter sat, quiet and sedate, the size of a grapefruit. To its right, around where Ganymede should be, a blinding eruption of light was radiating through the darkness: the surface layers of the Galilean Mass were scattering into the solar wind as the planetoid went supernova.

He looked back at Roont, his face red as a beet, and screamed:

“Idiot! *Idiot!* What in the holy *fuck* was that!?”

## VII.

*A hum.*

*A steady, ethereal hum...*

*It sounds like the whine of a swimming pool’s filter from 15 feet below...*

*Nice. Heavenly, even.*

*A light.*

*A small pinprick of white light.*

*It’s a star. One single, little star.*

*Are there any stars over Heaven? That’s a good question...*

*Well, why wouldn’t there be?*

A nurse’s cart rattled behind his bed; the wheels squeaked noisily.

Justin’s eyes flitted open. He was on his back. He was naked. He was on a bed with a thin white sheet covering him. There was a light overhead: *far* overhead. The room he was in was gigantic: thirty meters tall and several thousand square-feet.

*What is this place?*

Justin’s bed was one of several hundred in the massive room. All around him in every other bed men and women lay in various states of incapacitation: some sat up and

rubbed injured shoulders and limbs, some lay covered in bandages and gauze, and one or two lay completely motionless, their faces covered by white blankets.

He turned his head to one side: a slim feminine back greeted him. Chenine was sitting on a stool beside his bed, leaning over a particularly tricky Sudoku puzzle. She was clad in the drab brown clothing typically worn by an AM warship's crewmembers.

Justin looked back at the ceiling, perplexed.

"I'm still alive." he mumbled.

The Ketoni girl picked up her head. She lazily swiveled around to face him. Chenine looked him up- then down- very slowly. "That seems to be correct." She agreed.

"Where am I?"

"You're onboard the flagship of the Superior Joint Command."

"The *Onycophage*?"

"That's what I said."

"The Mass-"

"-was destroyed." Chenine replied.

"Shifted back home to Dimension 26, did it?"

"Not exactly..." Chenine hesitantly answered. "There was a massive internal eruption: the top layers of the Mass were ejected into space."

"You mean it went supernova?"

"I don't think that's technically correct, but it works as an analogy."

"But they *never* do that, do they?"

"They're not supposed to."

Justin lay back tiredly. "So that means free Bydo flesh has been spread throughout the Jupiter orbital: That can't be good for the Europa Preserve."

"Mmm." Chenine shrugged her shoulders in an adorable display of indifference.

Justin looked around again: the beds were all arranged in neat rows, but the setup looked hasty. "The *Onycophage*:" he repeated sleepily, "Never been near this thing before. I knew this ship was amazing, but there's no way they've got an infirmary *this* big..."

"You are not in the infirmary."

"Triage." Justin guessed, correcting himself.

Chenine shook her head. "Post-Op Recovery."

Justin's eyes flashed: "Post-Op? I've already been in surgery? Why was I put under the knife so quickly?"

"Because you almost died." Chenine explained, scratching in a few numbers on her puzzle.

"I did?"

*Did I?*

"That's right..." Justin remembered. "The *Love*: I took out that Opie-"

"You eliminated an Opie?" Chenine asked.

"Well, finished him off at least." Justin nodded. "And then I passed out: the Mass was starting to, well, burn up, or something like that. That's when I lost consciousness-"

"No, you didn't." She disagreed. "You skimmed out past the Jovian orbital; your Raiden was recovered because a clean-up crew detected your kindred signal."

Justin scrunched his face. “I... I can’t remember any of that.” He turned his attention to his colleague: he looked Chenine up and down. “Well, *you* look like you’re in good shape, anyway. How’d your Penetration Team do, starfighter?”

Chenine’s eyes went askance. “I... ended up going the full way through.” She answered cryptically.

“‘Full way’? Like, down to the *Pellucida* you mean?”

She shook her head. “No: I was... ‘ensnared’ while we were inside.”

“‘Ensnared’?”

“I was captured, and for a few minutes the *Gazer* was held inside the Final Core Barrier.”

“The *Core*?! *You* were in the Core? Jesus, Chenine, are you kidding?” Justin considered her expressionless face and rebuked himself with a grin: “no, of course you’re not. Well, hell, what was it like, huh?”

“I really don’t want to talk about it. Not right now, at least.”

Justin blinked twice. “Fair enough, I guess.” He looked around the crowded room again. His neck felt like a piece of iron. “This isn’t the cheeriest place to hang around, is it.”

“The *Onycophage* is severely overcrowded right now: almost everyone’s hitching a ride back to Earth. It’s their right, at least, and most Raiden units only prepare for a one-way trip to Mass-engagements, anyway.”

Justin smirked. “They expect the noble SJC to haul their asses home when the dust has cleared.”

Chenine tapped the wobbly stool she was sitting on, not taking her eyes off the puzzle. He noticed for the first time a few small red dots on her forearm: it was in the same place that a doctor would draw blood from. “Both the lounges and the temporary crew quarters are all completely packed: that’s why I’m down here, at the moment.”

*How touching...*

“How were you able to disable an Opie?” The girl quickly changed the subject.

“Dunno. I guess-” he paused, “I can’t remember very much of it: I got very angry.”

“At what?”

*Everything.*

Justin shook his head. “Everything... and nothing. I dunno: I’m an idiot, Chenine, that’s all.”

*That unbridled, unfocused rage didn’t earn you a thing, did it, fool?*

He was beat-up, spent: a pathetic specimen.

*And for no good reason, really.* He felt like an alcoholic waking up to a 7:00 AM hangover: what he’d done down at the Mass *wasn’t* the kind of thing a real warrior would do: it was the kind of thing an *idiot* would do.

Chenine went back to her puzzle, wordlessly bowing her head to survey the grid. She didn’t seem willing to challenge Justin’s opinion of his conduct.

For the first time he took stock of his body: His forehead was tightly wrapped in sterile dressing, he could feel a cold, slimy medical gel oozing underneath. His entire right arm was sealed in a tight metal brace, same as his shattered foot. Neither had been remolded yet: as long as anyone in triage was in critical condition, nobody’s skeletal limbs would be resealed: that was a low priority.

It didn't really matter *when* they got to him: from the look of those braces, all of Justin's fractures appeared to be nice and routine.

*I'm just like a kid who fell out of a tree*, he noted. *Well, that takes care of the old skeleton*. He hesitantly lifted his bed sheets up with one hand, careful to keep the view hidden from Chenine if she chose to look up at him: Justin's entire abdomen was girded in a tight white garment. He could feel the bulky medical girdle radiating a huge amount of heat into his left side.

Heat, as anyone will tell you, staves off infection. Almost *all* warm-blooded organisms generate heat to kill a pathogen.

That's just how an immune system works.

"How long?"

"Thirty-two hours." Chenine guessed his question. "You were in surgery for only two-and-a-half hours, however." She yawned, hand to mouth, then looked up from her puzzle. "You'll probably be transferred to Mount Olivier when the ship docks at Spindlespire."

"Olivier?"

Chenine nodded. "I assume that they'll fast-track you to their full-organic prosthetics lab."

Justin shot her a troubled, questioning look.

"Your spleen." She explained, tapping her own left abdomen to demonstrate. "It was destroyed when you got speared. It tore into your left lung as well, however that was pretty easy for them to solder back together."

"I *do* remember that." He mumbled. He rolled over to one side, facing away from the unflatteringly-dressed girl. "So, then: my spleen is gone?" Justin stared down at the unremarkable tile floor.

"Yes."

"Hmm. Maybe I should pass on the prosthetic."

The girl tilted her head. "But you're entitled—"

"As a little memento. That way I won't forget this 'magical' day."

*And my 'magical' idiocy...*

"I wouldn't want to forget everything that happened, after all, and then miss out on all the lessons learned. Education always comes at a price, doesn't it?"

"Your immune system would end up 'missing out' on much more: our link prongs already put us at a high risk for infection: we're both required to have functioning spleens."

Without any warning, Chenine grasped Justin's bed sheet by the edge, up near the nape of his neck. He flashed her a look, but didn't interfere. The girl yanked the covers down to his waist.

She tapped the center of Justin's chest, right along his bony solar plexus.

The young man raised his head to look at the spot; the blood in his head seemed to evaporate as he did so. There was a thin 'X' burned into his chest. Smaller, thinner burns extended up from either side toward his neck.

"Your necklace was superheated, and it burned your skin." She commented, absently training a fingernail around the mark. Justin was very suddenly reminded of the same gesture she'd used when he ventured into her apartment.

The girl removed her hand. She folded-up her Sudoku and rose to her feet. “If you really need a reminder, I suggest you use that, instead.”

“Going somewhere?”

“To stretch my legs. You should probably rest, anyway.” As an afterthought, she turned and said: “I’m glad that you survived, by the way.” Then she walked off without another word.

“Same to you, starfighter.” He mumbled.

*Huh: your pulse didn’t even break 60 beats-per-minute when she touched you.*

“Wonder what that means...” he mumbled.

*The ‘hedgehog’s spines’ are getting soft, are they? Maybe this whole ‘human’ thing is getting easier...*

Justin’s pupils dilated, then his head hit the pillow.

*Nope, false alarm: that would just be my blood pressure crashing.*

He fell into a heavy doze.

### VIII.

Chenine wandered through yet another half-deserted corridor of the warship. There were dozens of tough, ugly couches to choose from, but in a rare turn of events she didn’t really feel like sleeping at the moment. The girl pressed her hands against a windowpane and gazed at the colorful trans-dimensional corridor outside. The shapes swirling through this weird nether-land were more puzzling than a Rorschach Test: it almost felt like those ghostly shapes could charge the ship at a moment’s notice.

*And haunt us with their weirdness.*

“Boogiemen and ghosts.” She scoffed at herself derisively. Tch! What was she, 10-years-old, or something?

“scuse me, lass.” A heavily accented voice crooned behind her.

*The ghost of Sean Connery?* She very nearly burst out laughing.

The girl turned to face this speaker with her usual indifferent stare. The man was tall (he was much taller than Chenine, anyway). His hair looked like it was on fire. He must be a Typer, too, since he was wearing one of those spare maintenance uniforms that the *Onycophage’s* crew had passed out to all the pilots when they came aboard.

*An ugly costume, but it does beats strutting around the ship in a sweaty, torn-up flight suit.*

She had to give a point to him for trying to accessorize, though: the Scot wore a long red overcoat around his shoulders; the garment flowed down either side of his body, but especially on the right side, where it completely covered his shoulder and the length of his arm.

“Beg pardon, but d’ya know where they’re keeping all the critical-care patients around here?”

She pointed. “Some are down there, but there are other wards on the ship, too.”

“I’ve already been to two of ‘em.” He scoffed.

“Who are you looking for?”

The Scotsman waved her off. “No one you’d know.” He lamented as he turned away. “He’s a baby-face recruit from the new Raiden program.” There was something

approaching a blush on his face. “And I don’t know him that well, or his mates at *all*. You see, I need to apologize-”

“You’re looking for the pilot of the *Platonic Love*.” She arched an eyebrow in surprise. “He is in there.” She motioned again.

“How do you know? Are you his nurse?”

Chenine held her lower lip in her teeth. “His squadmate.”

The man looked her up and down, head to toe: “*You’re* a Raiden pilot?”

“Yes.”

He snapped to, suddenly realizing the obvious offense he’d generated: “*Nàire!* I am sorry!” He apologetically extended a hand. “And it’s an honor to meet one of Justin’s mates.”

“Not mate: *squadmate*.” She took the hand limply. “My name is Chenine Chovert. Who are you?”

The Scot smiled derisively and looked at her with eyes that were proud and sheepish at the same time. “Oh, me? I happen to be an idiot...”

### **Fin.**

Tossing. Turning.

He struggled: he muttered in his sleep as he fidgeted.

‘*My name... is Quint!*’

‘*What else could you possibly want?*’

‘*To continue, right?*’

‘*To ‘understand’ people?*’

‘*No:*’

‘*Survival’s the answer...*’

‘*Untie my hands:*’

‘*Give me that adamancy!*’

Adam-

-antsy?

A massive bloody eye: an empty human skin.

‘*We can be more than one!...*’

Justin Storm bolted upright in his bed. A wall of sweat flicked off his body as he sat erect, staring straight ahead with huge white eyes. His jugulars bulged like roots.

“The R-H’s! What *are* they!?” he screamed.

The pilot of the *Platonic Love* then fell backwards: he was unconscious before his head hit the pillow.

The *Onycophage* continued on its merry way, bringing everyone home through the cold, dark night.

Shane Kent Knolltrey

9/15/06



### Postscript: Swing the Circle Wide

“Jesus, you *do* look nice in this one, alright.” Justin complimented.

They were sitting in the cafeteria at Base-10. Sunlight streamed down all around them. Lunch was in full swing.

The pair had a table near the panorama window: they *always* had a table near the window these days. Even if the tables were taken, one group of personnel or another would always move to another table, out of deference to the two Typers.

It wasn’t something that Justin or Chenine asked for, but it was given to them. The each accrued a great deal of gravitas after the events at Jupiter: the *Tear’s Shower Squadron* now had some respect.

Chenine absently crumpled up an envelope. It bore a handwritten address:

Mail to:  
Flight Lieutenant Chenine Chovert  
Base-10: Command and Adjuncts Branch  
Box 311-892-0-119.

Courtesy:  
Captain Kensu Onizuka  
Base Leone: C&A Branch  
Box 612-119-8

“I’m not into the whole ‘retro-photography’ thing, but this picture is amazing. Really. I mean, you look ecstatic, Chenine, almost radiant: what were you thinking about when he took this, anyway?”

“Something or other.” She blew on the top of her coffee to cool it down.

Justin placed the glossy photo on the table, careful not to disturb the remaining bandages on his recovering arm. The picture was the only thing inside the package from Leone. “And that’s the only copy?”

“It was an accidental candid shot: apparently he didn’t think it was right to make any other copies without my permission.” She slid him a small note card.

“P.S.,” Justin read, “Sorry about the flash bulb.” He looked up. “P.S.?”

“I’m not sure about that, either. Some archaic formality of writing, I guess.”

“Tch! This guy really *is* old-school.” Justin handed the picture back to Chenine.



“I don’t want it.”

“Really?”

The girl tossed it down on the table with disinterest. “I already know what I look like: so what’s the point?”

He gave up and shrugged, though Justin fingered the edges of the print delicately. “I guess there isn’t one.”

Samantha strutted through the crowded cafeteria: the wave-skim dropped her off completely ‘bass-ackwards’ from where she needed to be. The whole place looked like a rusty little hellhole, but it also looked like they were doing some major renovations on the base’s main side. That wasn’t a surprise, considering the accomplishments of the base’s Raiden team during the Jupiter Campaign.

*Well, this place has potential, at least...*

She strolled past a brown-eyed private, busy ladling some soup into his bowl in the chow line. She passed by a table of computer techies: one of them, to her mild surprise, had pink hair and an obvious tongue-stud. Further along, she passed a table with two people sitting side-by-side: one an overweight Quartermaster with gigantic glasses, the other a full-lieutenant downing a can of cola. She was a brunette, and looked *far* younger than any full-lieutenant should be.

She passed a window table with two other people sitting at it. The pair weren’t even in military attire: they wore khakis and turquoise tees. They were unremarkable to her, and Sam didn’t even bother examining their faces. She headed for the Command Ops escalators.

*Knock, knock.*

“Come in.” The gruff voice declared.

Sam slipped into the office: she noticed the subcommander, standing near his window, and another man, clad in a doctor’s lab coat, talking with him.

“That’s a possibility, Roont, we’ll see.” He softly ended their conversation and turned to face Sam.

The pilot set a small folder on his desk. “Raiden-Leader.” She saluted deferentially.

“Captain Samantha Rayne.” He read her name off the envelope.

“Yes, Raiden-Leader.”

“Graduate of the Advanced VR training class of-” he read the date.

“Yes, Raiden-Leader.”

“Commissioned junior pilot of the Dancer *Pizzicato*.”

“Yes, Raiden-Leader.”

The subcommander sat down, brought up his monitor, then squiggled a few words onto his console with a stylus. His voice, and cadence, were lazy and tired, as if he were bored by all the formalities.

*Can’t blame him, anyway.*

“As of this moment, Captain, you are hereby assigned to the *Tears’ Shower Squadron* as the designated pilot of the Raiden-Type unit with serial number R-H-ERS: you are now the pilot of the *Platinum Heart*.”

Sam saluted again, this time with emphasis.

“Yes, Aryl.”

No matter how wide a circle swings, it is still a circle. No matter how far ahead a person moves, their weights will still follow them. Time is a river, and history repeats itself: no mistake goes unpunished.

The mistake made during the Jupiter Campaign was serious, indeed: it was called ‘Antipathy’.

The aftermath of this mistake, and everything it produces, will have the power to destroy humanity: the secret to Earth’s survival now lies beneath the skins of the Raiden-Hybrids, and within the minds of their human pilots.

But only if they *choose* salvation.

Because there are always other, darker paths one can take.

*The next book in the ‘Typers’ story is*  
**“His Moral Antipathy”**