



## Lay the Banquet

### I.

Every taste bud in Justin's mouth exploded.

*Oh, holy God! That's a meal!*

The restaurant Sven Wraith booked for their little 'getting-to-know-you' event was on the ground floor of a skyscraper located in the heart of Ultima True. That should have told Justin something about the place's reputation, but he was still unprepared for the splendor.

And, at this moment, he was enjoying one of the finest meals he'd ever eaten.

Samantha Rayne sat across from him: she was slicing into her blood-red porterhouse with obvious greed. Justin tried to act more civilized with his braised veal cutlets, though his overwhelming impulse was to gorge himself with the succulent meat as fast as his jaw could manage it. Chenine sat beside Samantha, daintily pecking at a massive chicken-Caesar salad.

"Well, then: here's to the new kids on the block." Wraith raised his crystal wine glass in the air. All three pilots quickly followed suit.

"May your wrath be unending and your grace ever radiant, whether you taste the nectar of victory on your lips or the salt of blood in your mouths."

"Aryl." The trio replied. Everyone drank. Their beverages were all different. Justin wasn't a big fan of wine: he had a 'red sunset' cocktail on hand. It was made from pure Western whiskey and by itself probably cost a good £U 12. Captain Rayne drank a glass of neo-cabernet, blood red and bitter with tannins. Chenine, ever the bold thinker, had an iced tea and spring water. Sven Wraith genteelly sipped down a particularly expensive Chardonnay; it was the Aryl's favorite vintage, as Justin understood. Wraith drank the white wine on account of the dish he'd ordered: fresh, honest-to-goodness,

farm-raised salmon. It was easily twice the cost of Samantha's porterhouse, and four-times the cost of Chenine's rabbit-food.

Justin knew that command-level military officers were a competitive bunch—from their choice in clothes down to their pick of tailors: this seafood order was Wraith's way of impressing the room and offhandedly asserting dominance over his pilots.

Justin couldn't complain, though: after all, the Aryl was taking the check tonight.

He resisted the urge to fidget with the breast-piece of his suit; the large 'Golden Kite' medal of valor jangled irritatingly whenever he reached for his highball glass. Wraith was specific in his orders for the evening: everyone was to show up in full AM dress uniform. That was no problem with Justin: he rather liked the Spartan black-and-white males' uniform. It had the look of a futuristic tuxedo, but without the milquetoast implications: it was the kind of suit a minimalist badass might wear to the opera.

Samantha, it seemed, suffered through her female dress uniform well enough: it was clear that she didn't like it too much. Justin supposed he wouldn't, either: the dress was too complicated with frills, ruffles and unnecessary straps and buckles: the faux-corset trim along the midline was perhaps the most objectionable (to the females, at least). Besides all that, Captain Rayne didn't seem the type of woman to wear such feminine attire very often: she looked out of sorts. Chenine managed to look pretty damn good in her military dress, but then again the girl could probably pull-off wearing a dirty paper bag, too.

He'd started the evening with the clumsy gold medallion in his pocket, but on stern orders from Wraith he took it out and pinned it up on his chest for display. Other than being awkward and jingly, Justin disliked wearing the medal for the social implications: it made him stand out from both Chenine and Samantha Rayne; Justin didn't really want to do that. Also, the circumstances from which he obtained this bauble were far from resolved: until Justin understood what happened to him and his Raiden out at Ganymede he'd just as soon shelf the gaudy trinket.

But now wasn't the time, or place, to start questioning his Aryl about the Raiden-Hybrids. Even with all the weirdness around him Justin wasn't about to start interrogating Sven Wraith: he'd sooner tangle with a Tove hand-to-hand than show any bluntness to the ice-cold administrator.

Actually, Wraith *wasn't* that ice-cold tonight: he was in quite a good mood, from what Justin could tell. Justin didn't know if it was just a show on the Aryl's part, or genuine warmth, but Wraith seemed fairly content to be out at table with his pilots. Justin, meanwhile, was more than content to scarf down this premium cuisine.

"Pardon me, RL Sven Wraith?" A waiter in a classy white shirt and coat handed the Aryl a data pad. After a cursory inspection of the message he stood to leave.

The pilots rose in turn.

"I must go." He apologized, removing his black cane from the empty chair beside him. He turned to the waiter. "See to any other needs they may have. You've got my chit card on file, correct?"

"Certainly sir."

With a minimal nod to the two ladies at the table Wraith strode out of the warm, oak-trimmed dining parlor. Justin lost sight of the man as he hobbled past the elegant gold-lined bar.

The waiter came around and offered Justin another ‘red sunset’ cocktail; Justin looked between the two ladies before declining.

“Guess we wouldn’t want to run-up the charges on the Aryl, would we?”

“I wouldn’t think so.” Samantha agreed.

Another waiter swooped in bearing dainty portfolios trimmed in gold leaf.

“Dessert menus, anyone? Our famous liquor soufflés take extra preparation time, you know...”

“Not for me.” Chenine shook her head, not bothering to take her eyes up from the salad.

“Me, neither.” Samantha managed to speak around a juicy chunk of filet.

“Just coffee, then.” Justin shrugged to the waiter.

Samantha stared at Justin with those enigmatic, rusty yellow eyes of hers. She smiled at him, and then a coquettish grin curled up her tanned cheeks. Her dirty blond hair—rusty as a field of overgrown wheat, like her eyes— glittered like beach sand under the restaurant’s soft lighting. Her freckles stood out like a thousand melanic constellations on her face.

“So, I guess we’re gonna be neighbors in the docking bays now, right?” Justin tried to make small-talk with the woman. He felt uncomfortable under her ‘high-beam’ gaze.

All at once Samantha stood up. She casually brushed the plates, silverware and crystal glasses off the table between them. The utensils clanked and thudded on the plush burgundy carpet, coming to rest in a messy pile. The smiling woman leaned over the table and grabbed Justin by his uniform collar, yanking him right out of his chair.

She had just enough upper body strength to roll Justin over on the table, and then she got up on top of him. She straddled him, her pink and unpainted lips inches from Justin’s face. He could smell the salty juices of the porterhouse on her breath.

*Hullo, Zeeba neighbor!*

“What’re you doing, huh? Holding back, stud? Why so defensive? Drop the pretenses, why don’t ya?” She whispered, running a finger over his lips. “Yup: we’re gonna be neighbors. Some people say good ‘defenses’ make good neighbors, but not me...”

Her fingers wandered down Justin’s body.

Chenine sat right across from the pair. She stared at them over her salad. The pale-skinned Ketoni girl did nothing, and said nothing, but she watched them.

“You call this professional conduct?” Justin smirked.

“Shut up.” She ordered. “If you’re not gonna drop those pretenses, then I’ll drop ‘em for you. How professional is *this*, do you think?”

Justin’s heart leapt into his throat.

*Oh, holy God! Now that’s a mea—*

“Storm?”

Justin snapped to. He nearly bumped his coffee cup off the table. Captain Rayne stared at him from across the table.

“Huh? I mean: yes, what is it?”

“I asked for some of your cream.” She motioned towards the silver carafe beside Justin’s cup.

He flushed. “My cream? Oh, my *cream!*” His brain, swimming through fumes, finally locked back onto reality. “Yeah, sure.” He handed the carafe to the Captain.

“Aryl Wraith is an interesting guy, isn’t he?” She offered.

“Kinda intimidating, to me at least.” Justin nodded. “But generous, isn’t he?”

“He’s nothing like my old Aryl.”

“Well, we’re a wholly different unit, you could say.” He fished for something else to say, desperate to conceal his embarrassment. “Oh, hey: do you know when they’re going to let you do the ‘TA’ on the *Platinum Heart*?”

“TA?”

“Terminal Activation.” Chenine interjected quietly.

“What do you mean by that?” Samantha looked back at Justin, confused.

“The Raiden-Hybrids can’t just be turned on, or off.” Justin fumbled to explain.

“See, the electric field of a regular R-Type ship is always on, right?”

“The latent electrical impulse.” Sam nodded.

Chenine pushed her empty salad bowl away from the table and finished the explanation with her docent voice. “The R-H’s have that field, but they also have a supplemental computer system that controls the extra denatured flesh inside the ships; since we have double the flesh in our Raidens, it’s exponentially more difficult to keep it stabilized, and almost impossible to prevent it from decomposing over time. The computer that regulates all that has to be extraordinarily responsive, so they made the software emergently adaptive.”

“Weak A.I.?” Sam scrunched her face. “Just for managing a bunch of degenerate Bydo tissue?”

“Tending the dead garden.” Justin smiled.

Chenine shrugged. “In any event: that computer *never* shuts off after Terminal Activation, at least not as long as the R-H unit remains operational.”

Justin took over. “So, when you get into your cockpit and ‘flip the switch’ for the first time, you’re irreversibly activating the ship.”

“‘Crossing the Rubicon’, so to speak.” Chenine finished.

“That’s the official explanation, anyway.” Justin looked Chenine in the eyes, wondering if she shared any of his creeping suspicions about the Hybrids and their true nature. If she did, Chenine certainly hid it well: the girl flashed no hint of interest, or even concern, at his words.

“What do you mean by that?” Samantha asked.

“Never mind.” He shook his head.

“A lot of it depends on what the Aryl’s staff has to say. For example: I don’t know when that Bydo Labs Doctor wants to put me in the *Heart*. What’s his name: ‘Ruined’, or something? That guy’s another weird one, isn’t he?”

“Samuel Roont.” Chenine scowled. “He’s not weird,” she muttered, “he’s all too typical.”

Samantha didn’t know how to handle that statement, so she ignored it. “And then there’s the Sensations Link.” She groaned in exasperation. “Why the hell does the Aryl want to use those damn things? They’re like training wheels for newbie babies—” she caught herself, remembering present company. “Anyway: they’re putting me under the knife on Friday.” She looked down at the bloody steak knife on her plate and shook her

head: there was definite uncertainty in her eyes. “That should be an interesting experience, anyway.”

“You’re an *au natural*, aren’t you?” Justin guessed. When Samantha nodded, he tried to be reassuring. “Prong insertion isn’t that tough a procedure. It’s painful, but it’s not that bad.”

Samantha nodded at his words, then looked over at Chenine. She addressed the girl for the first time that night.

“What did you think of your operation?”

“Painful. It’s excruciatingly painful: one can’t be anesthetized during the operation, and only a small amount of local anesthetic can be used.”

Justin scowled at the girl. He was irritated by her merciless frankness. The little pop-tart was toying with her coffee spoon; for all purposes she was disengaged from their conversation.

*Not disengaged enough to stop being a bitch, though.*

Justin was about to come in with more reassurances, but Samantha’s head shot back to level. There was a tough glimmer in her rusty eyes: Justin thought it might be pride.

“Thanks for your honesty, Chenine.”

The silver-haired girl shrugged indifferently. Her attention remained locked on her coffee spoon. Rayne seemed to be taken aback by Chenine’s aloofness: she hadn’t even begun to adapt to the girl’s granite-like personality.

In all honesty, though, neither had Justin.

*The girl’s an acquired taste that you really can’t ‘acquire’: like a cup of burned coffee.*

Samantha looked back at Justin. “None of that matters, anyway. I follow orders: suffering is inconsequential. So, then: after that I’ll be like you guys, won’t I? ‘Beta Augments’ all, right?”

Justin pointed at his younger colleague. “Chenine’s a Beta Augment.”

“And you?”

“I’m a Gamma, actually. But just barely: I’ve got one or two ‘fops’ inside me.”

“Full-organic-prosthetics, huh?” Samantha winked at Justin. A smile returned to her face. “Well, if things don’t work out with my current boyfriend you’ll have to show me where a few of them are sometime, eh: soldier?”

Justin flushed at this innuendo.

The waiter hovered behind him.

“More coffee, sir?”

He shook his head.

“No.”

Justin had to decline the smooth java.

*After all: I don’t think I really need anymore ‘stimulation’ tonight...*

## II.

Frost rolled in from the Western Wastes. It left the air outside the *Coeur Sanglant* crisp with a chill. Wraith hobbled over to a set of benches set apart from the restaurant entrance by a row of ice-covered gardenias.

A silver cigar tube sat on one of those chilly benches, shimmering with frost on the tip.

*Well, I am much obliged, 'Johnny'.*

Wraith sat down with a groan. This frigid air was murder on his poor leg. He took up the cigar tube and unscrewed the casing. The Aryl frowned in disappointment: the cigar within was a Haddon, not one of his precious Caribes.

His ears twitched as he sensed a presence: someone walking behind him.

The bench against his back squeaked as a body sank onto it.

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't turn around, Sven." A familiar voice requested.

"I wouldn't dream of it." Wraith wagged the inferior-quality cigar in front of his nose. "But this is hardly the kind of gift that impresses, you know."

"Why is a Haddon so much less desirable than a Caribe, Sven?"

The RL smirked. "You asked me out here to play riddles, Johnny? Alright, I'll indulge you: a Haddon, like this thing here, is machine-produced: it's a hasty knock-off blended with inferior tobacco."

"And your Caribes are hand-rolled, and with ridiculously expensive tobacco blends, right?"

"Just so."

"So, then: there'd *never* be a time when you'd smoke a Haddon instead of a Caribe?"

"Well, of course there are," Sven replied, "I guess if I was on the run, and only had the time for a taste before stamping it out; even I can't afford to leave a Caribe half-smoked, you know. There's nothing wrong with getting a little sloppy, sometimes."

"You mean when you're in a *hurry*: people can get a little sloppy when they're in a hurry" Johnny summarized.

"Why are you here, now?" Sven twisted the cheap cigar in his hand; he was disquieted by the thing's symbolic meaning. "You interrupted my dinner with the seat-warmers, you know."

"Mmm. I saw that: very touching. You seemed to be enjoying yourself in there."

"For a 'faceless' runner you've sure got some balls about you." Wraith growled. "Anyway, it's necessary to do that kind of thing every once in a while; it helps keep the group cohesive."

"But you certainly didn't need to do it at a place like *Coeur Sanglant*: I know Generals who balk at the price of this place. Hope you're not getting too attached to the subjects: that new girl, for example, has quite the figure..."

"I don't fool around with pilots under my command, Unitas. As for 'getting attached': I could kill any one of those rubes in there without a moment's hesitation. Remember: I was the one that sent the *Chaste Gazer* to its death."

"From which it miraculously returned. Yes: bravo." Johnny clapped, mockingly.

There was a pause between the men. Finally Johnny broke the silence.

"We're accelerating the timetable, Sven: I want you to infuse both the Diapente Test Subject and the Combatant Test Subject with serum immediately."

"And this order comes from the Committee, does it?"

"No."

Wraith resisted the urge to turn around and smack the man. "Then why in God's name would I do that?"

“Do you know that Epdin is launching their own investigation into that little systems failure you caused?”

Wraith was silent.

“The investigation’s probably being headed-up by the Epdin Raising Committee itself, but judging from the quality of their private investigators nothing will come of it. Oh, just so you know: the Brass are investigating, too, but thanks to a little influence on my part their probe was stymied just enough to keep your ass covered. What, no thank you?”

“Blackmail, then.” Wraith crossed his gimp leg over the other one and drummed his fingers on the sole of a well-polished shoe.

“Well, the Committee *would* be a little annoyed with all this blood in the water, wouldn’t they?”

“But why the change in plans?”

“For one thing: what’s the life expectancy of your little girl right now? Miss Chovert, I mean? Frankly I’m surprised she hasn’t already dropped dead, and she’s *sure* to expire within a month or so, by Doctor Alletalen’s estimates, at least.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Oh, we can only hope that the old estimates are true, and that Antipathy *is* fully-selective towards Bydo flesh alone, but Murphy’s Law should always supercede optimism, Sven. It’s best to assume the worst, and we’ll have a fresh corpse on our hands when it comes to that. There’ll be a *lot* of questions hovering around your rust-bucket base when that happens, and it won’t be safe to shoot-up the other pilots while that sandstorm’s blowing. Also, I was visited by a Mister Joe Montana the other day—”

The RL crossed his arms. He growled.

“You’ve met, eh? The guy’s an ass, to be sure, but he was making some good points. All is not well in the Committee, Sven: at the best we’ve got some weak links, and at the worst we’ve got some downright traitors.”

“Traitors?”

“There was a time you said ‘treason’ was the ultimate ‘grey-word’. Didn’t you say that, once? Well, we might be struggling with just that type of thing. But there’s no ‘grey’ in the Committee, my dear Sven: when it’s all over— once the dust settles— *everyone* found to have hindered the Project will be visited by our good friend ‘Havoc’. The slate *will* be wiped clean, one way or another.”

Wraith stared at the red-lit door that led into the *Coeur Sanglant*.

Johnny detected the man’s hesitance. “If you’ve got problems with this, then we can just transfer you out to—”

“It’ll be done by Friday.” The Aryl growled. His voice was cold. It led to a silence between them. Johnny finally broke it, his own voice soft:

“I haven’t been able to speak with Ainsworth for some time, now.” He admitted.

“What: they don’t have telephones up in Distelspitze Tower?” Wraith’s words were laced with derision.

“It’s not that easy, and you know it. Sven: this course of action may not follow the letter of the Committee’s law, but it *is* in the spirit. And I know that Ainsworth agrees. He’s responsible for all the breakthroughs in the Project, after all, and he wouldn’t want our current batch of subjects to go to waste.”

“And we have everything to learn from good old MA, don’t we?” Wraith smirked, his teeth set upon his lower lip. “So, Johnny, the ‘teacher’ says that our time is at hand, does he? He can taste the blood of the Bydo as well as anyone...” The RL grasped the cigar in both hands and twisted it: the Haddon split down the middle, shedding flakes of tar and tobacco from its innards. The center was hollowed out: it contained two very small ampoules, each holding a brown, sludgy liquid in them. The gel looked like crusty oil.

“In that case,” he conceded, “let us prepare the feast.” He slipped the two vials into his coat pocket, handling them like Fabergé eggs.

### III.

“How can you not have an opinion about her at all?” Justin kicked his locker door open. “I mean, does she give you a ‘vibe’, or something? Rub you the right way? The wrong way? *Any way, at least?*”

“I have no strong feelings one way or the other.” Chenine shook her head. She stood in the doorway of the male Raiden pilots’ barracks.

Justin sighed as he rummaged through his locker. “Yeah, me too, actually. She seems a little bossy, but other than that I don’t know what to think of her yet.” He peeked around the locker door. “Not that we’ve got a very good point of reference, do we? I mean, neither of us has had a lot of experience with, um...” he waved his hand.

“*Regular* Raiden units.” Chenine nodded.

“Yeah.” Justin was relieved that the phrase didn’t provoke any resentment from the girl. Truthfully he knew that Chenine didn’t give a lick how he felt about her, but he was still sensitive to any offense he might generate.

*Although the only way to actually ‘offend’ Chenine would be to switch out her hair bleach with purple dye, or something along those lines.*

His colleague stared at the grimy washbasin near the doorway: there was a collection of a dozen or so conical spines, irregularly shaped out of glittering metal. Justin noticed her looking at them.

“I stole those from a surgical tray onboard the *Onychophage*.”

“From *your* tray.” Chenine nodded as she fingered one of the fat spikes. “I’d heard about that: all the puncture wounds you suffered.” Her fingers stopped on one of the larger spines. “This one...” she held it up to her face, “is odd.”

“How so?”

“There are two clamp marks near the tip, not along the base.”

“So, what?”

“The surgeons should have pulled these out from the base if they were sticking in you. It looks like a lot of these were pulled out by the tip. That implies they were extracted headfirst: the only way that could happen is if they were facing the other direction.”

“Other direction? You mean poking *out* of my skin, like our Prongs do?” He laughed. “That hardly makes any sense, does it? Besides, one or two of them may have been through-and-through wounds anyway, right?”

“That might explain the marks on *some* of them...”

“Eh, they’re just empty shards: the remnants of Bydo tech, that’s all.”



“And yet you saw fit to keep them...”

Justin shrugged. “No one was telling me *anything* about me condition when I was onboard the cruiser. It pissed me off. Then they went and classified all my medical records—”

“—to disguise the severity of your injuries.”

He nodded. “Yeah: I guess the Aryl didn’t want my little stunt to give us all a reputation as a reckless unit.”

“Yes.”

Justin arched an eyebrow; he was surprised at how quickly the girl responded to this hypothesis.

“Do you think I was ‘reckless’ out at Jupiter, Chenine?”

“Yes, I do.” She replaced the conical spike with the others. “These spines: what are they made of?”

“I don’t know: I just can’t go around asking people to analyze ‘em for me. I’m not even supposed to have them, you know. Besides, I’m not really friends with anyone in our spectroscopy lab.” Justin kicked off his pilot’s boots, then he yanked the ‘flask of the imbalanced heart’ from one of his shoes.

“Private Drake’s flask?”

“Mmm. I took it back to Jen, but she refused to accept it. She said something about it being the property of the *Tears’ Shower Squadron*, now. So I guess I’ll hold onto it, at least for the time being.” He offered the bottle to Chenine, who shook her head. “Of course: you don’t like alcohol much, do you?” He jiggled the container in front of his own emerald eyes. “I’m due in the infirmary at 1500 hours: guess I’d better not show up with liquor on my breath.” He reluctantly pocketed the flask and threw his heavy boots inside the locker.

The footwear slammed into the back of the locker with a boom. A piece of paper fluttered off one of the top shelves, landing on the grimy floor. Justin picked up the scrap and unfolded it. There were two words scrawled onto the page in sloppy penmanship, as if it were written in a hurry:

beware **Antipathy**

“What the hell is this?”

Chenine leaned over his shoulder.

“Strange.” She muttered.

“Did you put this here?”

“No.”

Justin scratched his head. “I locked the barracks door before I headed out this morning, and this note wasn’t in here, then.”

“I found the same note in my locker last week.” Chenine recalled.

“Really?”

The girl nodded, but then shook her head. “No, it wasn’t. The handwriting was similar, but the note said ‘lament Antipathy’, not ‘beware’.”

“*Lament* Antipathy?”

“Yes.”

“With the ‘A’ bolded, like this?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She briefly scanned the note. “Also, like this one, the word ‘lament’ was in lowercase, but ‘Antipathy’ was in uppercase.”

“‘Antipathy,’” Justin mused. “that’s an archaic word, isn’t it?” The corners of his lips rose, then he flashed a grin. “Tch! ‘Beware antipathy’, ‘lament antipathy’, hell: this is like some kinda bad religious flyer, something you’d see stuck on your doorknob. You know: ‘Jesus Saves’ and things like that some prick on the street hands out to you.”

Chenine looked at him, vaguely surprised by his religion-bashing.

“What?” He returned the look. “I hate evangelicals, too.” Justin tucked the note inside the breast pocket of his turquoise shirt. “Especially pushy ones.”

“But how do notes like that manage to find their way into locked rooms?”

“How do dogs lick their own balls?” Justin smirked. He walked past the girl and out into the corridor; he wasn’t about to take this cartoonish vandalism seriously. “The Lord works in mysterious ways, doesn’t He, Chenine?”

The girl watched him walk down the corridor. She mumbled after him: “Maybe he does: but apparently someone *else* does, too.”

#### IV.

Sam’s head jerked back as if she’d been struck in the face.

“Sorry.” The doctor apologized. “That wasn’t the right nerve bundle.” The woman’s voice was muffled under the re-breather mask: it covered her nose and mouth.

“Ya think?” Sam lay prone on the operating table, naked as a newborn baby with a green cloth covering her lower body. A plastic ‘tent’ was set up above her bare back, complete with a row of lights and several bizarre-looking utensils jutting from a metal cross-beam.

Sam drew a sharp breath as the doctor tweezed two spinal nerves apart. It felt like a long, serrated dagger was being drawn up and down her skin, butchering her as it went. Her pupils dilated. She clenched her teeth almost tight enough to shatter them to pieces.

“Okay: Prong *Th-7* is locked in, Samantha. Now, this is the same procedure as before: I’m going to drill the extensor piston into the vertebrae’s spiny protrusion.”

*And by that you mean ‘hollow out my living bone tissue and jam a freaking switchblade in the gutted hole’, don’t you?*

“Just hang in there for me, Samantha...”

There was a noise like someone slowly exhaling a lungful of air. The hairs on Sam’s neck stood on end: she’d learned to dread this noise.

Her waist and shoulders were firmly restrained to the operating table, but that didn’t stop the rest of Sam’s body from gyrating in agony as the drill bored into her spine: it felt like her back was about to split in two.

“*Mmmmm! Rrrrrrgh!*” Sam held her lips together and did the best she could to hold her tongue. Her forehead, blazing hot from both the excruciating pain and the bright surgical lights overhead, roiled with sweat. The saltwater stung her eyes as it dripped down her face. She managed not to scream— after all: what a spectacle that would be!— but she couldn’t keep her eyes from welling up with tears.

The pressure in her spine died down, then it vanished.

“Alright: that’s it for Prong number 7.” The doctor tried to sound upbeat and positive.

*Spare me your platitudes...*

A few watery droplets landed on the table beneath Sam's head. She smiled derisively.

"I guess that's why they call our group the 'Tears' Shower Squadron', huh?"

"Forget about that; it's only natural." The doctor came around the table with her instrument tray; she needed to clean her tools after she'd placed each prong, and she made a point of doing all that in front of Sam, where the prone pilot could see her.

*I guess that's just good bedside manner.*

But Sam resented the fact that the woman had seen her cry at all.

"I was an assistant physician with the Experimental-Technologies Squadron before my daughter and I came down to the Gulf," she explained, "and I've performed this procedure over a dozen times now, including the operations on your squadmates. Everybody gets misty-eyed. Well: *almost* everyone." She looked to one side, pensive. "But most people make a lot more noise than you're making: you're doing very well, Samantha—"

"Mmm." Sam cut the doctor off. She was irritated by the woman's fawning.

"Think of it this way: the tears prove you're human, just like everybody else."

A buzzer went off at the OR's airlock. One of the doctor's assistants checked on the signal, then returned to the table a few seconds later. She whispered in the doctor's ear.

"What the hell does *he* want?"

"He said he's scheduled to see Captain Rayne," the nurse answered, "and that as long as she's lucid he should see her right now."

"Well: he is *not* coming in here." The doctor's voice was stern.

"Yes, ma'am: but he says that his orders come directly from Subcommander Wraith."

This changed the doctor's attitude. Sam noticed the firm corners of her lips fall from a scowl into a limp frown.

*She's afraid of Aryl Sven Wraith. I guess that man's effect on people is somewhat universal.*

Sam could also tell that the doctor didn't want to look impotent in front of her nurses: she tried to salvage a bit of her air of authority.

"Tell him *five minutes*: absolutely no more than that."

The edges of the OR door glowed, then the cold metal paneling shot off to one side, exposing the tiny rectangular 'scrub room' with its reinforced plastic walls. Beyond that another door shot open, identical to the metal OR door. Sam craned her neck: she could just see beyond that door into the main infirmary area. The glass was clean and smooth, except for one spot on its side: a small streak of blood marred the wall: it was Sam's. The blood managed to get there by way of a clumsy nurse, a stray ground cable, and an instrument tray caked with the girl's blood. The bloodstain didn't really obscure her view, though.

*There's the main nurses' station, the critical care rooms, decontamination, the Karat Pools and... 'Puppy-dog' boy?*

Her brows arched: Justin Storm was standing off to one side of the nurses' station, clad in his turquoise shirt and khakis. His right elbow was bent, and the nurse at the station was holding a cotton pad up over his forearm. Evidently he'd just received some

kind of injection. Storm heard the OR door hiss open: he turned on his heels to look past the glass-walled scrub room.

Sam's teeth were still cemented in a fierce snarl from pain, but she flashed the pilot a quick nod and followed that with a tough wink. Storm wasn't nearly as composed: he started at the sight of her, and his face turned a shade of green to match his eyes.

*Tch! Of course: he's been through this procedure, too, but he's never actually seen someone's back cracked open like mine is right now.*

It must be a pretty disgusting sight, she reasoned. Sam didn't have any idea what her back looked like at the moment, but she wasn't really interested in finding out.

*Poor little boy, though, she smirked. He's awfully green for an R-Typer, and he's easily the most squeamish 'arm' pilot I've ever met.*

"That one: he was different." The doctor nodded towards the Typer.

"Different?"

"Yes. I said that *almost* everyone tears up during this procedure. Justin Storm is one of the only people who didn't. He screamed a little, but never shed a single tear."

"Could he be tougher than he looks?" Sam mused as she gazed at the unimpressive pilot. "Not likely, I'd think."

The doctor shrugged. "I don't think it's 'toughness', it's just 'difference' really."

"How so?"

"Perfect Fifths are a peculiar bunch. They're rare as hell, for one thing, and for good reason: I don't want to sound un-technical, but they're all a little, well..."

"Quirky." Sam nodded.

"Quirky." The doctor agreed.

Justin Storm only got a passing glance at Sam's avulsed skin: Dr. Samuel Roont soon darkened the doorway, standing between Justin and the glass-walled room. He stepped into the tiny scrub room; the main infirmary door snapped shut behind him like a vicious clam.

The computer speakers crackled to life: "Please stand by for microbial decontamination. Solution is 55-percent *Karat* spray, 45-percent *Ab Ex Mortis* at 500 parts per million."

Roont leered at Samantha with snakelike eyes; there was something about his eyes that really creeped her out. The Bydo doctor inhaled deeply and held his breath. Within seconds the room was filled with a black, sooty mist. The man's body disappeared beneath it.

"Antibydo." Sam recognized the black film. "Why do you use Antibydo in your decontamination process?"

The doctor was hard at work removing a sticky piece of bone from one of her scalpels. She motioned towards the scrub room with her head. "Ask the 'good doctor' over there. He demanded *Ab Ex Mortis* reservoirs be placed in *every* decontamination chamber when he showed up here. God only knows why. Roont practically bathes in the stuff, though." She looked at Sam, curious. "I don't suppose other Raiden units use *AEM* so liberally?"

"No, we don't. In fact, I've only even seen Antibydo solution twice before, and both those times we were using them to scrub-out defective Force Orbs."

"Scrub? You mean you had to kill the embryos?"

“On occasion.” Sam rested her head on her arms. “A force orb is really just a stunted Bydo embryo, but every so often one would crack open, and then it would start gestating. Antibydo’s a good thing to have in those cases.”

“Because the last thing you’d want is another ‘Dobkeratops’ on your hands, right?”

“Mmm. But I don’t see why it’s necessary to put the stuff in a regular old decontamination chamber.” She eyed the doctor: Sam could tell the woman disliked Roont intensely, so her next comment was made in safe confidence. “Maybe Dr. Roont is just a clean-freak? You know: a dandy-boy.”

She could tell that the doctor was smiling beneath her re-breather mask. She leaned close to the pilot’s ear. “That’s not the half of it, Samantha—”

“Sam, please.”

“Sam: one of the first things he did when he took over the ‘dungeon’ downstairs was to requisition twice the usual number of Karat Pools.”

“‘cause you were just getting a Raiden unit?”

The doctor nodded. “There was nothing unusual about *that*: Raiden pilots have a tendency to get a little too close to Bydo incarnations’ flesh, and Karat Pools are critical in such situations. But here’s the strange part: the units arrived and we place the baths here and in the auxiliary medical branch, but one of the kits was missing.”

Sam wrinkled her nose. “Your movers ‘lost’ a whole Karat Bath? Where’d it go?”

The doctor smiled. She motioned towards the scrub room: Roont was fumbling with one of the re-breathers hanging on the wall, trying to slip it over his mouth and nose.

“I’d bet my daughter’s place in kindergarten that he’s got it stashed in his office, somewhere. He doesn’t take visitors down there, and it’s not like anyone else even goes down to the R-H Development Center, anyway.”

Sam chuckled. “His own personal Karat Bath? Now *that’s* a dandy!”

This friendly banter came to a halt as the computer announced Roont’s cleanliness. The black mist settled, then disappeared. Sam could barely make out Roont, standing in the scrub room with his lab coat whipping around his body as air purifiers droned all around him. His glasses glinted in the dark room like the hellish eyes of a demon.

Roont stepped forward, but the door didn’t open before him. He smiled, very diplomatically, and then tapped on the glass. His fingers trained around the bloodstain on the door in small circles.

“Mmm.” The doctor motioned to one of her nurses.

Sam couldn’t really say why, but for the first time during this whole operation she was rather nervous at being ‘tied down’ in her present state. She shifted her hips and wriggled her shoulder blades back and forth a bit.

*I think that any girl might feel a bit like a sacrificial lamb, being so helpless in front of a weirdo like him...*

“Stop that squirming, Sam.” The doctor chided. She didn’t take her eyes off the tools as she scrubbed them.

“Hi-ho!” Sam Roont crooned through his facemask. The doctor presented Samantha with a mock salute.

“Sir.” She provided him the barest civility.

“Make this quick, Roont.” The doctor growled. She took her instrument tray to a corner of the operating room to wash the crud out of them.

“Sorry to catch you in such an ‘indecent’ position, my lady.” The man cooed. He sat up on the operating table, his thigh inches from Sam’s ear.

“That’s inconsequential: what can I do for you, sir?”

“Oh, it’s what I can do for *you*.” His pearly white teeth glinted under the OR floodlights. The Bydo doctor pulled a long silver syringe out of his lab coat. “You’ve got an exciting time ahead of you, Miss Rayne: piloting a new ship, getting to know your new assignment, learning how to link with your ship, it’s all very exciting.” He popped the cap on the large needle. “And this, my dear girl, is something that you’ll find *very* valuable.”

“What is it?” Sam eyed the large needle, remembering how Justin Storm cradled his arm: whatever this stuff was, she and Justin were getting it at the same time.

*The only difference being that he wasn’t bothered while in the Operating Room, was he?*

“This lovely little solution is something new: something very powerful. Think of it as ‘caffeine’ for today’s ‘linking brain’.

“‘Caffeine’?”

“With this stuff in your system, you’ll be a real showstopper.”

“A ‘rock star’?” The Captain smiled anemically.

“Let’s just say that it’s sure to make you a legend...”

Roont produced an ampoule. He plunged the needle into it, and then withdrew the plunger. A syrupy brown sludge collected inside the syringe.

*Looks like the raw syrup you’d find in a can of cola, or maybe a kid’s juice box.*

The doctor held Sam’s naked right arm in his hand, then he set the syringe on her vein.

Sam watched all this without comment. She was a good military woman, and wouldn’t question such treatment. She did, however, have one small question to ask.

“What’s it called?”

Roont paused. He looked up at her, uncertain.

“Uh, what was that?”

“The treatment: what’s it called?”

“Oh. Well, no one’s ever asked *that* before...” Roont turned the syringe over in his hand. He bowed his head in thought.

Rayne squinted. “What was that, sir?”

Roont looked Sam in the eyes again. This time he wore a snakelike smile.

“‘*Angelbreath*’.” He cooed, stroking the nape of Samantha’s neck. “This little ol’ serum is called ‘*Angelbreath*’, Captain”.

The needle slipped into Sam’s vein without effort. Three seconds later Roont pressed the plunger, sending the entire contents of the syringe into the girl’s body.

## V.

On average it takes about 20 seconds for one drop of blood to cycle through the human body, from start to finish. This simple process of tiny bullets spiraling through

barrels happens thousands of times every day. It's a very mundane event, hardly worthy of anyone's time.

But, just this once, it's worthy of some note:

The contents of the syringe rocketed up Samantha's vein, then squeezed through her bottlenecked vena cava. From there the fluid shuttled into her heart, blitzed through her lungs, shot back through her chest, then flowed up into her aorta.

From there the contents spread out through the rest of the girl: it diffused almost instantaneously through the spongy mesh of her brain to the stony tips of her toes. It dissolved in only 20 seconds, scattered to the four corners of Samantha's body like a handful of pebbles tossed into a pond, or a sunbeam scattered throughout the darkness.

But, like each of these things, the sludge was not entirely gone.

Deep within a forest of flesh, down at some random point in Samantha Rayne's body, a cell sits beside its own little stream, feeding off a warm capillary bed. Blood rushes past in a constant stream, offloading chemicals and nutrients as it flows.

A black streak winds through that capillary bed, oozing out into the forest of cells like a rolling storm cloud. It circles this lone cell, hovering along the membrane before pressing through it like a needle through a Nerf ball.

Down, down, down it flows: down into the darkness...

In the center of the cell lay a great chain. It is a chain of nucleic acids, compact and perfect, bearing more raw information within it than most modern computers.

But, no matter how much information something contains, there's always room for a little more, isn't there?

The black cloud dissolves, merging into the machinery of the cell.

It processed itself, like a late night guest checking himself into a hotel.

It set itself into that unending chain of acids like a guest heading up to his hotel room.

And then, like a guest kicking off his shoes and cuddling up under the mattress, it slept.

Down in the darkness it slept, and it waited.

