



## Zankoku Na Tenshi No You Ni

### I.

*2300 hours, and all is well...*

Scott Tabris shuffled down the hallway. His footsteps were irregular and lethargic: he nearly bumped into the wall twice.

*There's nothing like a 14-hour shift, is there?*

Scott slipped through the main doorway to Command Ops. At that moment he was treated to a true 'first' in his life: the main operations room was totally empty. Most of the workstations were dark, and lightning was minimal throughout the massive room. The stars shimmered brightly outside beyond the panorama windows.

Only two workstations were illuminated: the duty officer's and an assistant's. The chairs behind them, however, were empty.

"Anybody home?" He called into the dimly lit room. There was no response.

*Creepy, but also kinda interesting.*

Tabris smiled. He took one last reassuring look around him before jumping over one bank of computers. He landed in front of the duty officer's station. He scratched at the stubble forming over his flat chin, then he slipped into the chair.

*Scott Tabris: Lieutenant 'Tertiary Grade'...*

He leaned back and folded his hands behind his head: there was no question that Scott was going places. *Big* places, too. He was constantly pulling double-shifts with Dr. Roont down in the R-H Development Center. All that blood and sweat were starting to catch up with him.

*But all the dividends I'm sure to get out of it? They're priceless!*

He smiled: if the Raiden-Hybrid program continued to get all this positive exposure in the AM hierarchy, very soon people like Laura Hayle would be saluting *him* in the halls.

“JG. Tabris” A throaty old voice sounded behind him.

Scott bolted out of the chair reflexively and spun around, firing off a hasty salute.

“Commander Faught! Uh, sir: I didn’t know you were here—”

The old man pushed back his uniform cap. His salt-and-pepper moustache bristled. “I’ve been crunching the budget numbers: those blasphemous ships you work on downstairs may be over-funded boondoggles, but they’ve managed to infuse our base with so much raw cash that I’m at a loss as to how to use it all.”

*Well: I wouldn’t mind having my own personal ‘wave-skim’ ship, if you’ve got some extra ££’s in the budget...*

“Miss Hayle is making you cover for her absence, is she?”

“The Lieutenant?” Scott asked.

“She’s *a* lieutenant, last time I checked, J.G.” Commander Faught detested pet names around his base: especially ones that tied a very general rank to a very specific person. *Everyone* on base, even other full-lieutenants, referred to their brunette duty-officer as ‘The Lieutenant’.

“Lieutenant *Hayle*.” Scott corrected himself.

Ron Faught’s tough gray eyes bored into Scott through his wrinkly flesh. He looked at the young man, then out across the empty room.

“Hayle is getting sloppy.” He muttered. “Well: when she gets back inform her that there are never any unannounced ‘breaks’ for the on-duty officer, right?”

“Uh, yes sir.” Scott saluted again as the old commander tottered up the steps to his office like a walrus clambering over ice floes. “And if she finds herself sized with the constant urge to use the facilities, inform her that it might be advisable to cut back on her caffeine consumption.” He disappeared upstairs.

“Yeesh!” Tabris wiped his forehead after Faught was out of sight.

*So, the Lieutenant’s on duty, is she?*

He rested his arm on the workstation behind him and inadvertently knocked over an empty can of ‘Pop-Up’ Cola.

*Well, that should have told me something when I came in...*

A small speck of light exploded far away on the horizon. It was a big green combustion that rose over a bright white arc on the dark horizon: that arc of light was Nash Ultima. The Great City looked like a miniature sun rising out of the brine itself.

Tabris smiled: he had a pretty good idea about the missing ‘Cola Nut’s’ whereabouts, now.

It was crisp outside. A sea breeze made the air moist with saltwater. Tabris cinched up the straps of his jacket as he wandered along the balcony below one of the panorama’s windowpanes. This area was unlit to allow better viewing from the ‘hot-zone’ of Ops. Scott stumbled several times as he made his way down the scaffolding.

He could hear two people talking when he reached the strut above the wave-skim bays: he recognized the timbre of each female voice.

“Oooh: that’s a big one.” Jen Drake observed.

“Probably half-a-ton of TNT in it, I’ll bet.” The Lieutenant agreed.

The ladies were seated on the arched roof of the launch bay, their backs pressed against a mesh of tough foam rubber that helped keep the modular wave-skim bay attached to Base-10’s greater structure: it would be a far warmer backrest than the cold, salt-encrusted exoskeleton of the base around them.

“Having fun, much?” He crossed his arms.

They swivled around, both surprised to hear his voice. “Didn’t you get off duty hours ago?” Jen asked.

“I came off *Ops* duties, not R-H detail, though.”

“You’ve been down in the dungeon, huh? Guess *you* haven’t been having much fun.” Laura smiled with sympathy. Scott noticed a small earpiece covering the brunette lieutenant’s right earlobe: apparently she *was* actually ‘working’, albeit remotely.

“Mmm. No, not really. Commander Faught’s not having much fun, either, you know.”

Laura’s eyes shot open. “The Commander?”

“He’s burning the midnight oil up in his office, and he’s kind of upset that *you’re* not doing the same...”

Scott didn’t get the chance to say anything else: Laura was up the scaffolding and across the dark landing outside Ops in an instant. She bounded up the struts faster than a mountain goat.

“Poor Laura.” Jen smirked.

Scott sat in Hayle’s spot: it was mercifully warm from the duty officer’s residual body heat. “Aren’t you gonna head up there, too?”

Jen shook her pink head to and fro. “Not a chance. After all, what’s Commander Faught gonna do: throw me out of the Allied Military? I’d kiss the man if he did that!”

“Tch! That’s no mean feat; either: you’re not in the habit of kissing men, are you?”

Jen cast Tabris a sidelong glance. “Some men more than others, but as a rule— ‘dear’— your gender just isn’t my cup of tea.”

“Mmm. That’s my gain, I guess.” He smiled and folded his hands behind his head. “But I wonder what the officials over at the Human Reintroduction Project would think about your attitude.”

Jen’s gaze returned to the massive fireworks exploding on the horizon. “I’m all for population growth, really I am. And it’s not that I don’t want to have a kid someday: I think I do.”

“Are you going to apply for a genetic sample from the ‘Ark’?”

“I think so. When I’m ready, at least.” She smiled distantly. “There’s somebody I’ve been seeing for a really long time now: we’ve been ‘friends’ forever, but I think she and I might start getting more serious, soon.”

Scott nodded appreciatively. His relationship with Jen Drake— usually filled with mock-flirtations and derisive teasing on both their parts— seldom entered such serious realms. This discussion was a unique change.

“What about you?” Jen asked.

“Well: I’m *in* the ‘Ark’.” Scott replied. “In a way I think that’s enough for me.”

“You don’t like kids?”

“So-so.” He waved his hand from side to side. “I don’t think I’d like taking *care* of one, that’s for sure. But it doesn’t really matter: I’m not that important, am I? At least my sex isn’t: it’s you girls that hold all the cards for our species. You’re the hope for little *Generation Abel*, not us. I don’t know if I’d ever try that whole conception business if I were in your shoes, but bravo for your attitude.” He sighed. “I guess my problem is that I

don't know what sort of future I'd be giving a kid if I had one. After all: when *Gen. Abel* grows up, *if* they grow up, what kind of a world will they have by then?"

"Mmm: *if* there's even a world around. The Allied Commanders once toured my university campus on a recruiting run: looking for fresh young meat to feed to the Bydo Masses out there. They gave a long-winded speech about bravery, duty and crap like that. But there was one quote I remember— I think it was from Senior General Reidemeister— about *Generation Abel*. He said: 'Theirs will be the greater sacrifice, though their future is most uncertain', or something like that." She sighed just like Scott did, with an air of hopelessness on her breath. The private smirked a moment later, though, and turned to face Tabris: "Well, now that I know *you're* in the Archives somewhere I'm gonna have to re-think the whole thing: what a nightmare it would be if I ended up with *your* genetic material!"

"I can see why that'd be a problem for you: all your kids would be phenomenal geniuses. They'd make you look bad, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah, they'd make me look bad alright: by tripping over their own egos every ten seconds."

The two sat in silence for some time, watching the fantastic light show out in the infinite distance. A loud sniffing noise suddenly sounded directly over Scott's head: his first thought was that a giant anteater was trying to gobble him up. He looked up and nearly fell off the strut in surprise.

"Ib's cohd out here." Sam Rayne commented. She stood directly above the pair, holding a handkerchief to her dripping nose.

"Where the hell did you come from!?"

"Wow: you came all the way down here without us even hearing you! Those were some sneaky moves!" Jen stared at the Captain with upside-down eyes. "And you did it with that cold, too. You're like a commando, Captain!"

"I wadh a cobbando." The woman explained through massively congested sinuses.

"Why're you out of quarantine, Captain?" Scott asked.

"Call be Samb, nohd 'cabtan'." She requested. The woman pointed back towards the base and waved her hand. "Cabbeteria?"

"It's closed, now, and locked up, too." Jen apologized. "You can't even get to the vending machines at this time of night." The private motioned toward Ops with her head. "We've got some odds and ends stashed in our lockers under the escalators, over in the Command Ops 'cold zone': some chips, sodas, a couple of juice boxes—"

"Juze?" Sam's dirty copper eyes widened a bit.

"Sure: you can borrow what you like."

"*Borrow* as in 'replace at a later date'." Tabris cautioned.

"Mmm." Rayne nodded a promise, then she clambered across the steps that led to the lower floor of Ops.

"It's a damn nuisance that she came down with a cold like that." Scott complained.

Jen shrugged. "Who even *gets* colds anymore?"

"Dunno: but it seems to take to the Typers around here like flames to kindling: Miss Chovert got one a few months ago, then both Rayne and Justin Storm now. I wouldn't normally care, but I'm afraid it might push back the date that we perform

Terminal Activation on the *Platinum Heart*.” He looked over at Jen. “That’s scheduled for Wednesday, by the way. You’ll want to be here: it should be a neat little show.”

“What do I care about turning on a ship?” Jen scoffed. Then she smiled: “Besides, I’ve got that day off: my ‘significant other’ is taking me out to Elysia Fairgrounds. We’re gonna meet up with all my friends from the university. You know: the good old days before my blatant, illegal kidnapping.”

“Most people would call it ‘being drafted’, you know.” Scott shook his head. He suddenly looked up: “Hey: the Elysia Fairgrounds are right across the water from Asphodeline Island, aren’t they? There’s a Bydo Labs research branch there. It’s a damn big one, too: they subcontract lots of work to the greater Gulf area, Patagonia, even New Europe. All the projects I worked on in college came out of Asphodeline. All the really cool ones did, anyway.”

“Could you *please* let me know if there’s a point to this nostalgia?”

“Why don’t you pop into their offices while you’re over there and get a little tour. I hate to admit it, but in all fairness you *are* pretty sharp, at least at some things...”

“Stop, please: I’m blushing.” Jen teased.

“I’m *trying* to be magnanimous, you jackass. My point is that you’ve probably got something to offer the Bydo research community, if you’d like to pursue that road.”

Jen snickered. Her snicker escalated into a long belly laugh. “I don’t think so, Scotty. Not in a million years.” She slunk down against the foam rubber until she was lying on her back. “That’s not the road for me at all.” She sniffed the salty air, held her breath, then released it with a pleasurable sigh. “‘Two roads diverged in a wood and I, I took the one less traveled by; that’s made all the difference’.”

“Huh?”

“It’s something I read somewhere, once.” Jen folded her hands behind her head, imitating Scott. “I don’t know what the main purpose of humans was supposed to be before the Bydo came, but nowadays everybody’s stuck in this endless fighting.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. The girl’s nose-stud sparkled in the darkness. “All I wanna do is live my life in peace: I don’t want any part of this conflict.”

“We’re kinda trying to establish a ‘peace through superior firepower’ thing here, you know...”

“Then *you* work on the guns.” She retorted with a growl. “*I* just wanna churn the butter.”

“You want to live a ‘normal’ life while everyone else is fighting and dying? That’s selfish.”

“Call it what you want, Scotty. Bottom line is that I’m not getting myself any more involved in this dumb nightmare than I already am. When my service-contract expires I’ll be out of here like a shot, and *nothing* will change that. Got it?”

Scott gave up on the little tart. The pair lay sprawled out on the strut in silence, bathed in moonlight, their stony faces occasionally highlighted by the flares of distant fireworks.

## II.

Sam kicked-in the door with her large black combat boot.

“That’ll leave a mark.” Justin Storm muttered. He was seated at one of four computer consoles in the lower Ops conference room. A velvet pouch dangled around his neck.

“Mmmph.” Sam grunted without comment. She dumped an armload of provisions— sodas, chips and a couple of juice boxes— on the conference table. The pilot reached into her shirt pocket, fumbling for something. Upon not finding it she looked up and down the table, then on the floor, then on each seat. Samantha growled with frustration.

“Where *id ihdt*?”

A plastic triangular box slid down the table from the opposite side. The ‘Brass Ring’ was sitting at that end: Chenine Chovert leaned over the table, her attention was exclusively focused on an old hardcover book.

“Thanks.” Sam called down to the girl. Chenine didn’t acknowledge her at all.

*Ah, she’s such a charming little lady...*

Samantha pressed the device against her mouth and nose: she inhaled from the box twice, very deeply, until she felt the mucous in her sinuses harden, then evaporate.

“Gah! So much better!”

She and Storm were holed-up in the conference room for the night as a precautionary measure due to their sudden, freak illnesses. The ‘Brass Ring’ had wandered in an hour earlier, fresh off her standby flight. She hadn’t even changed out of that black *Liefde* suit of hers, yet.

*I bet she enjoys strutting around in that skin-tight bodysuit...*

“I still don’t see how you could’ve come down with my cold bug, Storm: don’t you take care of yourself at all?”

“It’s not my fault. Besides, I wasn’t the ‘vector’, was I?” Justin didn’t take his eyes off the computer screen. His fingers hovered along a pink shaft of light rising vertically off one side of the console: the input field. His digits flicked hither and yon as he manipulated the screen.

“I’ve got an excuse for coming down ill: *I* was having these damn spikes shoved into my spine. Surgery has a way of weakening a person’s immune system. What’s your excuse, huh?”

“I’m not invah- ah- ah—” he sneezed, hard. “I’m not *invulnerable*. Ugh: Goddamnit!” Justin cursed as he wiped down the computer screen.

Sam slipped into one of the conference chairs, cracked open a juice box and put her feet up on the table.

“Well,” she began, “I guess we don’t get overtime pay for this, huh?”

“No.” The Brass Ring kept her nose buried in the book.

“Wouldn’t think so.” Storm agreed.

Silence.

Sam sucked down some juice; she could hear the clock ticking on the wall.

“So: who wants to share their ‘Prong reaction’ frequencies?” her voice lilted playfully.

“144.75 hertz.” Storm mumbled. He didn’t take his eyes off the computer.

Sam frowned. “Oh, I see.” She was hoping to make some kind of game out of the issue.

*I guess these guys aren’t that playful...*

She looked over at Chenine, just to be polite. “What about you: your frequency, I mean?”

The pale girl’s blue eyes rose up from the book pages for one second before they rolled back down. “If you ever need to know, I will tell you.”

*How very charming!*

“And what qualifies as ‘need to know’?”

Chenine tilted her head to one side, then returned it to level. “If the Aryl orders me.”

More silence.

Sam finished the juice box. It made a hollow sucking noise that echoed throughout the conference room.

*These guys are friggin’ zombies!*

Storm’s head rose up above the computer screen.

“What’s that noise?”

“What noise?” Sam squinted.

“It sounds like a—”

“—rattle.” Chenine agreed, still keeping her eyes on the book. “A boom: repeating itself over and over again...”

Sam looked at the pair as if they were crazy, but then it dawned on her. “Oh, well, they’re launching fireworks over at Nash Ultima, but—”

“That’d be it.” Chenine nodded.

“—but how could you hear them?”

“More like ‘feel’ them.” Justin explained. “It’s the link: it has a way of making some of your senses a little more ‘in tune’...”

“Sensitive.” Chenine finished.

“Give it some time and you’ll understand.” He went back to the computer, then looked up again. “What’s the occasion, anyway?”

“The what?” Sam was still trying to process that incredible bit of information.

*The tremors from those fireworks wouldn’t even register on a seismograph: how the hell could they possibly—*

“The occasion.” Justin repeated. “Why’re they blowing stuff up in the Great City?”

“Oh: it’s the Human Reintroduction Project. Apparently the global population just broke 200.”

“Really?” Justin whistled. “So there’re officially 200 million humans on the Blue Marble, huh? Hooray for the home team.”

“Mmm: apparently all you *Generation Eve*-ers are finally starting to get ‘busy’...”

Justin’s expression turned quizzical. “Aren’t you *Eve*?”

Sam smiled. “Ah, you’re sweet, but no: I’m 28 years old.”

“Oh: so you were a toddler during the Cataclysm? Still: it must’ve been rough, living through that whole ordeal, right?” Justin nodded. Then he turned his attention back to the computer.

Sam spent fifteen more minutes in silent boredom.

*What the hell is it with these people? I mean, there’s ‘taciturn’ and then there’s ‘antisocial’...*

She took the initiative, if for no other reason than to eliminate her own boredom.

“What’re you doing, here?” She strutted over to Puppy-Dog-Boy and looked at his computer screen. She put her palms on the table. Instantly a small gray blur of spiky fur shot across the console. The critter perched upright on Samantha’s left hand for a couple seconds, then it shot off again.

“Why’d you have to bring those guys in, again?”

“I have to feed them by hand twice a day; they depend on it.” Justin answered. “They can’t afford for me to spend the night somewhere else without them.”

“Why didn’t you get someone to look after them for you?”

“I don’t have anyone to—” Justin stopped. He bit the side of his lip and then started over: “There was no one I *trusted* to take care of them.”

“Hmm. Well, they’re pretty curious little creatures. Who was that?”

“Sigs’.” Justin mumbled. He tapped the pouch on his chest. “And this guy is ‘Cars’.”

“And what’re they?”

“Well, hedgehogs: haven’t you ever seen one before?”

“Right, but what kind? Do you know?”

“‘Kind’? Are there ‘kinds’ of hedgehogs? I didn’t know that...”

“There’re several. But I don’t recognize yours...”

“I don’t know what they are.” Justin scratched the back of his head: he looked annoyed by Sam’s persistence. “They’re pain-in-the-asses that have little practical value, and mostly serve to annoy me: if you don’t know what kind they are then let’s just call them *Czech Hedgehogs*, okay?”

“‘Czech Hedgehogs’?”

The ‘Brass Ring’ snickered softly in the corner.

“What?” Sam turned to the girl.

“A *Czech Hedgehog* is—” Chenine sighed and shook her head: she banished the smile from her face. “—never mind.” The corners of her lips stayed up in a transient grin.

“Is *what*?”

“It’s a military device: they were big roadblocks made of crooked iron, set-up in urban streets and on open battlefields. The idea was to deny the use of tanks and large troop transports in those areas. It was mostly a World War II kind of thing...”

“I see.” Sam looked at Justin quizzically. “That right?”

He nodded.

“I’ve never studied pre-’69 military warfare. Besides: what’s the point, anyway? But how did she know what those things were?”

“Oh, Chenine knows everything.” Justin mumbled derisively. “That’s the first rule you should learn about the unit.”

“What about you: are you some kinda military historian?”

“Uh, no: not really.” He shrugged. “But photo-restoration’s one of my hobbies, and a little while ago I got a request from a friend over in the Scottish Crown Territory to touch-up an old photo he had squirreled away. It was from some battle on a large beach: he said it was in France. There were thousands of those damn ‘Czech hedgehogs’ littering the shoreline.”

“Why’d your friend have a picture like that in the first place?”



“He said something about his great-grandfather making the ‘landing at Normandy’, or something like that.” Justin shook his head. “But I don’t follow the nitty-gritty specifics. Connor’s the certified World War II nut: I’m just a guy that likes to touch-up artwork.”

“And that’s what you do when you’re off-duty?”

“That, and I kinda like growing plants, too.”

“Fascinating.” Sam grumbled. This guy was about as interesting as watching grass grow, but seeing as how he was her only means of diversion, she persisted.

“So what’re you doing here: touching-up morw war pictures?”

“No. Well, yes: but I finished that other one weeks ago. This one is kind of a personal project.” Puppy-Dog Boy leaned back from the monitor, hesitant: he looked a little reluctant to divulge his work to her. Sam also noticed that the timid pilot had a tendency to stammer while he spoke: she found it ridiculously annoying. She wedged herself between Justin and the monitor and, as she predicted, he pulled back reflexively, giving her more room.

*‘Personal Project’, huh? Will it be a picture of a field of dandelions, or maybe a heartwarming still-shot of a kitty cat...*

Sam’s smile evaporated as she eyed the console. The image on the screen wasn’t a field of flowers, or a picture of a cute animal: it was far more gruesome than she anticipated, coming from a milquetoast like Storm.

The picture was a high-resolution scan of a carving; it looked fairly old. In it there were figures, both men and horses, set against a dark, swirling sky: the men were clothed in turbans and utilitarian robes, wielding ancient scimitars and scattered amongst crude tents on a desert backdrop. The horses stood girded in old-fashioned battle harnesses and colored drop cloths. The sky in the middle of the picture was parted, with an ominous white slit of light, like an eye, bearing down on the night scene. All the figures in that carving were frozen in terror, some lay dead near that dread shaft of light, others beating a madcap retreat in either direction, their faces cemented in a look of what Sam could only describe as sheer horror.

Standing before that light, in the midst of the army camp, a large and radiant angel gazed with disinterest at something to its right. The great winged entity bore a massive rapier in one hand. There were men at its feet, some writing in agony with what looked like foam spilling over their lips, others lay facedown, limp in the sand.

“What in the name of God?”

Storm smiled. “Yeah: that’s probably what the Assyrians were thinking, too. Before they all keeled over and died, anyway.”

“Assyrians?”

“It was an ancient empire in the middle-east: somewhere in the Old Iran area, I think.”

“So those good ol’ boys had experience getting their asses kicked on the battlefield even before the Arab War, huh?” She smirked.

“Sennacherib never got his ass handed to him, *ever*, before this happened.”

“Was that their commander?”

“Mmm. A warrior king.” Justin nodded. “One of the greatest of the great tyrants. He waged a bloody campaign against his neighbors to the West, and eventually got to the city of Jerusalem itself. He couldn’t just attack it right away: the city’s inhabitants had

adequate defenses along the city's walls, and an all-out assault would've been too costly, so he laid siege to the city and bided his time. One night he decided that it was just about the right time to strike, so he prepared his overwhelmingly superior force for a dawn assault."

"But he never got the chance to launch that assault, I'm guessing" Sam noted the cloudy night sky in the picture. "So, what: the 'Lord on High' intervened?"

Justin stared at the screen, his green eyes shining with the first true glimmer of 'patriotism' that Sam had ever seen from him. "Yahweh, Jehovah, Adonai... whatever you want to call Him: He didn't look too favorably on the Assyrians' plans."

Samantha looked between his face and the screen: she could make a guess about his feeling toward this picture. "You call Him something too, don't you? You're a religious?"

Justin nodded disinterestedly: he went back to work on the retouching. "But I call Him 'The Father the Almighty'."

"Christian, then. Figures, I guess." She shrugged. "So that entity would be the 'angel of death'?"

"Something like that."

Sam leaned down over the desk, her head propped up in her hands. "So: a little city on a hill under constant attack by an overwhelming force, with only its thin walls to protect itself..." She laughed. "It's the perfect analogy for the Bydo Wars, isn't it?"

"But we lack an angel to protect us." Chenine commented. Her eyes flitted in Justin Storm's direction very briefly: it was a passive-aggressive stab at his religiosity, she assumed.

Samantha had to disagree. "By 'angel', do you mean a being that can walk right up into the middle of an 'enemy camp'? Well: what do you call being able to move through a high-density Active System Scan field—the way no other ship can? Raidens *are* angels, Chovert: by that definition, at least. In fact, I'd say we're much better than regular ol' angels: we've certainly got more firepower."

"We don't look much like angels, though: do we?" She muttered. The girl's nose remained cemented on the book.

"Only you do, Chenine. After all: you're completely friggin' perfect, aren't you? So, good for you 'dear'." Justin growled: he was through ignoring the pop-tart.

"Hey, hey, hey." Sam spread her hands between the two: she'd seen very big fights get started over much less. Her peacemaker gesture appeared unneeded, though: the silver-headed 'Brass Ring' didn't respond to Storm's jab at all.

The silence that followed was easily the most awkward of the night. Sam went back to inspecting Justin's image touch-up.

"That's an interesting style you've got there. The soldier's battle colors seem off, though: why purple and gold? They couldn't have really worn colors like that."

"Well, there's a reason for the colors..."

"I'll admit: I like everything else, though."

"He's overexposed the eyes." Chovert commented.

Sam looked back at the pop-tart: for all intents and purposes she was eager to prod Storm into a reaction. None came from Justin, though: he ignored the girl. Sam squinted across the room and peeked at the book Chenine was reading, just out of curiosity.

“A *Mortal Antipathy*, by Oliver Wendell Holmes’...” She whispered to herself. “Well, given her apparent love of conflict, I’d say the title’s appropriate.” She looked back at the screen. “But she may have a point: you did go ballistic on that angel’s eyes, didn’t you?” Sam noted the bright light-source he’d included around the creature’s orbits.

“Well: it’s the most impressive part of an angel, don’t you think?”

“Why would you say that?”

Justin shrugged. “They’re *eyes*, but brilliant, demon-like eyes: great big glowing things. They’re terrifying. I’ll bet a lot of the people in the picture fell dead just at the sight of them. They’re the most powerful and frightening thing about an angel, don’t you think?”

“I’d be more impressed by that massive iron sword it’s holding.” Sam shook her head. “*That’s* true power, to me.” She looked over her shoulder at the Brass Ring. “What about you Chovert: are you more impressed by an angel’s big ‘ol eyes, or their big ol’ ‘hardware’, huh?”

“Neither.”

“Neither? Well, what, then?”

Chenine folded her book closed halfway: she actually put some thought into this question.

“The wings.” She finally answered.

“Wings?” Both Justin and Sam muttered in unison.

“Eyes and swords are common things; wings are not.”

“That’s the Windsor McKay in her talking...” Justin mumbled.

“Who?” Sam asked.

“An artist she likes. Chenine’s got a bit of a surrealist streak in her, I guess.”

“Does he do murals, or something?”

“No:” Justin smiled “comic strips: strips about a little boy and his dreams.”

Sam blinked. “Comics? Huh. I guess your girl’s not exactly as high-class as she tries to look.”

“Chenine’s not exactly categorizable, period.” Justin replied.

*Neither are you*, Sam thought as she watched the young man get back to work on his little picture-project. In all likelihood these two— Storm and Chovert— could end up being the two worst pilots she ever worked with. They were easily two of the strangest people Samantha had ever met. She could only wonder what it would be like when they were all up in the air together, flying their Raidens.

*Better watch yourself out there, Sammy-girl, because you probably won’t be able to count on these two screwballs for anything in a pinch.*

Samantha Rayne, after all, lived by the sword, and *for* the sword. She’d been this way a very long time, now, and she was unaccustomed to meeting people who lived by, or even admired, anything other than that.

*After all: in a world like ours, what else is there but the sword?* Faith, or hope, in anything else was foolish, and ultimately deadly.

*Because— in the end— there’s nothing else out there for any of us humans except the sword: it’s either that or the void.*

She’d made a life out of pouring all her faith and her soul into the former in order to avoid the latter, and she wasn’t about to slip-up now just because her new comrades were a pair of odd fruits. And mismatched fruits, from the look of things.

*He's an apple: she's an orange. What about me, then?*  
"I'm the soldier."  
"What was that, Captain?" Justin asked.  
"Nothing. Never mind."

