



If One Wake at Midnight

I.

Assessment Battery Summary

Subject:

Ensign Chenine Eugénie Chovert

Purpose: A comprehensive analysis of this subject's physical, mental and temperamental qualities as per the request of Subcommander Sven Wraith, executive officer of Allied Military Marine Base 10, Greater Gulf Area, Western Branch of Regional Command.

History: This 21-year-old female subject is a recent transfer out of the Keto Region, during which time she served as a secretary in the logistics division of the Ketoni Militia (see "Franco-Ketoni Conflict" also known as the "Ketoni Insurrection" by partisans). Records from the Keto government are largely incomplete, though the Ensign claims to have enlisted with her regional command post on her 18th birthday. Ensign Chovert is a native Ketoni; her parents both lived in the region even after their separation when she was five. The father is senior administrator of a small vineyard in the Charybdis Plain. Her mother had previously gone out of the Keto Region to acquire several advanced degrees from Cat State University, most notably in the fields of linguistics, philosophy, mechanical engineering, ecology and (after marrying the Ensign's father) hydroponics and mineral studies. A brief review of scientific annals reveals that she had little impact with any research efforts in the scientific community; she appears to have skipped quite rapidly from discipline to discipline during her education before she had the time to make a mark of any significance; most of the woman's expertise was used at the Charybdis Plain vineyard during her marriage to the

Ensign's father. The mother has been 'deceased' (Ensign's only word on the matter) since the Ensign was six. The Ensign was an only child growing up, however records from the father's subsequent marriage are incomplete and it is unclear whether any agnate siblings exist. Ensign Chovert's own formal education does not exceed the high-school level (see *Academics Appendix*) although admittedly she does possess impressive intellectual faculties (*Appendix B, * classified D-2*), if not any outright expertise in any particular area.

Ensign Chovert has amassed a spotty performance record and developed a largely negative reputation from her commanding officers during her 18 months as an Allied Military officer. As a Quartermaster's assistant at Base Leone she accrued enough negative marks on her record to be singled out for redirection by the base's duty officer, and the Ensign's reaction to this counseling was not constructive (details are again unclear, but whatever actions the Ensign took were sufficient to merit her incarceration at Kasseh-Fighouse Women's Penitentiary, pending formal charges of insubordination; these charges never materialized, however).

Ensign Chovert was deployed out to AM Marine Base-10 with the latest batch of unspecialized / low-skill / low-value personnel. During the past seven weeks Ensign Chovert appears to have fallen squarely back into her underachieving and underperforming ways.

In-test Behavioral Observations: Ensign Chovert, while compliant with all testing procedures and endlessly patient with the process, demonstrated marked resistance to several facets of testing, most noticeably on her Spah-Tüahla Adult Test of Intelligence, where the Ensign provided several "errors" of either omission or misdirection that greatly impacted her overall score in a negative way (please note, however, that all weighted test scores using the exam's hidden validity factors provided a more than satisfactory assessment of her overall cognitive function).

The Ensign's attempt to negatively influence her results on this exam may hint at an overly developed sense of conformity (ie: an attempt to perform up to "reasonable expectations") or more likely a passive-aggressive attempt to assert some form of control over a situation in which she felt she had little. In any case, given her superior mental faculties (*Appendix B, * classified D-2*) the Ensign herself was probably quite aware that her attempts to influence the exam's validity would be unsuccessful.

Results:

Moro-Plantar Test of Innate Reflexes: Aggregate score of **87** (6th percentile) *

** Based on this subject's test score Ensign Chovert is hereby certified an 'acceptable' candidate for R-Type training, though given other temperamental factors she cannot be 'recommended' for such.*

Spah-Tüahla Adult Test of Intelligence: **RESULTS CLASSIFIED ***

*** WARNING:** *This subject presents with significantly above-average intelligence.*

Myers-Briggs VII-R Personality Type Profile: **ISTJ** (full results in appendix A)

Cluster-Beah Temperamental Tendencies Scale: Summed Score of **48** (4th percentile)

Phlamengh-Tortuga Index of Sympathy / Antisociality: **Results Inconclusive**

Wraith's mouth opened so wide he might have swallowed the data-pad in front of him whole; he didn't bother covering his lips as a freight-train yawn lazily shuttled up his throat and into the stale office air.

"The Psych Department," he mused, "what is it about them, huh? How can they have such a knack for putting people to sleep? Lord! They've got a language all their own. Hell: it's like reading James Joyce. Or trying to, anyway..."

The faintest sound— a fluttering whistle— sailed by his desk. Sam Roont lay sprawled in Wraith's guest chair, gently flicking a deck of cards across the room one at a time:

"You know, someone once told me that *Ulysses* is actually written in English." The good doctor grinned. "Of course I've actually *seen* a copy firsthand, so I know that's a lie, if there ever was one..."

Wraith dropped the pad with a sneer and waved a hand. "It's fine. It's all fine. This Chovert girl is a fine subject, for what she is, anyway. The shrinks are a formality: they don't know what we're looking for in our recruits, anyway—"

"Naturally."

"—so the whole damned battery is pointless." The subcommander shivered and bit his lip. "The report just pisses me off for some reason. Can't say why..."

Roont's grin widened. "Probably 'cause they like to overcomplicate: sometimes a cigar *is* just a cigar, you know..."

Wraith returned the doctor's gaze and then reciprocated the grin: he pulled two cigars from under his desk and handed one off. Roont lit up immediately and motioned to a monitor on Wraith's desk:

"Good thing you don't care what the Sigmunds say, amigo: it looks like the base doctor just finished prepping our little 'child of the corn' for surgery."

Wraith stared at his monitor's grainy feed: the Chovert girl lay on her stomach in profile, bare in the surgical ward with her milky skin stained an ugly yellow by harsh lights and myriad disinfectants oozing along her back like slime across a slug's carapace. Her head was to one side, facing away from the camera: nothing but a mop of unnatural white hair met the monitor's gaze.

Roont chuckled. "Callipygian, ain't she?"

Wraith shook his head: "No: Ketoni."

The pair stared vacantly at the monitor for a time, watching while nurses in rebreathers loomed in and out of the surgical room's eerie floodlight shadows, flitting about like masked phantoms.

"The passive voice." Wraith growled.

"Huh?"

“It’s the passive voice.” The subcommander motioned to the report on his desk. “They use it all the time. *All* the time. It’s horrible. *That’s* what pisses me off about it, when I stop to think.”

“You pick the damndest things to get worked up about, you know.” Roont snickered as he blew a lungful of smoke out his nostrils; his scholar’s brow soon furrowed into a more serious shape. “Speaking of little things to get worked up about: the Labs sent us specs for that new model of electrical insulating suit. *Liefde*, I think it’s called. It’s good stuff and all— *really* good stuff, actually— and the Labs’ll get one to us as soon as we send off our little girl’s measurements. But...”

“But what?”

Roont shrugged. “They want a name.”

Wraith pulled the cigar from his mouth. “A ‘name’?”

“The unit. Well, *your* unit in fact. Your friends in the Committee have our backs, I know: pilot physicals, funding, logistics, psychological reports,” he motioned to Wraith’s data pad, “I know *that’s* all formality and we don’t have to muddle around with it—”

The subcommander sighed. “But a squadron without a name is a little stranger than we’d like, isn’t it?”

Roont winked. “Something like that. Ah, and then there’s the uniform designs...”

“What color is the base-coat on a *Liefde* suit?”

“Uh, let’s see... the microfiber outer finish should be deep navy. *Really* deep navy or maybe even black, I’m not sure.”

“That’s fine. There’s our ‘design’.”

Roont held up a tiny envelope: it was self-addressed to the research and development wing of Bydo Labs, Hamburg. “But the name, Wraithie? And the logo? You know better than me that the Brass really get off on that kind of thing. If we’re gonna camouflage ourselves worth a damn here— make ourselves look like a respectable Raiden unit— well, we gotta play the game, don’t we? Cheetahs can’t play alongside tigers without putting on their racing stripes, you know...”

The subcommander kicked the envelope away with a crossed leg. “You’re a philosopher, now? All mismatched metaphors aside: what stupidity is this? We’re expected to pick out curtains and drapes for the windows before our house’s foundation is set, Samuel? Carts and horses, friend: you tell the Labs to go fuck themselves.”

“That would be my pleasure, but—”

“‘But’ nothing; I’ll waste my time with trivialities like names and call-symbols some other time. Understand?”

Roont held up a hand. “Fine, fine!”

After a considerable pause Wraith leaned back in his chair:

“Speaking of ‘trivialities’: how’s your boy?”

“Who: that little JG, you mean? Ah, he’s fine. Well: I wouldn’t say *fine*...” Roont tilted one hand back and forth. It was a move Wraith found particularly annoying; one dark sneer put an end to it. “He’s in a better place with it all, I think. And *Rubicon* was what it was: we screwed up, and we know it.”

Wraith shook his head. “And yet *he* knows it, too, doesn’t he? The boy wasn’t even supposed to be down there, Samuel! What do we do with him, huh?”

Another pause. Roont shrugged:

“Well, your Committee hasn’t been forthcoming with an assistant for me...”

The subcommander waved a hand and growled. “Whatever. Do as you will. That keeps him under our thumb, anyway.”

Another pause. The good doctor started up with his deck of cards again, lobbing them one at a time across the subcommander’s desk. Wraith finally spoke:

“Of course if JG Tabris’ lips get too big for his own good then he will be killed.”

Roont sat back and crossed his arms; he didn’t say anything.

“What, Samuel? That ‘offends’ you? You know the Committee’s methods—”

“It isn’t that.” Roont shook his head. “It’s something else.”

“What, then?”

“The passive voice.”

Wraith sat back in his chair. He blinked.

“What?”

“You’re talking in a language ‘all your own’, ain’t you?” The good doctor shook his head. “In the short time I’ve known you I’ve noticed that pair on you: a big ‘ol set of balls. You don’t take crap, and you talk like you mean it, most of the time anyway. So don’t friggin’ tell me that Tabris ‘will be killed’, Wraith. Say it like you mean it.”

The subcommander cemented his teeth on edge and exhaled a dangerous breath.

“Right you are, Samuel: if JG Tabris’ lips get too big for his own good then *I* will kill him. How’s that for syntax?”

Roont chuckled. Then he laughed.

“Ah, that’s much better, Wraithie! No bullshit and no equivocations, right? And it really makes our present much less tense, don’t you think? Even if the idea itself makes the future a little bit imperfect—”

“That’s enough.” Wraith growled.

Roont went back to flicking playing cards. Eventually he sighed and hung his head:

“Do you know something? Tanner came out with his new book last week.”

Wraith arched his brow. “‘Tanner’ as in the Bydo Labs’ Tanner? ‘Special Assistant to the Lab Chief’ Tanner?”

Roont nodded. “‘The reincarnation of Dr. Shinto Kama’, they call him. Piece of scum fucker, *I* call him.”

“Jealousy,” Wraith chided.

Roont shook his head. “No: envy, actually. I can’t be ‘jealous’ of the respect and recognition he gets from our peers because I’ve never *had* that before, professionally.” Roont laughed. “Motherfucker! Pedestrian prick, too: you know he actually called his book *Down the Rabbit Hole*? And he wouldn’t even consult with me on the ‘Practical Applications of the Bydo Genome’ chapter: he blew me off as if I were some crackpot in a basement laboratory!”

“Observant fellow...”

Roont sorted through the remaining cards in his deck. He found the one he was looking for and then grinned from ear-to-ear. “But you know, amigo, I’m gonna end up trumping his ass like he wouldn’t believe!” He held up a tattered playing card; fluorescent bulbs bounced off the lacquered face like laser beams.

It was the queen of hearts.

“The only thing that popular-science-book-writing prick got right in all his blather is the cutsey Wonderland reference: it’s *all* about the Red Queen’s Race. An *arms* race, to be specific. Nature is a whore for change; you gotta run twice as fast just to stand still, and accelerate every minute just to hold your ground, especially against a predator as ravenous as the Bydo Empire. But us, Wraith— you, me and your precious Committee—we’re *not* standing our ground: we’re looking to gain it.” Roont’s lips twisted into a dark, cruel sneer: “and when all the itty bitty little people on this miserable excuse for a planet wake up on Christmas morning to find all that gained ground sitting in their stockings, well: they’ll see who to thank for that!” The good doctor pounded his chest.

Wraith shook his head. A condescending smirk blossomed over his lips. “My ‘precious Committee’ might just want a little of that credit too, if you wouldn’t mind...”

“And you yourself, of course.”

“I’m not doing any of this for credit, Samuel. If you go up for each and every Nobel Prize known to man I’d keep my own name far from consideration for all of them.”

“Oh, come on!” Roont snickered. “You’re telling me you don’t want that massive ‘ol ego of yours stroked at all? That I don’t believe!”

“I rather like you, Samuel, but I’m not *like* you,” Wraith answered. “I’m a soldier. Soldiers are instruments: means to an end, and not ends in and of themselves. And we don’t chase fame. I’m on board with the Project for my own reasons, but they have little to do with personal glory and recognition.”

“What, then?”

Wraith’s slate eyes turned icy. “Honor, among other things, I guess.”

“Aha! Honor! And honor is—”

“Honor is *not* the same as glory. Not even close.” The subcommander folded his hands behind his head and leaned back. “You have a good afternoon, Samuel.”

The good doctor got to his feet and stretched. He retrieved the envelope addressed to Bydo Labs and crammed it in his pocket, but then he stopped. He opened the top and wedged that playing card into the fold, grinning all the while. He motioned to the live video feed with his head:

“That spectacular little piece of tail is really just a card in our deck, anyway. Let her wear her suit with pride! Anyway, Wraith: as for your Committee and all, I’m sure that when all’s said and done there’ll be more than enough credit to go around.”

Wraith was still staring down at the video feed. The nurse-phantoms, steam rising out the sides of their ugly rebreather masks like hot stink pouring out a wild hog’s snout, were busy holding down the young girl pinned to their operating table like a butterfly. Presently the girl’s entire body went to spasms. A silver knife— more accurately a spear— flittered about against the child’s writhing back as the doctor went to work on her.

Doctor? Tch! Butcher, more like...

A mop of hair flailed about, silver streaks dancing a manic chorea, and a head turned around. Teeth— perfect, white and salivating with terror— yawned around a black chasm of a mouth, the tongue inside writhing like a snake. Above that a button-nose ran snot and two delicate eyes lay cemented shut, bleeding mighty rivers of water between them, the tears flying in beads from her wriggling head like a melancholy rainstorm.

Wraith sighed:

“Credit? Yes, there’ll be enough of that, I think. That and blame...”

“What?” Roont turned around.

The subcommander shook his head and sat up in his chair:

“A *name*, Roont; a name. I think I have our squadron name for you, if you’re still interested...”

II.

Given her looks Chenine was undoubtedly used to turning heads wherever she walked. Whether it was the dreary halls of her old high school in Keto, the seedy back alley of that juvenile Nash Ultima club scene or even the ‘asexual’ corridors of a dignified Allied Military base there were always heads to turn in her direction, and eyes to bug out at her. No doubt the girl had developed that curious ‘sixth sense’ for this phenomenon when she was younger— that faint feeling in the spine, like a caterpillar wandering down her back, prowling on to the usual points of interest— but if there’s one universal rule to life it’s that one can get used to anything: these days, most likely, the girl had no such magical radar at her disposal.

But the moment Chenine stepped through Base-10’s cold zone and into Command Ops with Wraith at her side the burning stares came down from all around her: vapid, entranced eyes landed on her by the dozen. Their surprise was palpable— shock at the fact that, for starters, she was still breathing, let alone strutting through Command Ops at all— and the girl didn’t damn-well need an internal radar to pick up those signals, did she?

Would it be cliché to say that they look as if they’d ‘just seen a ghost’?

Yes, that would in fact be a cliché.

But in this case it would also be quite appropriate.

And accurate, too, from a certain point of view...

Wraith pushed Chenine through his office door. Lieutenant Hayle was on her feet across the room, lips perched with the beginning of words, but Wraith held out a stern finger and wagged it. He followed Chenine into his office and slammed the door shut behind him. He turned his desk chair around so it was facing the door and pointed at it:

“Sit.”

Chenine did so, folding her hands delicately in her lap; she took up all of a third of the padded leather chair.

Wraith circled around his desk once, then twice. He stood leaning against his scratched-up filing cabinet, arms crossed, and sighed.

“Excitement enough, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Aryl.”

“A product of interesting times...”

“Yes, Aryl.”

Wraith pursed his lips. He pulled a bottle of Western whiskey from under his desk and filled a cup.

“You don’t drink—”

“As a rule, no.”

“*Legally*, I mean.”

Chenine’s brow twitched. She did not answer.

“Miss Chovert?”

“You’re trying to put me on my guard, aren’t you, Aryl?”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s what you do. It’s what gives you your power, anyway. You want me to be afraid. When you make people afraid you make them compliant, you make them docile.” She turned her head to look at the man with one brilliant blue eye. “You make them more ‘tame’ for you. Isn’t that right, Aryl?”

Wraith’s brow twitched. He did not answer.

Chenine faced forward. “I could be wrong,” she said, “but I’m not.”

Her hair ruffled on one side. The girl’s body tensed and she reflexively shot her arm forward, deftly snatching a bottle of cold water out of the air as it sailed past her chair. The Aryl’s voice sounded behind her:

“And where do you get that stone-cold certainty about human behavior, hmm? Is it an expert analysis based on these venerable 19 years you’ve spent on the Blue Marble, Miss Chovert, or is it—”

“And that diminutive...” Chenine’s voice was a faint whisper.

“What?” He barked.

“You always use that civilian form of address for me; you never call me ‘Lieutenant’—”

“Because you damn-well *aren’t* a Lieutenant in my book, by merit or by right.”

“No: only by practicality...”

An affirmative growl escaped Wraith’s throat. He nodded. “You never objected before, did you?” He stared out his office’s dingy brown window, but then he turned around: he’d just hit upon something very important.

“You didn’t object before, but not because you were afraid, right?”

“No: it was because I didn’t take offense.”

“You were never afraid of me, were you?”

Chenine faced forward. “I obey orders, but you could say that I was never tame, Aryl.”

Wraith took hold of his highball glass and cocked his head in the air quickly, lips pulled apart like a pit viper flashing its fangs; the sparkling amber liquid in the glass disappeared in one fell motion.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” he said.

“There’s only one thing in life that scares me, Aryl, and it isn’t you.”

“The R-H’s, then? You’ve got a funny way of showing it—”

“My *Gazer* doesn’t scare me—”

“No? Really, and here I thought you were intelligent—”

“—because my Raiden wouldn’t hurt me, I don’t believe.”

Wraith stopped, lips still parted to continue the cross-talk. He traced a ring around his highball glass with one white-gloved finger.

“And I *would*, you mean?”

Chenine blinked, then stared down at the dingy floor tiles between her feet.

“That depends, Aryl.”

“On what?”

Chenine said nothing for several seconds. Finally the girl looked up and faced forward, avoiding Wraith’s eyes:

“I think that might depend on... on how far your Antipathy can take you, Aryl.”

A hollow ping, and then another: the highball glass slipped through gloved hands and rattled against the metal tabletop.

Wraith said nothing for several seconds.

“An interesting choice of words, Miss Chovert.”

“These are interesting times, Aryl.”

The subcommander opened his top desk drawer and moved a dusty set of files out of the way: there was a brass key beneath the mess of paperwork.

“Why did you come back to Base-10 after the operation, Miss Chovert? Were you coming after me, maybe?”

“No.”

Wraith used the key on his bottom desk drawer: it snapped open with a rusty squeal. He slid an object out of the gaping maw with a dull metal-on-metal scrape.

“You abandoned your Raiden in Santiago—”

“We were done with each other for the moment.”

Wraith stood behind Chenine; the girl sat with her ankles crossed and hands still folded in her lap, facing forward.

Wraith leaned down near her ear: “You were ‘done’? ‘Done’ doing what, girl?”

“Whatever it was you intended us to do in the first place, I suppose...”

The chrome gun barrel hovered behind Chenine’s head, six centimeters from her delicate white-stained bangs; both barrel and bangs gleamed with a lethal silver luster.

The girl continued, oblivious:

“Whatever it was you wanted from these creatures from the start.”

Wraith’s voice was a deathly whisper:

“And what makes you think you have any idea what I really wanted from you?”

“I know what you wanted from me this time, during *Ozymandian Veil*.”

“Do you? And just what did I want?”

“My death.” Chenine turned her head slightly, enough to eye Wraith but not enough to see the instrument of her imminent execution. “You pushed me into the middle of Old Santiago just as the fleet was being pulled back: you wanted me and my Raiden to be destroyed.”

“And why would I do that?”

“I don’t know, Aryl. But I think you need to know something. Something very important.”

The gun’s hammer was staggeringly well-oiled: it made no sound at all as Wraith cocked it.

“What’s that, child?”

“I’ll never do that for you again. I’ll never put my head in a noose— commit to absolute suicide like that— ever again. Not for you, anyway, Aryl.”

“You won’t follow your orders, girl?”

Inch, inch, inch: a white-gloved finger stroked the handgun’s trigger.

“I obey orders,” she answered, “and I could die for two-hundred-thousand different things, or two-hundred-million different people. But not for you.”

“Your life is so precious, is it, pop-tart?”

Inch...inch...inch...

“No.” Chenine said. “It is not.”

“Then why couldn’t you die for me, little one?”

“Because it isn’t so precious a thing, but you are not worth my life, Aryl.”

Chenine bowed her head and stared into her lap. “You’re not even *close*.”

Wraith’s brow twitched.

For the next fifteen seconds there was absolute silence.

And then there was that sound, loud and caustic: a noise as unmistakable as it is unpleasant.

The intercom on Wraith’s desk sang out with a peal.

“Subcommander,” Laura Hayle interrupted, “there are representatives from the Military Investigate Branch here. They want to talk to you—”

“Tell Faught to sent them over to—”

“Sir, they’re here with Castor Bean clearance: representing the Allied Commanders themselves. I can’t give them any push-back. The best I can do is give you a few minutes of prep time, if you need it...”

The white-gloved finger on the gun’s trigger tightened.

A few minutes? Seconds is all I need...

It tightened...

Milliseconds...

“Sir?” Laura called.

Wraith dropped the gun to his side and put it in his uniform coat. He kicked the chair forward, prompting Chenine to hop out of it. The girl faced him:

“The Generals?” Chenine asked.

“Never mind that. Just get out of here. Go be with your squadmates, girl.” Wraith opened his office door and shoved Chenine through it, watching as she shuffled down the hallway.

Thirty seconds later a phalanx of dark-clothed men marched up to his door.

“Subcommander Sven Wraith?” The lead man asked.

Wraith nodded.

“Sir, we have orders to place you under arrest, on authority of the Allied Commanders, the Council on Human Rights and the Committee for the Preservation of Naturalistic Life.”

Wraith smiled. He drew the firearm from his coat, very slowly. Immediately four of the men brandished MP-180s from under their own cloaks, all of them configured for light machine pistol use. The display was unnecessary: Wraith slowly handed the weapon butt first to their leader and nodded.

“So, what are the charges, Captain?”

“Crimes against nature, Subcommander, as well as crimes against humanity.”

Wraith put out two hands, awaiting the cuffs. He laughed bitterly:

“And that’s the actual order of things, is it? How heartless...”

III.

Spent fuel rods dominate the underside of the docking ring. They smother it, ruling the eerie shadows of this abyssal underworld with a sweet, cloying vapor leaking through their rusted hulls. Patchwork cobwebs bridge the gaps, swaying to and fro in time with the underside of the mooring floor grating around far, far above in the darkness: the

only true sign of motion— or of any kind of life— in this technological purgatory. This is the domain of obsolete equipment and useless junk: the kind of place one hides the things they don't need.

It can also be a place to hide a human being, if the being's so inclined. And at the moment an angry pair of copper-colored eyes glistened in the darkness of a corner— dead drunk and wobbly like cracked saucers— sending a clear message that *this* particular being was so inclined.

She was very inclined, in fact.

The flask of the imbalanced heart sailed through the air and landed at the Base Doctor's feet with a hollow metal clang. A golden sludge oozed along the exposed rim, glistening like pale honey.

"Galliano," Samantha snarled from her corner. "Bloody Christchurch: Galliano! Only a fucker like Storm could still that Italian swit!"

The doctor raised an eyebrow.

Samantha ground her teeth and drew a deep, sobering breath:

"*Swill... that Italian... shit.*"

"That's hard enough to say even when sober, isn't it Sam?"

The pilot plopped down on an overturned fuel rod, legs spread apart, staring down at a miscellaneous grease stain seeping over the rusty metal floor.

"It's a mongrel bastard drink," she said. "Take a batch of perfectly fine booze and stir it up in a mismatched garden of star anise and flowery crap: fucking impurities! Doll the shit up with enough vanilla to just *try* and make it palatable? I don't think so! It's still a mongrel bastard drink!" The girl spat on the ground, relatively close to the silver flask. She shook her head and looked up at the doctor. "Tch! Doesn't matter, I guess. *I'm* a mongrel bastard too, you know." She waved a hand. "Bitch, anyway. And, well, of course *you'd* know..." Sam held up one hand, bronze and pale in the wan light of the storage bay. "You've seen my naked genes, haven't you? Ha! And me without my own jeans!" The girl grinned with absolute delight, and then mild mirth. Finally the smile fell from Sam's face: apparently she'd taken a moment to reevaluate that joke, and judging by the scrunch in her face she now had a far more accurate opinion of it. "Take one part European blood and mix it with two parts New Kenyan." She glared at the older woman: "Stir it up in a mismatched garden of spent alien toxins— courtesy of some piss-head irresponsible techie fuckers in Bydo Labs' Nalubaale Branch— and you get one stubborn-as-a-mule, golden-eyed battleaxe. A battleaxe with a thirty year lifespan, give or take a few years..."

"Sam, your syndrome is almost certainly many years away from the quickening stage, and you know it—"

The pilot ignored this observation and continued flexing and relaxing her fingers. "Mongrels, mongrels... Tch! We can't all be pure-blooded goddesses. Not all of us can be like Chovert, you know..."

"Pure-blooded? What? For heaven's sake, Samantha: Chenine's a French-Chinese crossbreed, and you know *that*, too!"

Samantha scoffed. "A Ketoni... the best of both genetic worlds. They got their genes distilled *pure*— genetically speaking— and clean, too. Unnatural asses... kinda like the Bydo that way, I always thought. Still... damn Ketoni! Tch! Their blood is charcoal-filtered vodka to my Galliano."

The doctor shook her head. “If I were to pick the person I think most benefits from ‘hybrid vigor’ in their genes, Sam, I’d have to go with the girl who soldiers on, even under the shadow of an incurable illness. That’s guts, and that’s strength.”

The pilot laughed, and it was a very unattractive sound:

“A girl’s life can get very interesting when she isn’t too concerned about losing it, push coming to shove...”

“Going back to that alcohol-for-blood metaphor, Sam, I have a question for you: when did you start hitting the bottle? *Really* hitting it, I mean?”

Sam looked over at the empty flask resting between them. The engine of her head was clearly not set on the right rail, or at the very least its conductor was out taking a very long piss.

No: more like on the piss...

“Hitting the bottle? Dunno: half-an-hour ago... maybe... but given the God-damned circumstances—”

“That’s not what I mean.” The doctor sighed. “You know, *Ex-Tech* pilots get plenty more training than regular linked pilots like yourself, and the process was always the same with them: recruits might come in with pink livers, even teetotalers, but it wouldn’t be more than a few months before they started pickling their innards.”

“They fall off the wagon, do they?” Samantha did not look up.

“*Leap*, more like. Granted, Chenine doesn’t drink at all and Justin’s liver was already three-shades short of cirrhotic when he got to Base-10, but I pegged your drinking habits as somewhere in the middle ground between the two when you first got here. I’m hoping that hasn’t changed much since then, but based on your last physical you seem to be getting most of your vegetable intake from noble hops these days...”

Samantha sat up, slowly, and brought her legs together. She traced a small pattern down her shoulder with one finger: a line running down her left breast and across her lower ribs. She did not look at the doctor, nor did she have to double-check her finger’s route:

“About two weeks ago— it was a Tuesday, I think— we all went up in the air for combat qualifiers: Storm, Chovert and me. We were dogfighting each other, you know? No live ordinance. It’s all done with scanners and sensors: a game of laser tag for big kids.” Her finger wandered back up her body following the same route. “I’ve been a pilot for longer than either Storm or Chovert. They’re both okay at a lot of things— craft handling and acrobatics— but I’m a better fighter than they are. I’m *much* better, actually. That can be... frustrating, for the underdogs. So we spend all afternoon gunning for each other, with me on top, and Chovert after that. The girl’s got a rocket on her ass after all, and it’s hell trying to run down a Dancer. Then there’s Justin, flying a lumbering Striker-clone out in the open against two other R-Types...” Sam shook her head. “That’s not an easy thing to do: it’s like a tortoise swimming through a herd of jellyfish, trying to avoid the stings. He’s not really fast enough for Raiden-on-Raiden combat, and he’s not really built for it.” Sam’s finger dropped back down to her side. “That can be... frustrating. But as it goes, everything was gravy: a routine mock-combat day closing out another routine Tuesday. Near the end of the day I was strafing past the *Love*— I’d been picking on Justin all day, ‘cause I could, I suppose— and he was understandably upset about getting his own ass handed to him like that. I would be too, of course, but Storm can be a tough read for me: he was a little more upset than I thought. I even heard him

growling through my speakers... and so anyway he checked me when we passed each other.”

“He ‘checked’ you?” The doctor asked. “What do you mean ‘checked’?”

Samantha waved a hand. “Checked! He *brushed* me. You know: cut the turn too close; shaved some paint off my finish. That kind of thing.”

“But physical contact’s not allowed in those qualifiers. Did you report him?”

Sam laughed. “We’re not babies running home to mommy! There’s always a little pushing and shoving on the playground, doc. You don’t scream bloody murder for a bloody lip, do you?”

“But it was more than that, wasn’t it?”

Sam closed her eyes. “Part of his spike arm’s pivot gear caught on my port, just under my aileron; he couldn’t have predicted that happening. The shorn aileron exploded off the wing and cut back over to my underside. It tore up some nonessential systems, but nothing too serious...” She looked down at her own body. “It felt like a bullet, I think, and then like a white-hot steel rod striking my skin. We hit— Justin and me— and we both passed each other, and then...” Sam cupped both hands over her torso, her left hand against her breast and her right hand at her midsection, “...and then I’m holding my guts in with one hand and my heart in with the other. There’s blood everywhere— caking the cockpit like India ink— and that hot, throbbing pulse of raw organs dangling out of my chest... me fighting to fly the damn ship and pull my head out of my ass, my throat chalking up with bile... the stink of my ‘exposed innards’...”

Sam put her hands back down at her side and looked up:

“Just another routine Tuesday.”

“Sensation links are *not* an easy thing, Sam. And you’re all supposed to have counselors, aren’t you? They’re *mandatory* in a normal unit with linked pilots—”

“Storm and Chovert don’t fucking need them!” Samantha let loose a very ugly snarl. “And if they don’t need them—”

“You can’t go around comparing yourself to Justin Storm and Chenine Chovert. You’re not like them. They’re—”

“Why?” The girl spat. “Why can’t I compare!? Is it because they’re better pilots than me? Because they’re stronger? I’ve got news for you, doc: the two of them are both cagey, manipulative little toads! They’re *not* better than me!”

“That’s not what I meant. Justin and Chenine are masochists, Samantha. And I mean it: both of them are.”

“A soldier *is* a masochist.” The girl raised her nose in the air. “And a soldier is a sadist. A soldier is a peaceful hero and a soldier is a war criminal. A soldier is an agent of mercy and a soldier is an angel of death. A soldier is a chess piece— from a rook to a pawn— and a soldier is a football shin guard; a soldier is a scalpel and a soldier is a sledgehammer. They’re not political, but they can be tools of politics, and they’re not thoughtless, but they can be deployed to the inner gates of hell or the outer boundaries of heaven without a second thought. A soldier is whatever their brass wants them to be, and whatever their brass *needs* them to be.” She balled her fists and bowed her head. “I’m a soldier, and that job description doesn’t phase me; I’m okay with all of that. But... but with this assignment, and with the R-H’s— what they are, and what they can do— I don’t know what my brass wants me to be. I have no idea what they want me to be...”

“A corpse, if you keep this up. And one thing they definitely *don't* want you to be is a raging alcoholic.” The doctor shook her head, and then held out one hand. “Come on, Sam: let’s get you back to medical.”

Samantha got up, ignoring the doctor’s hand until she nearly fell forward onto her face. When she caught herself a small data pad fell out of her lap and landed on the floor.

“What’s that, huh? A list of names?”

Sam shrugged: “It’s a casualty report: that’s all. For the *Ozymandian Veil* Operation at Godthab. Still preliminary, but we got it two hours ago...”

There was one name highlighted on that list.

“Miles Moritz? Who was he?”

The pilot bared teeth, but then she shook her head and shrugged:

“Mi—” She swallowed. “Captain Moritz: he was a soldier. Just a soldier, and that’s all...”

Sam opened her mouth again; she appeared ready to say more, but then her voice broke, almost like a pubescent boy’s would. She bared her teeth again, grinding them like sandpaper, but remained silent. The two walked out of the docking ring, Samantha supported on the doctor’s shoulder, until they reached the lift.

“I hope Justin at least apologized to you for lashing out like that,” the doctor said.

Samantha stared down at her feet. She nodded.

“Of course he did: soft-spoken... avoiding eye contact... your basic pansy traits... back to his old self... grazing...”

More silence.

“Motherfucking goat...”

The doctor cocked a brow: “Huh?”

Sam bared her teeth again:

“He went back to being ‘just another goat’, that’s all...”

IV.

His eyes shot open wide. A choking gurgle exploded from his lips.

Justin barely managed to keep his tongue facing forward.

“Dreaming?”

That voice was all of six inches away from his head.

He blinked. “No... I wasn’t.”

“You were.”

“I said that I *wasn't*, Chenine.”

Monitors beeped and buzzed. Computers droned from a far corner of the room: sterile, electronic lights dancing a somber ballet across the muted walls of the clean room.

“I wasn’t dreaming,” he repeated.

“I see,” Chenine answered.

The pilots’ heads— Justin, Chenine and Samantha’s— pointed inward at each other like the central spokes of a bicycle wheel. The supine trio’s bodies radiated out from that central configuration, each encased in a steel gray chamber from the collarbone down. Each tube bore serrated grooves at regular intervals: jagged guts in the metal column packed with a mismatched mesh of wire and tubes. Some of these wires were quite thin— like low-grade speaker wiring— and others were thick as a grown man’s

Achilles tendon. Clear plastic tubes crisscrossed the silver sarcophagi as well, all of them either carrying colored fluids into or out of their respective containers; most of these fluids were dull white or pink in color, a few bright red and purple, and one tube going into each container at each pilot's waist held a sparkling fluid that actually glowed green in the dark room, shining like a soft radioactive backlight against the 'hip' of each iron lung.

Justin arched his eyebrows.

"Hey: have you ever seen an iron lung before, Chenine?"

"These are *not* iron lungs."

"That wasn't my question. I was only curious—"

"In a textbook, maybe, but I don't know."

"Guess they've been obsolete since we killed polio..."

"They were obsolete long before that, I think."

The lights continued their ballet; the fluid inside the medical tubes kept right on oozing.

"Why do you want to know about them?" She asked.

Justin shrugged— out of habit, if nothing else— and instantly his naked body tingled like a dead limb beneath its silver shell. More than that: it 'reverberated' like a wine glass beneath a whirling fingertip. That sensation was not pleasant.

"I'm just passing the time. That's all..."

Justin arched his neck back as far as it would go: he could barely see the white-tipped bangs of his colleague's hair. Samantha Rayne's dirty blond locks rested beside that, but she was fast asleep: dead drunk, apparently, and having refused the base doctor's offer of GABA_{Acide} she would stay that way into the immediate future.

It was just as well, really.

"Sam's ship tried to kill her. Did you hear?"

"Yes." Chenine said.

"Why would it wait until now to try something like that?"

Chenine said nothing.

"To just lash out at her like that, out of the blue—"

"It wanted the Mass."

Justin blinked.

"What?"

"The *Platinum Heart* must have wanted to bond with the Slingshot Mass."

"To 'bond'?"

"Or merge... conjoin... I don't know the terminology, but it's what the Bydo Empire lives to do, isn't it?"

Justin sighed. "Yeah, it is. That's a nice guess and all, but how the hell can you be so sure..." Justin's speech slowed, and then he stopped. His first instinct was to be angry— livid, even— but as soon as Justin's fists clenched he relaxed them: there was no need for histrionics. When he spoke he was calm:

"The Galilean Mass, right, Chenine?"

Justin felt a small rhythmic jostle against his stiff pillow: Chenine nodding.

"So, did your kid—"

"They are not children," she said.

"Did your *ship* try to ice you?"

“No, I don’t think so...”

This time Justin nodded. “And Qu—” he paused, “the flesh in the *Platonic Love* never tried to take me out.”

“Quite the opposite, in fact.” Chenine said this quickly, almost reflexively, and Justin found it most aggravating. He took a breath and decided to bluff his hand:

“About that, Chenine: I can remember now. The amnesia’s temporary, and most everything’s come back to me, more or less in order. There’s no need to be cute or coy anymore, Starfighter.”

“I’m seldom coy—”

“That a fact?”

“To you, anyway. And I’m *never* cute—”

“I’ll have to agree with you, there...”

“And, consequently, you do *not* remember anything about what happened.”

“How the hell are you so sure?”

There was another light jostle. Justin arched his neck back and was met by a pair of brilliant blue eyes, all but dripping venom from the sockets. When the girl spoke it was in the closest thing to a ‘growl’ she might possess:

“Because you are not in agony right now. That’s why.”

The duo returned their heads to level, each arching back down very slowly, like a pair of wary cobras backing off their strike positions.

Do cobras fight each other? One of us would have to be a mongoose, I guess...

And it was already clear which one of them had the venom, wasn’t it?

“Would you say I’m anything like a mongoose, Chenine?”

The girl said nothing. It seemed that she didn’t want to play. But then she provided an unexpected answer:

“A rabbit.”

“What?”

“You have a good sense of smell. Much better than most, anyway.”

“It’s just link-enhancement.”

“Still, much better than mine.”

“Smell was your ‘price’, wasn’t it Chenine?”

She nodded again.

“But why a rabbit?”

“Base-10 smells bad: we’ve got all these oils and fuels and sanitizers and greases—”

“Again: *so?*”

“So when you walk from room to room anywhere on this base you wrinkle your nose and flare your nostrils.”

Justin thought about that. “I hadn’t noticed...”

“And it’s very like a rabbit,” Chenine concluded.

“But... rabbits are prey for snakes.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Justin said.

Neither of them spoke again for well over ten minutes. When Justin finally broke the silence he came right to the point:

“What did you see down in the docking ring, Chenine? What did— how, I mean... what *was* it?”

Chenine hesitated. When Justin pressed her, it was with a guttural snarl:

“You saw, damn it. I *know* you did, Chenine. What the fuck *was* it?”

“I can’t answer that... easily.”

“Try being difficult, then. It’s what you excel at, anyway.”

Chenine didn’t take the bait: the excuse to provide Justin with a fight. Instead she provided him with something quite unexpected: a straight answer.”

“Blue,” she whispered.

“That wasn’t *me*! It was a— a—!”

“I didn’t say ‘*you*’. I said *blue*.” The girl was still barely whispering.

Justin opened his mouth, and then he closed it. “What?” He finally managed. “What do you mean ‘blue’? What the hell kind of answer is that? Blue-eyed *boy*, do you mean? But... Quint... I— I really don’t think Quint...”

“Not the flesh of the *Platonic Love*, either... even though that must have been the catalyst.”

“‘Catalyst’? What the hell are you talking about?”

There was a light whistling noise: the sound of air slowly filling petite lungs. Chenine spoke only when she’d finished drawing out a sigh:

“When I was very little— even younger than you were when you had your accident over in Vladivostok—”

Justin’s brow arched, and then his lip curled: apparently Jen Drake had a big mouth on her.

“—when I was very small my mother would take me down out of the Charybdis Plain and into the Shoals, the low-lying grasslands to the north. They were daytrips, for the most part, and we’d usually go right after the rains, after the floods ran down out of Charybdis and painted the land a stain of slipshod, irregular canals. It was beautiful then, down on the banks and all along the steppes; everything grew.”

“You lived in fucking Keto, Chenine; it’s the world’s largest open greenhouse. Everything’s *always* growing there...”

“More than normal,” she said. “All the vineyards south of the Shoals use controlled irrigation techniques; their soil beds don’t take in excess rainwater so when it does rain in the rainy season it really cascades down the plain. There’s so much mineral-rich water involved, it’s more of a tsunami than a flood...”

Justin felt his pillow jostle: Chenine angling her head back to look at him once again. “They didn’t even call it the Charybdis Plains before the vineyards were built, you know.”

Justin squinted. “Why the hell would they ever call it that in the *first* place?”

Once again he heard the sound of air slowly filling petite lungs:

“Neither you nor Captain Rayne has a knack for Greek mythology...”

Justin’s lip curled; the gesture was as playful as it was resentful:

“I know that a guy’s supposed to cover his ears when a siren starts yammering at him. Unfortunately, I don’t seem to have the use of my hands at the moment...”

Chenine ignored him: “My mother would feel artsy, then, I guess. When we were in the Shoals we’d go down into one of the towns— usually Daybrook, since it was closest— and then she’d ply her trade.”

“Trade?”

“She liked to paint, among other things, and work at pottery, or sculpting, or whatever else was popular with the artisans at that time of year. There was a time when they needed some elaborate frescos touched-up on the walls at White Hollow—”

“‘White Hollow’? What was that: a row of statehouses, or something?”

“No: mausoleums,” Chenine replied. “White Hollow is the local cemetery.”

“What a great place to take a little kid...”

“It wasn’t unpleasant. I was too small to have any interest in the artwork, but there were other things to do: playing amongst the tombstones and darting in and out of all the big cedar trees they had there... trying to skip stones in the glistening lily ponds... napping on the benches near those rolling fields, all full of dandelions...”

He heard a small gulp: Chenine swallowing. It seemed that this was a pleasant memory for the girl, but for whatever reason she wouldn’t care to admit it to anyone, least of all herself.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Justin interrupted, “but what does this have to do with the color blue?”

“I’m getting to that,” the girl snapped. “They had a raised platform down in the center of the cemetery: a square building with ornate slits all along the edges. Sometimes the families of deceased people would gather around that place, when they weren’t burying anyone in the earth, of course. I didn’t know what that place was at the time, but my mother and I would sometimes sit on a hilltop just a stone’s throw away from some random group of mourners during twilight, when she was tired from her work. That’s when it would happen: all these wonderful colors erupted from the slits in that building like... like I don’t know... crayon drawings come to life. The colors were intense, and kaleidoscopic, even; it was mesmerizing to a five-year-old, anyway...”

“The place was a crematorium, wasn’t it, Chenine? They were burning corpses in there, weren’t they?”

“Of course they were. And they used a progression of temperatures— and a progression of colored flames— to incinerate those bodies. They did it to burn the bodies evenly: starting cold, with deep crimson flames, growing hotter and hotter into yellow tendrils— which are still quite cold, by any standard— until at last the slits turned brilliant white with an ungodly hot fire. The last step of cremation— for this cemetery, at least— was for them to superheat the incinerator: they injected the furnace with a volatile mixture of carbon subnitride...”

“‘Carbon subnitride’? Am I supposed to know what the hell that is?”

“Have you ever seen an acetylene torch?”

“What, a gas welder? Sure.”

“They use acetylene as a fuel in welders instead of subnitride because subnitride would melt the torch itself.”

“Ah...”

“Anyway, that final flame got hotter than anything else, burning radiant and strong...”

Justin perched his lips: he could remember just enough college chemistry to fill in one blank spot.

“Hotter than hot... it burned blue, didn’t it? It was a blue flame?”

Chenine nodded. “My mother, she would get kind of fanciful at times like that. When I asked her about the fire, about that strong blue flame in particular, she told me it was a person’s soul escaping the bonds of earth: it was the spirit of a human being evaporating off the planet and rising up to another plane of existence. Paradise, heaven... she had different answers on different days, but one part of her fantasy was always the same. ‘The human soul burns blue, Chenine...’ that’s what she would tell me. That’s the idiotic fantasy she provided to a stupid little child who couldn’t know any better at the time...”

“Well: that’s a good answer, as far as I’m concerned. What else are you gonna tell a kid, anyway?”

“The truth,” Chenine snarled. “That would have been a start, anyway. Humans don’t have anything like a soul inside them; making me believe something like that was as bad as making someone believe in Santa Claus.”

“Or in God, right Chenine?”

“That’s right: *El Shaddai*, too.”

“What a myopic view of the world you have, Starfighter.”

“And what a fanciful view of the world *you* have...”

Justin smiled: he could picture the girl’s delicate brow scrunching like a displeased housecat’s.

Or a displeased tiger’s, at that...

“But you sure as hell didn’t see my *soul* rampaging through those corridors, Chenine—”

“No: because you don’t have one, like I said. I’ve amended all the inadequacies of my mother’s lessons as I’ve grown, and the overall *point* of her lesson is sound, at least: a human’s *will* does burn blue. It burns brighter and stronger than anything else. The light of the Bydo is yellow, and that’s fitting: yellow flames burn cold, you know. Most people don’t think that’s the case, for whatever reason, but they do. The Bydo aren’t mindless, but I think they’re close to it. They’re much, much stronger than us, but that strength comes from a diffusion of power over trillions of unthinking drones. Our strength—whatever strength the human race might possess, anyway—comes from a concentration of power into these massive, overly-complicated minds. Whatever will or desire might drive the Bydo Empire is cold, and faint, and weak, but a human’s will burns blue: strong, and voracious, and clear...”

Justin let that dissertation set in, and as it turns out it didn’t sit particularly well with him:

“That *thing* wasn’t my will, either, damn it! It wasn’t *me* in control out there...”

“No,” Chenine agreed. “But it might have been you *out* of control, out there.”

He couldn’t manage an answer to the girl’s rather clever wordplay for some time.

Finally Justin came up with the proper rhetorical response for her:

“Fuck you, Chenine.”

The girl said nothing to this.

“And what about you, anyway? Are *you* in control of the *Chaste Gazer*?”

“No,” she answered. “I’m not. I’m... just—”

“A protowinged angel, aren’t you?”

He could feel that jostle: Chenine’s head tilting, this time less from puzzlement than from surprise, he imagined.

“Yeah, Starfighter: I can come up with fancy words, too. And they *are* wings, aren’t they?” Justin sneered: “Those holes in your back, the longitudinal tears in your flight suit? With me it’s spikes—”

“Spines,” Chenine quietly interrupted.

“—or *whatever*, but for you it’s wings, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t kno—”

“Bullshit.” Justin closed his eyes and sighed. “The Bydo... evil fucking creatures, every one of them! Whether they’re inside a Mass Core or inside an R-Type hull the Bydo can’t seem to keep their God-damned hands off other life-forms’ bodies... other life-forms’ genetic codes—”

“So far all the doctor’s genetic scans haven’t found any actual corruption in our genomes—”

“Yet...”

“—and as for the alterations, I believe they do it for—”

“Protection,” Justin growled. “Yes, I know. They *need* us in order to live, I think. They need our brainwaves, anyway. Without us they’d shrivel up and die like raisins. As long as they’re dependant upon us they *can’t* let us die—”

“And as long as *we* are dependant upon them then we won’t let *them* die, will we?”

A knot caught in Justin’s throat. At that moment he looked as if he’d been kicked right in the spiritual testicles. It was a cheap shot!

He wanted to repudiate this ugly statement. He wanted to shout down such a reprehensible innuendo— that Justin’s relationship with his *Platonic Love* was anything other than a battle for dominance and submission, and in any event most certainly *not* an act of symbiosis!— and he wanted to curse the name of the whole Bydo Empire into the ground. He wanted to make it crystal clear— *crystal* clear— that his previous choice to carry on in the R-H program was nothing more than a desire to fulfill the ultimate aim of mankind— to blast off and strike the bloody-fucking-evil Bydo— and that he didn’t have anything to gain by using such a vessel to do it. What insanity: Justin had something to *gain* in this unholy alliance? Ha! How *could* he, associating with such Bydo filth? How *could* he, forced to work with such an unholy spawn of hell: the demon lurking in the darkness, hiding on the fringes of God’s holy light? How *could* he gain anything?

Tch! How?

Two sensations invaded his head, one a sight and the other a smell, both of them flitting about with disquieting familiarity: blood-stained fingernails, oozing with syrupy black jelly, and a stink— a stench— more vile than roadkill rotting under the sun.

Those sensations didn’t matter, though, and his mantra sill rang true: how *could* he gain anything in this alliance?

Then there was a third thing: an emotion that followed both those sensations. He couldn’t call it excitement, or fear, or disgust, or happiness, or terror, or anything other than what it was:

It was euphoria. It was pure, unadulterated euphoria.

“How... how *could* I?”

“What was that?” Chenine asked.

He wanted to argue all these points and more— and of course he’d be successful— but Justin was tired, and he was bored with the argument anyway.

“I said I don’t want to talk about the R-H’s anymore, Chenine.”

Silence ruled the roost for another ten minutes after that. Chenine sounded a bit reluctant when she finally broke it: “I didn’t mean to say that it was ‘you’ that came out of the *Love*. That’s not what I was trying to say...”

Justin set his teeth on edge. “No, it wasn’t...”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Another?” When the girl didn’t answer Justin relented. “Fine, what?”

“Do you really believe that Antithesis *is* the Galilean Mass?”

“Of course I do.”

“Why?”

Justin blinked. Then he swallowed, uncomfortable:

“How else do you explain him— I mean *it*— traveling aboard Velasquez’s transport to Ceres using *your* face?”

“He remembered me from Operation ‘Concerted Reaction’, do you mean?”

“Yes, *it* did. It must have, right? There’s no other explanation...”

“There’s no other explanation...” Chenine repeated.

Justin didn’t know if this was a confirmation of his theory, or another probing question. In any case he didn’t demand clarification. He wouldn’t have had time, anyway: there was a jostle against his head, but this time from a different direction. Dirty blond locks shifted around on his periphery.

“Do either of you realize that you say in about 5,000 words what any normal person would say in less than 100?” Samantha’s voice was crackly and unsteady, but somehow in her drunkenness she was more sober than either of them. “Here’s the deal, kiddies: Li’l Miss Brass Ring’s got an edge to her words because she saved Justin’s bacon down in the docking ring—”

“She did not!”

Colors exploded before Justin’s eyes, all courtesy of a sucker-punch headbutt by Rayne.

“What the hell! Do you have the neck of an ostrich?”

“Don’t interrupt, Puppy-Dog Boy.”

“What’d you just call me?”

“Anyway, Chenine did save your ass by doing whatever the hell she did down in the docking ring: our doctor says that you’ve got three crusted-over bullet wounds on your back— courtesy of JG Tabris, of all people— and they’re so damned healed that they look to be a month old, give or take. But they *are* a month old, and that *is* scar tissue in your back. The doc says that if our security boys had pumped you full of MP-180 bullets like they had *planned* to do then you’d probably be in the next room right now, in eternal riposte under a bloody-fucking tarp—”

“Just ‘cause she’s so clumsy doesn’t make her a saint—”

“—and then there’s the Brass Ring: Justin here is put-off because you, Chenine, keep subtly blaming him for everything that’s happened up ‘till now—”

“I—” Chenine began.

“—*you* are not an innocent bystander, even though you’d like to be. With all due respect— and I really mean *all* due respect because, as you might say, I don’t ‘not respect’ you— you really are a tight-lipped, deceitful little toad.”

Chenine waited ten seconds to respond:

“And you... you are resourceful, and personable— perceptive, even, Captain... but you’re also an idiot...”

Justin clamped his lips together, snared tight as a tomb.

There was a snicker; it came from Samantha. Her snicker soon turned into full-blown laughter. And about that time Justin’s silence turned into a snicker:

“Tch! Stuck between a toad and an idiot...”

“And *you*,” Samantha added, “are a sniveling pantywaist.”

“Better’n a nimrod amazon.”

“‘Nimrod’ would be a *complimentary* term for a marine commando,” Chenine said. “You’d know that if you actually read the Bible. It must not be a requirement in your religion...”

“Quiet, you nitpicking twat,” Justin snarled.

“Churl...”

“Great insult,” Samantha interjected, “for a 15th century Englishman. Try to be a little fresher, there, kid...”

It went on from there: a volley of vicious name-calling, some of it biting, most of it ridiculous. By the end of it both Justin and Samantha were roiling in hysterical laughter. Chenine was more restrained emotionally, but by no means displeased. In fact, given what Justin could tell from the girl’s tone, she was damn-near as delighted as they were. He could tell because, as the shouting went on, the girl sounded less and less academic— less and less professorial— and more and more like herself, like the true emotional self he thought must be at Chenine’s core: the girl sounded positively childlike.

Of course a human’s core is even more mysterious than a Bydo Core. Not only is it a more difficult thing to get into, but the journey is far more dangerous. Justin thought so, anyway, and while he was willing to descend into the deepest version of hell behind the wheel of a questionably-built spacecraft he was positively *unwilling* to tread water in that other kind of inhospitable climate: a human heart.

And, of course, he didn’t really care at all about whatever hidden personality may lurk beneath Chenine’s icy skin anyway. One thing was certain, though: after that merciless barrage of insults and quips the pilots had broken through one layer of ice, and it was a big one.

“How’d we get to this point, anyway? How’d we all get so far out of line as a unit?” Sam asked.

Justin fielded that one:

“We don’t trust each other. We *didn’t* trust each other...” Justin shook his head.

“But... it’s not too late, I think, for us to start. We’ve all been kept in the dark for so long, and by so many people, and we really tried to go it alone for long enough. Pretty obvious that approach isn’t so helpful...”

“Dawn follows the darkness, doesn’t it? Not too late to hope for it, at least—”

“But hoping is only one better than dreaming...” Chenine whispered.

Sam continued: “As for me, I kept my experiences with the *Platinum Heart* hidden because I was afraid: I have enough problems with the link as it is, and I guess I thought I was losing my mind...”

“And I didn’t tell you about the R-H’s— the truth about their nature— because...”

“Because *why*?”

Justin shook his head. “You’re ‘military proper’, Samantha. I don’t know. Chenine and I are more ‘fringe’. You said it yourself: we’re not really cut-out for AM service. It was easier for us to talk about Wraith’s lies than it was to bring you in on everything. I’m sorry: you were afraid to confide in us, but we were worse. We just plain didn’t trust you.”

Samantha shook her head back and forth slowly. “It’s okay.”

“Is it?” Justin asked. “Is it *really*? Are we really okay?”

Sam sounded like she was about to speak, but then stopped. Justin heard her swallow, hard. After that she bumped him right on the top of the head, far more gently than before. After that he felt a jostle as Sam swung her head to one side, aiming at Chenine with the same general velocity, but prompting a reaction from the girl:

“Ow!” She exclaimed.

“‘Fringe’, indeed...” Sam growled.

“Where do we stand with Wraith?” Justin asked. “What about Roont, Tabris, and who know *who* else?”

“Mmm. Deceit kinda surrounds us, doesn’t it?”

“We can’t trust *anyone* affiliated with the R-H Program, can we?”

“You mean anyone affiliated with the burning heart and the teardrop,” Chenine clarified.

“That logo...” Justin remembered. “On the development center doors... the program files...”

“‘TIA’,” Sam added. “I’ve seen those letters before.”

“You’re right: on stationary... other places, too...”

No one spoke, so Samantha injected the obvious question:

“What do those letters mean to anyone?”

Chenine answered: “TIA... is Spanish for aunt, I think... and it’s an abbreviation for transient ischemic attack...”

“Huh?” Justin asked.

“A stroke.”

“Oh...”

After a longer pause Justin came right out with the obvious:

“The ‘A’ stands for Antipathy, you know.”

He felt Samantha nodding. “Yeah, I know.”

“I’m pretty sure that Tabris, for one, doesn’t know anything about ‘Antipathy’. But *we* damn-well need to. So what is it, huh? *What* is Antipathy?”

No one spoke; no one knew.

“What... is Antipathy?” Sam repeated.

Justin felt Chenine shrug:

“What is *sympathy*?”

The girl’s question was ridiculous and didn’t merit an answer, but so was Justin’s, given the amount of information available to them. Sam went back to sleep soon after this exchange: all that previous ‘touchy-feely’ talk likely made her nauseous. Chenine stayed quite awake, though:

“You think we’re both ‘fringe’, do you?”

“Don’t you?”

She didn’t answer that. Instead she worked through some logic all her own:

“You say we’re the same... compared to Captain Rayne, at least...”

“Kinda. What’s your point?”

Silence.

“Chenine?”

“I... have a question to ask you...”

“No: you have *another* question to ask me...”

“It’s important. I need to know if you can be honest about it, because it’s not an easy thing to answer. It *won’t* be, for someone like you, anyway—”

“Someone like me? Wh—”

“—but I need an answer. And it’s not just a question about you. It involves me, of course, and it’s important for both of us and *more* than just us. I think this is a question that you’ve seen coming. You should have anticipated it, anyway, because you’re not unintelligent...”

Justin didn’t say anything.

“If you don’t think you can be honest, or—”

“What is your question Chenine?” He was whispering; Justin closed his eyes.

A noise, slow and steady: the sound of air slowly filling petite lungs.

“How long have you actually *known* that your ‘Quint’ is actually a Bydo soldier?”

Justin’s eyes shot open.

Never before in the history of human conversation did a conversation go downhill as fast as that one did.

V.

She awoke perhaps an hour after the other two were finished yelling at each other.

The clean room was completely still: no noises except the faint hiss of static from health monitors and that constant, unnerving gurgling sound rising out of the tubes connected to the pilots’ sarcophaguses.

Or would that be sarcophagi?

Sam didn’t know.

Then Samantha blinked: there was a more important question, here.

“Why I am suddenly sober enough to care?”

Click... click... click...

Dress shoes on tile, clicking from across the room. Most unnervingly these noises came from behind Sam, in the shadows of the room.

“Doctor? Nurse?”

Click... click... click...

“Tabris? Hayle...”

Click... click... click...

“Roont? C’mon: damnit! Who the fu—*gmph...*”

A hand clamped down right over her mouth, and then there was a snakelike hiss against her ear:

“What’s the plan, Captain ma’am?”

The man withdrew his hand just before Sam had a chance to remove a finger or two.

“Who in the holy fuck are you! What are you—”

“Ain’t a need to scream at me, li’l chick-a-dee...”

“Storm! Chovert!”

She heard a tapping sound on either side of her; out of the corner of her eye Sam saw a gloved finger bouncing off Chenine’s forehead.

“They’re temporarily checked out, Delivery Boy and Milkmaid...”

Sam swung her head as far as possible, knocking her colleagues’ skulls in the process. A stiff hand against her temples put a stop to that.

“Omnicuronium...” the snakelike voice continued. “I had the good ol’ CPU dump half-a-milligram per kilogram body weight into each of their IV tubes ten minutes ago, along with that sobering-sauce for your—”

“*Our* computers don’t listen to strangers—”

“Wanna know how I did it, hmm? Same way I walked through the walls to get in here, my lovely lady. Same way I’ll walk through the walls when I leave, and the same way that no one, not even the God-man himself, is gonna see my do it.”

“What’re you, a ghost?”

“Not really, but I am about as visible as your feminine side, honeychile...” The gloved hand tapped Sam’s neckline, just above the metal sheath of her tube. “Literally as well as figuratively, at the moment...”

“Get the hell out of here!”

“You gonna listen to me, miss ma’am, or not?”

“I’m gonna give you five seconds before I start screaming—”

Fwip...

Sam tensed. She knew that noise. She knew what kind of thing *made* that noise.

Her suspicions were confirmed when a lethal shining blade came to rest right up against Chenine’s exposed throat.

“It’s funny, I think... see: I’ve been here before, if you know what I mean. I fancy myself a real ladykiller, and I’ve worked the club scene over in the Nash, but wouldn’t you know that I didn’t get the chance to go through with the snippy-snippy, then. No biggie, huh? Do-overs *are* all the rage these days...”

The knife sank down closer.

“After all: the Aryl-man’s had *three* chances to make his money-shot, so why shouldn’t I get one li’l do-over?”

The knife sank even closer.

“Just one... tiny... itty... bitty... li’l do-over?”

A second shining blade glistened on Sam’s other periphery, this one against Justin’s throat:

“Or I could air-out the li’l boy, here. Either way it would really, really, really complicate my life, and *boy* would I be in the doghouse, then!” The lips drew closer to Sam’s ear, and the voice got much lower: “but let me tell you something, chick-a-dee: it would also get me *exactly* what I’m looking for in life, my bronze-eyed baby doll, and in the end killin’ either of these twits would make me a very, very, very happy man...”

Sam bit her lip.

The man snickered. “So...”

“You’ve got my undivided attention...”

“I’m sooooo glad to hear it,” he cooed.

“What do you want?”

“I want to tell you the secrets of the world, girlie. I want to give you the answers behind the answers, probably just the kind of information you’re gagging for at the moment. I have the power to cast a big ‘ol ray of sunshine over all the dark secrets you’ve been shielded from. And the secrets that *I’ve* got stored up will give you no end of pleasure, I bet...”

A gloved hand wandered along Samantha’s silver sarcophagus, lingering suggestively over a few key parts:

“Of course, right now I can’t give you *any* pleasure, can I? Maybe later, perhaps, when we can be more... alone? And when you’re dressed-up in something more... comfortable...”

That hand caressed the silver tube with vulgar strokes.

“...something less... ‘restrictive’, anyway.”

“Later?” Sam snarled. “What do you mean *later*?”

“There’s a building smack in the middle of Ultima True: ‘Central One’. Ever hear of it?”

“What? Yes, but it’s been closed since—”

“Two years ago, when they started structural repairs,” the man finished. “Diggity-dog! I had the best prime rib of my life in the nightclub there: the *Orion’s Arm*, way up on the top floor halfway between the earth and the sky. Tch! In a world put up against those pesky-ol’ Bydo creatures, well, I guess that puts *Orion’s Arm* smack in the middle of heaven and hell, you think? And hey: the prime rib was to die for, but even with all that marbled meat I’m always hungry for a little extra ‘tail’...”

“I am *not* going up into an abandoned nightclub with you!”

“Ah, you are, Missy Mellow Yellow... if you don’t want your playmates here taking dirt naps on you—”

“I can—”

“Get ‘em some protection? Ah, not from me. Let me ask you something, honey: if I can walk right through the most secure parts of the most secure locations on the planet— like the restricted ward of your cute li’l infirmary— what makes you think I can’t find, and get to, any of you at any *time* I wanna?”

“You can track the GPS in our Prongs?”

A laugh: immature and reptilian.

“Tch! Who needs that kinda info? Cutie: I know what color underoos you put on yesterday before you went into the sky to shake ‘n bake that Mass, so not a hair on either of these guys’ heads— or anywhere else, for that matter— moves without me bein’ in on the loop. If you don’t go where I want, *when* I want, then you can check the next day’s obit section in the paper and read the ‘messy’ details of your playmates’ last moments...”

The woman licked her lips:

“For the sake of argument let’s say I believe you. Then...”

“The *Orion’s Arm* club: five strokes past midnight.”

“When?”

“Soon, and *very* soon! Tell you what: I’ll leave a rose petal for you on the date of our... date.”

“Where?”

“On your nightstand, of course... while you’re sleeping...”

The gloved hand brushed against Sam's dirty locks; the girl recoiled as much as she could.

"Doesn't seem like you can move much now, does it, honeychile?" The man laughed again. "Feeling trapped? Pinned down?" The hand grasped her chin and held her head taut: "You have *no* idea how trapped you really are, baby doll. You've been trapped in a net ever since you were selected by the Committee, ever since you were lain on the slab: just a virgin on a sacrificial altar—"

"I'm no vir—"

"Oh, I don't doubt that, girlie, but I'm giving you a chance to open your eyes, and when your eyes are opened you'll have a choice: you can either be set free in the process, or be destroyed by it." He released her head from his grasp and uttered one last line, his voice fading even as he spoke:

"Personally, I can go either way. Keep that in mind, honey o' mine..."

There was no clicking of heels this time, or any other noise, but Sam could sense the electric glare of eyes leaving her. She lay in silence for the longest time until finally a nurse entered the room to check up on them. She wondered what she should say, if anything, or what she should do.

She'd need to think about both those question awhile longer.

"Holding up alright, Sam?" The woman asked as she inspected the equipment.

"I'm fine, under the circumstances. What's going on topside?"

The nurse shook her head. "There's oodles of commotion about something way up in Command Ops, but I wouldn't know too much about that. The most eventful thing we've seen around here in the past hour is the sun; it came up about an hour ago. Very pretty today."

Sam stared straight up, eyes wide and serious:

"Sometimes the sunrise... is not always such a pleasant thing..."

