



On the Razor's Edge

I.

Yellow chandelier light glittered off his polished black shoes. Outside in the distance thunder sounded and the rain fell as one terrific sheet. The man's delicately-trimmed eyebrows flickered as another volley of lightning fell to earth. That brilliant strike set his amber eyes afire. He threw off his black rain poncho with precision, flicking all its beads of water against the massive Victorian windows lining the hallway; a large black shade flitted from his shoulder. It circled around his head once, twice, and three times before returning to its perch.

Serafino Grafsteen reached up and scratched Diablo's neck. The mad raven's red eyes twitched with ambivalent affection.

At the end of that gigantic hall was a woman at her desk. Papers were strewn all about, she had a headset to each ear and held two data pads in each hand. When she looked up to find Serafino approaching her perched lips fell. The poor little thing's brow trembled. She was obviously not a good match for her quietly confident boss: no poise at all.

In fact, this woman wouldn't even be a 'good match' for a chain-smoking gambling addict.

Serafino smiled.

She'd do nicely as secretary for a cocaine-snorting schizophrenic, perhaps. That, or a member of the Epdin Raising Committee.

Inasmuch as there was a difference between the two.

"M— Mister Grafsteen! Oh, Mister Grafsteen: I've tried calling you all morning!"

"I had a last minute meeting. In Utrecht."

“For what, sir?”

“To slip my head out of a noose. That’s the only possible reason to go to Utrecht, after all.” Serafino snatched a data pad from the desk and thumbed through it. He rubbed the back of his neck. “And traffic through Ypenburg was absolute hell coming back in; at midday the lanes move as fast as tombstones.” He looked down at the woman and smiled. “Ironically, and in all honesty Miss Buskirk, I prefer to move much faster than that.”

She smiled, but nervously. “Why didn’t you use the Streaker?”

“I felt like a drive. It’s a pleasant thing: soothes the restless animal.” He pulled a shelled peanut from his breast pocket and held it to one side; Diablo immediately snatched it out of his gloved hand. “My raven seems to enjoy it, also.”

“A— about that, sir...” the secretary fidgeted with one of her earpieces, “the Old Ma— well, *he* sent a package for you: a bag of Spanish peanuts: the really oily ones. But you see...” she produced a flattened sack from under her desk; loose shell fragments tricked from it like dirty snow. “I didn’t get it from the mailroom soon enough. It was crushed under the morning mail. I’m so sorry, sir!”

Serafino took up the ruined bag in one hand, stared at it noncommittally, and then shrugged. He put it down on the desk:

“So noted. Be sure to express our gratitude to the Old Man.”

Miss Buskirk’s finger again circled one earlobe: “You’re not... you aren’t terribly mad, Mister Grafsteen?”

Diablo fluttered its wings and let out a guttural clucking sound.

“Someone is, I suppose, but it is a trivial matter, and life’s too short to get caught up in the small stuff: fucking ants, and such.” He took the woman’s chin in his ungloved hand and smiled. His brilliant white teeth gleamed in the subdued hallway lighting.

“Although, next time, I’m really not sure what Diablo will do in response, so at least take care, Miss Buskirk?”

“Y— yes, sir. Of course!”

The woman watched him with wary eyes until Serafino stepped under a large mahogany entryway and into his office proper. He shut the door behind him and trod across the room, his stubby dress shoes clacking across a polished granite floor. Shards of fine stone lay arranged all across the floor in careful order and in three shades: black, tan and muted blue. The effect was a gigantic mosaic: a sparkling black background with a long tan ‘G’ on the left side and an equally lengthy blue ‘P’ on the right side.

This was the finest office in *Carnegieplein 2*: the native Dutch headquarters of mighty Gouden-Preek, B.V. There were finer offices to be had in the corporation, but these could be found only in the branch office at Hamburg (where the full-fledged administrative presidents earned their salary not by toiling over the empire’s upkeep— a job for their VP’s— but rather through wining and dining the Allied Military elite in order to *expand* that empire) and, of course, on the seven floors of Distelspitze Tower that were dedicated to GP representation, but that was it. Neither of these places were for Serafino; as a seventeen-year-old upstart working out of a two-person cubicle in the filthy basement ‘sweatshop’ he had coveted this place, and as a 27-year-old senior vice president he had earned it, but only through the rigors of his own blood, his own sweat, and a litany of slit throats along the way.

Figuratively, more often than not.

At once Diablo flitted off his shoulder and sailed to an oily black tree jutting from the center of the rectangular room; it was surrounded by a bed of sickly brown soil. This dirt was imported directly from the base of the Limestone Alps in Austria, always fresh, and it required a weekly transfusion to keep that oozing Schwartzwald tree at its center alive. By itself the tree was modest, only twelve-feet tall, but that was really the bare minimum for a pampered mad raven to call it 'home'.

The bird plunged into a knoll along the tree's trunk, a dark hole dripping with sludge, and instantly there was no sign of him save for a pair of enigmatic red eyes shining in the darkness. A scream erupted from that knoll; it was vulgar and erratic, like the cackling of a lunatic:

"*Aga-caga-aga-caga-kaaaaaah!*"

"You haven't got my sympathy." Serafino ambled to his desk and sat down. "You're several ounces overweight as it is, and as the one who shoulders that weight I say you're on a diet for the time being."

There was another noise from the tree, this time far less pleasant.

Serafino plunged into some paperwork, mere trivialities, and when he tired of that he whipped his chair around and stared down into the building's plaza garden. It was a pleasant change of scenery from that ungodly tree standing thirty feet from his desk. He leaned back and unbuttoned his top collar. For the next ten minutes he lingered somewhere between consciousness and sleep: his first real rest in the past 36 hours.

His desktop let loose a three-note chime and instantly he sat up: the noise was Gouden-Preek's signature tone, an arpeggio of middle *C* followed by *G* followed by an *E-flat* with equal spacing between them. The signal itself was generic, but Grafsteen had no doubt about who was calling him; he called up his video monitor.

When he saw a gothic stained-glass window framing an otherwise darkened room, shining wan light over a shadow hunkered down above a gigantic granite-topped desk, Serafino knew he was right.

"You made excellent time from Utrecht, Serafino." The Old Man spoke with a delicate, grandfatherly voice. "I suppose that Denelli-10 of yours isn't as underpowered as I thought. Still: you'd be no match for me and my Boarsrock F-1 if I were to ever have it taken off the blocks..."

"Good afternoon, sir." He casually buttoned his collar. "You heard about that business with Jacques already? I'm surprised."

"What: that I would take an interest in such potentially dramatic power shifts in the ranks? I may be a hands-off individual in a managerial sense, Serafino, and I certainly don't trouble myself to keep up with the squabbling between all those workhorses below you, but how can I *not* keep tabs on my stable of prized thoroughbreds?"

"I suppose I doubted your abilities." He smiled. "But I didn't anticipate your call for another half-hour."

The Old Man laughed, his voice silky and controlled. "I happen to have the license plate of that adolescent rocket you call a 'car' on file: 'BWV-578', isn't it? That's the car that went blowing through the Ypenburg tollway an hour ago, anyway. Well, then: Jacques' surprise bid to land our Patagonia branch's collapse in your lap proved unwise, did it?"

"Yes, it did."

"You adequately parried his thrust, eh?"

“No.”

“What, then?”

“I played possum. His attack on me failed before it even began, sir, back when I anticipated his move last month and accepted that Trojan horse offer of control over the general office in Nequén. The place was profitable and sexy only on paper; between the lines our Nequén operation was a sinkhole and its collapse was only a matter of time. As one of the engines driving our South American operation it was well on its way to burnout, and as its newest leader I would be blamed.”

“Instead you graciously accept the offer and, as a sign of appreciation, you then secretly arranged for the other veeps to recommend Jacques for control of our entire Patagonia Union branch: a hefty promotion, indeed.” An immaculate set of gleaming white teeth pierced the darkness around the figure: “and when our ‘engine’ down in Nequén caught fire, you made sure that fire spread well beyond its confines, didn’t you?”

Serafino stared down at his crossed leg; he tapped a stylus against the sole of one shoe.

“To put it more politely, Serafino: you ‘allowed’ Nequén to take the entire Patagonia operation down with it, did you not?”

Grafsteen answered after a pause: “Hypothetically, sir, if a ship’s engine overheats and comes to ruin the operator in charge of that engine gets the axe on the spot. But if that fire spreads to all the other engines, and then throughout the ship itself until the thing is sure to sink, well...” he looked up at the Old Man, “in that case it is an entirely different protocol: it is the *captain* who goes down with the ship.”

There was a silence. Not even Diablo cawed from his gooey black tree. Serafino could almost hear the hustle and bustle of the people in the garden below him. Here, with a pulse not exceeding 60 beats-per-minute, with a still and composed face and not a drop of sweat curling over his iron-rod body, he was at his most nervous.

But for all his body language he could be watching a fly crawl over his desk.

After a few seconds the Old Man betrayed a small chuckle, and finally another controlled laugh.

“...and the machinist salutes him from one of the lifeboats!” More chuckling. “Ah, I’m not angry, Serafino; the Patagonia branch needed a major reorganization anyway, I know. Now, I would have preferred the reorganization come by way of soft hands and holy water, so to speak, but fire will do just as well, I think.”

“Let it never be said that I put myself above the company’s interests, sir.”

“Just so, just so. Well, then: that just leaves the question of what to do with our unfortunate friend Jacques...”

Serafino let the pause sink in. Then: “Am I being asked my opinion?”

“No: I’m giving you total control of his fate, here and now. Ask me whatever you will: relegate him to the boonies, dismiss him entirely...” The shadow inspected his delicately manicured fingernails. “Or even leave him untouched. You know that you’re still the best, Serafino. Jacques wasn’t in the same league, and his ploy to take you out was not at all well-planned. Tch! An understatement! It was so inept that I myself would chalk it up to an innocent cock-up on his part: not a conspiracy. They say that any sufficiently advanced incompetence is indistinguishable from malice.”

Grafsteen sat back and put his heels up on the desk; he rested his chin on one hand and scowled, as if he were a demented version of Rodin's Thinker. His thoughts, however, were far darker and much more ruthless than that simple statue's could ever be.

"Fire him." He answered. "The corollary to your little adage is that 'any *insufficiently* advanced malice is indistinguishable from incompetence'; Jacques may be an idiot, but there's no doubt that he's an ambitious one. His only fault is that he went for my balls when he should have gone for my throat. His actions hurt me, but I always make it a point to respond to a crotch kick with a razor blade. And it keeps him from getting lucky next time, too: life's too short to keep looking over one's shoulder, having to parry some idiot's half-assed attacks. I'd rather fuck ants, truth be told."

The Old Man cackled once again. He wagged his head and shrugged:

"Ah, Serafino, Serafino. Never one to mince words, eh? But always up to turning a good adage on its head! Very well, I'll have the papers drawn this evening, and Jacques will be out of *Carnegieplein 2* by morning's first light."

"Thank you, sir."

"As I said: you're still the best. And the best deserve their druthers. Well now, on to more important things; did you get my little present for Diablo?"

An indignant caw erupted from the gooey black tree beyond Serafino's desk.

"Yes, sir. We are most appreciative; thank you."

A pause. That shiny head of gray hair bobbed a bit, then a soft belly laugh wafted through the air. The shadow shook his head:

"Ah: Serafino. Your manners are sharp as ever, but you've got to work on your lying. Kind hearts are worth less than simple truth, after all. Anyway, I'll have a second bag delivered to you this afternoon, but this time please have Miss Buskirk check your mail in a timely manner, eh?"

"Sorry, sir. And thank you, again."

"Don't mention it. Well, now: how are operations in general, *mijn Scheermes Genadeloos*?" The Old Man honored his VP with a little dip from German into Dutch.

Serafino smiled. "Eh. *Aanvaardbaar*; they're acceptable. For now, anyway."

"And what about the... well, our 'TIA'?"

Grafsteen's hook nose wrinkled with distaste:

"Oh, that. The Committee has not met in some time, to be sure. I believe the Mutual Acquaintance is arranging a get-together soon, out at the Dead Land's Lighthouse."

"You'll be in attendance, of course."

"Of course, sir."

The shadow folded his hands over the dark granite desk and leaned forward, enough for the wan light of the room to bounce off his silky gray hair even as his face remained in darkness:

"And, without disturbing my plausible deniability: are there any other rough patches with the Project you can see? Any troubles from anybody in the Committee?"

"My runner's disappearance has not been resolved. The Mutual Acquaintance personally designated someone else to run information for me: this prattling worm named Joe Mont—"

"Serafino, Serafino..." The shadow cooed.

“Of course, my apologies.” The man’s amber eyes narrowed. “I do not like this runner, though. I never have, since first meeting him last year. And now that my communications are dependant upon him! Well!”

“He is incompetent?”

Grafsteen shook his head. “For what my skills are worth I’d say he’s borderline malevolent. He reminds me of Jacques, in a way. All our runners tend to be simple people: efficient and bureaucratic. Mister Mon— well, this person either has some ambition in his balls, or a loose screw in his head. I simply can’t tell which. He is not a good choice for such delicate operations.”

“I’m sure that our friend MA is careful in all decisions, is he not?”

“Perhaps. But I’d still like to appeal to his sensibilities. Or *her* sensibilities; whatever the case may be.” The young man straightened his tie and smiled grimly: “maybe you can discuss it with MA during your next golf outing together?”

There was a pause, a *great* pause. Then the Old Man spoke: “Now you overestimate me, oh ye little boy. And a great deal, at that.”

This time his voice was far less grandfatherly.

Serafino let loose an equally long pause, allowing for the illusion of shame on his part. Finally:

“I spoke out of turn, sir, and I deeply apologize.”

Grafsteen wouldn’t let such thoughts get too far past his lips, but he knew, or at least strongly suspected, that the Old Man of Gouden Preek achieved his lofty perch of dominion through more than just raw intelligence and cunning, and that today he slunk around in the shadows for reasons other than his reckless love of too-fast racing cars swinging around too-tight road corners.

Man was cast down from paradise for eating an apple, after all: such a simple sin. But what simple sin did he commit to garner that imprisonment in the Heavens: lording over mad ravens and the Schwarzwald trees? He was once a fearless hero, now a forest watchdog. What evil keeps him leashed there?

What, indeed?

Serafino snapped out of his reverie and apologized: the Old Man had spoken, and he had missed the words entirely.

“Pay attention. I said that you must put these trivial matters out of your head for the time being: Sven Wraith is going to be arrested, Serafino. There’s no stopping it, as I understand. My ‘crystal ball’ is keen enough to divine that a terrible... well, accident, happened at Base-10 just yesterday at the conclusion of the AM’s *Ozymandian Veil* operation. One of those R-Type Hybrids seems to have ‘engulfed’ its pilot, as my source put it—”

“I see.” Serafino understood this cryptic terminology at once. “And casualties?”

“I am still not certain about the raw numbers.”

“Was it R-H-ERS?”

“No: it was the *Platonic Love*.”

The younger man’s brow twitched. “Huh. I thought it would be the *Heart*...”

“Is that what your Committee source at Bydo Labs believed?”

“He— err, *they*— were always worried most about the *Platinum Heart*.”

Grafsteen scratched his chin and stared at the marble floor. “Of course, recently I got the

feeling that this person was even more concerned about the *Love* for some reason; I couldn't say why..."

"You see this person socially?"

"We've talked in private. This person is an old friend of mine. It was by coincidence that we met on the Committee."

"I see." The Old Man nodded. "Well: whoever they are, this person's judgment seems to be lacking of late..." He flicked one hand through the air. "In any event a very nasty cat has been let out of a very secure bag, and the backlash must be mitigated: go to the Gulf, Serafino, and smooth things over with the survivors. Full disclosure about the ship mechanics and the cover story. Soon everybody in the military loop is going to know *what* the Raiden-Hybrids are, so it's best to provide some 'full disclosure' to keep people from mulling over what *purpose* they might actually have. Go and put our cards on the table."

"We're exposing Gouden-Preek's involvement in the R-H development program?"

"We're being proactive: G-P is just one mechanic working on one engine in the Project's grand scheme. If we don't take charge of this engine fire from the outset we'll be called out on it in time, to be sure, and that would be worse. The captain goes down with his ship, Serafino, but on the high seas dereliction of duty merits a bullet to the brain. Or at least a walk of the plank." He pointed directly at the young man:

"Of course, *this time* we are not in the business of spreading fires, are we?"

Serafino tilted his head, slowly, and then nodded.

"Life's too short to spend it on a plank. Sir, I readily admit that I'll do whatever's necessary to protect G-P from damage—I'm not afraid of MA like the other Committee members are—but at the same time I agree: given what we still stand to gain from it all this ship is *not* prepared to flounder at the present time. I will extinguish this fire to the best of my abilities."

Another Cheshire cat grin leered though the darkness:

"And you are the best, Serafino: I expect this blaze to be reduced to cinders in record time."

The video feed of the dark room cut out, leaving Grafsteen's monitor stained with the gaudy two-letter logo of the company. He stood up, straightened his tie, took two steps away from his desk and cursed bitterly.

"Life's too short to walk the plank?" He paced back and forth. He snatched a data pad from his desk, keyed in his security codes and opened up a folder marred by the bloody heart-and-teardrop design. His classified files opened up, and then he leered at the three young faces smiling up at him from their dossiers.

To hell with planks! Life is too short to take little baby insects by the hand and coddle their tiny boo-boos: that is what life is too short for!

He ran two fingers over that face in the middle: the New Englander male. Other than a few unsightly circles under his orbits he really was a perfect specimen: attractive green eyes to Serafino's pale amber stones, taut, drawn cheekbones jutting strong and proud like sailing masts to Serafino's disjointed shipwreck rigging—broken masts that lazily draped his jowls—and of course there was that fine, tanned skin of early adulthood: a tight, delicately folded bed sheet cradling the pilot's body compared to

Serafino's premature wrinkles and the liver spots blossoming on his trunk— his ratty alley sheets disintegrating in an urban breeze.

He threw the pad to one side onto a carpeted section of floor and growled like an animal.

"Is it too much to ask, even of an insect, that they simply play their part!?" His shout echoed about the cavernous room and he clenched his fists tight.

But then, entirely out of the blue, another shout rang out.

Diablo exploded from his greasy knoll like a ball of wet phlegm coughed up from the tree. The raven whipped about through the air in a frenzy, dripping goo everywhere, and the creature soon fell into a madcap circle about Serafino's head, shrieking like a banshee all the while.

"Again?" The man's pale lips fell. "Not again..."

At once he took one, two, three deliberate steps off the granite floor until he was standing on plush carpet. Each step was slow and grim, and with the raven still circling his head all the while.

He stopped in the center of the carpet.

Not... again...

Serafino closed his eyes and bowed his head.

Two heartbeats later he was doubled over on the floor as if he'd been shot. Those immaculate, polished dress shoes kicked about and trembled like a spider's web in the breeze; his neatly-combed graying hair disintegrated into a sloppy comma as his head jerked erratically from side to side to side. Everything in between that was a macabre, writhing mess.

After an eternity— twenty seconds, perhaps thirty— his convulsions subsided. He lay on his back, breathing slow, deliberate and involuntarily. It took another five minutes for that rational agent of free will to once again take its seat behind the man's ruddy eyes, although now one of those eyes was a startling red due to a burst blood vessel.

Serafino rolled to one side, lethargic. Diablo retreated to its tree once again and the office was calm save for the light flickering off that busted data pad resting beside his body in the plush purple carpet. Serafino made a strange sound— a gurgle's ugly cousin— and got to his haunches. He stared at the three members of the *Tears' Shower Squadron* once again, although this time he thought enough to spit on their distorted images for good measure.

Life really *was* too short for this kind of crap.

He snarled.

"You fucking ants..."

II.

Krisssshh-uch...

That crack...

It sounded rather like an oyster being shucked. Scott didn't know why he thought so, how he could *possibly* compare the two things, but he did. But then again an oyster, of course, was a wholly different animal in its time: the peculiar beauty of a glittering shell hiding the ugliness of a fleshy wretch inside. And yet here with this... *thing* all the ugliness was on the outside—

Most of it, anyway...

—and the beauty, or at least the bare-bones aesthetics, was locked away underneath. They were opposites, then. And that made sense: a mollusk is not a monster, after all.

But, then again: the only redeeming part of the oyster *was* that ugly flesh inside, and even then only if shucked raw, eaten alive, and sucked wriggling down one's throat. That was its essence, truth, in an oyster shell.

Ha, ha...

But what was the most striking part of *this* being: this discolored wretch stretched out on the base doctor's operating table and staked down like a collected moth? The creamy nougat center underneath it was nothing compared to that spiny forest, a terrible mesh of brittle black spindles worming over its frame like ash stuck in tar.

Whatever being lay underneath all that was inconsequential in comparison, as substantive as an oyster's shell.

“Cause ugliness is truth...” Scott whispered.

The base doctor slid a foot-long syringe into the crack she made along the thing's chest cavity. She didn't drive the point in when she met resistance, but instead depressed the plunger and sent a sparkling green fluid down into the crevasse. Scott wasn't disturbed by this. He *had* been: during the twenty-two other injections. But now from head to toe the thing was so broken and pockmarked with syringe insertions that Scott could really care less about one more disfigurement.

But this stab was different: it was the money shot.

The body, so still and lifeless, suddenly reared up, its rib cage expanding to impossible proportions. Its 'legs' twisted to opposite directions and stiffened. Scott jumped up at once, ignoring the burning pain in his bloodied left leg as he cried out. The base doctor, however, remained calm and clinical. She spoke for the first time in a long while:

“Out of the dusk a shadow, then a spark...”

A silvery jawbone tilted, then fell away onto the thing's chest; white teeth underneath parted, gaping, and as the metal jawbone disintegrated into dust that mouth's soundless scream exploded into a shrill human wail.

“Out of the cloud a silence, then a lark...”

The body convulsed; humongous metal restraints exploded off the table like rivets blown off a submarine. Each shudder sent trillions of dirty shards billowing off the table and around the room.

“Out of the heart a rapture, then a pain...”

Whole pieces— arms, legs, pelvic bone— came clanking to the floor like discarded armor. Each piece landed in a messy heap, vaporized to dust like the rest of that terrible skin.

And beneath that pile of silver and black granules there was another shape: it was smaller— perhaps 150 pounds, if that— ever so scrawny and streamlined, with a slender chest rising and falling in calm organic riposte. Calm *human* riposte.

“Out of the dead, cold ashes: life again.” The doctor sank back into a chair and sighed.

Scott shook his head. “Doctor. Wh— what the hell *was* that?”

“*Evolution.*”

“Not fucking likely—”

“That was the poem.” The doctor flicked a mess of granules off Justin Storm’s naked chest and glared at the tech: “But *this*, on the other hand, is right up your alley, I think.”

“How did— well, how did you know what to... *how* to do that?”

“An anonymous tipster calling in from somewhere in the Southern Dead Lands.” The woman scowled. “And I damn-well won’t say any more about that. Not to you, anyway: only to people who give a damn about human life.”

Scott buried his face in one hand, mopping sweat. “Why did you make me watch all that?”

“You deserve to see the fruits of your labor, JG: what you’ve helped Wraith and Roont accomplish. The Raiden-Hybrid project is your biggest career achievement to date, isn’t it?” She spread her gloved hands over the operating table: “So, then: take pride in what you’ve wrought.”

“This wasn’t supposed to happen!”

“If you’ve got a conscience about it, then quit the project and turn state’s evidence on your superiors. Put your reptilian ‘doctor’ friend behind bars where he belongs.”

Scott shook his head and stared at his toes. “I can’t— Doctor: I— there are things you don’t understand: it’s more *complicated* than all that...”

“That was Hezbolla’s argument at the Tabriz Trial, as I recall. It didn’t work too well for them, either. Ironic that you of all people would use that example...”

The woman pulled out leather cuffs from under the table; they were fastened to the underside of the bed with unyielding yellow straps. “Help me get these on him; he should be awake in half-an-hour. Then I’ll patch-up your infernal leg.”

“I’m— no: it’s fine, doctor—”

“Just shut up and cuff...”

The doctor’s monitor blinked while Scott finished applying the four-points to Justin’s body. As soon as the woman checked her console she stared up at the tech with two cold, merciless eyes.

“What is it, doctor?”

“Someone’s just flown in. They’re going to want to have a little talk with you, I think.”

“Wraith?” He bit his cheek.

The doctor said nothing.

Scott slumped against the wall and took some weight off his torn leg. “The Military Investigative Branch? Bydo Labs?” He wagged his head back and forth: he really didn’t care anymore.

The woman shook her head as well.

“No, it’s someone much worse than all that, I’m afraid.”

“Who?”

“Samantha Rayne.”

III.

‘Bloodshot’ is an unattractive thing in normal human eyes. In a Lake Victoria Baby, though, that ugliness approaches an entirely new level.

But at this moment hardly anyone alive (not anyone who wished to stay that way) would mention this to Samantha.

“Why in the name of *fuck* don't we have any bloody-fucking parking, today?” She was screaming at the base doctor even before they navigated the 50-yard docking-ring corridor between them.

“Calm down, Sam—”

“*Kuma mamako!* Calm down yourself, goddamnit! What are those two strange birds doing in our bays?” She blitzed past the doctor, forcing the woman to turn on her heels and chase after the pilot.

“One of them is the *Silver Halide*, Sam, and it's here now because that's the ship Chenine came back in from Old Santiago—”

“Sprawled over bays B and C? What the hell was wrong with the little bitch? And who's the other one: that sexy Gen-II that looks like it was just taken out of the box, huh?”

“Err, the *Cerviel's Eye*: the Scots' replacement for their *Principalities*. It—”

Samantha looked back at the doctor. “What: Connor Trent is here? He's a veteran fighter. He should know how to fucking park...”

“Sam—”

“Know what I should do? I should write him up for that...”

“Samantha—”

“Both of them, most likely: him and Chenine. I'll have to make a note of it...”

The pilot tapped her bruised temple with one finger, as if etching a brief reminder onto her skull.

“*Pilot!*”

She came up behind Samantha and took her by the shoulders; the doctor's physique might be slight, but she nonetheless manhandled the pilot up against a wall and pinned her there.

“Listen: you're not angry because of any ‘parking problems’, and you know it.”

The pilot shook her head. “Angry? But regulations... are regulations, you know.”

“Sam: look at me...”

The woman did; her head trembled several times as she stood there, held in place against the rusty metal wall. She was staring back at the doctor, ostensibly, but she might as well be gazing down a two-thousand-yard tunnel.

“You're in shock, Captain.”

She shook her head.

“You are.” The doctor accused.

“Bullshit.”

“Sam—”

“That's not a medical term.”

“What are you, then? Because you're *not* okay: I can tell...”

Sam put her hands on the doctor's wrists, very gently, and slowly pushed the woman away. She cocked an eyebrow, scratched her head, and carefully debated this point:

“I— I'm batshit crazy, I think. That's more the medical term, anyway...”

The doctor smiled. "But sane enough to know it. That'll have to do. Samantha, listen to me very carefully: what have you heard? What did they tell you when you landed at Olivier?"

Sam stared at her boots. "Very little. Some kind of accident, or 'enemy action' as they put it. Storm is in critical condition; Chovert's dead." She looked up. "Drake bought it, too, and Tabris is badly wounded. How's that for being informed?" The woman leaned back and slid her hands down her eyes, brushing away nonexistent tears. "It was motivating enough for me to 'commandeer' a Korang fighter and jet over here, anyway..."

"Where's R-H-ERS? Why didn't you bring it?"

The pilot waited a full ten seconds to answer that question:

"Technical difficulties'..."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but I've got plenty to tell you, Sam." The doctor took the dazed pilot by the hand and led her into a docking-ring elevator. She selected the infirmary level and then turned Sam around to face her, making sure the woman kept eye contact.

"First thing, the most important thing: your information is wrong. Most of it is, anyway: we don't have fatalities here, Sam. *Nobody* died, understand? There're some bad injuries—Chenine took the equivalent of a lightning bolt to her body and Jen just got out of surgery—"

"Surgery? Where's your bunny suit?"

"It was done by remote. I referred her to a good surgeon in Italy—"

"You too busy, or something?"

The doctor sighed. "No, Sam, but I'm not a jack of all trades either, and I'm not qualified for gynecological work."

Samantha blinked, stared down at the doctor's shoes and looked back up.

"Gynecological?"

"Later." The doctor waved a hand. "But right now you need to listen, because the whitewash is going to get layered on quicker than we can imagine: I don't know who or what is going to come over here and mop up this incident, but I do know it's going to happen. Do you know anything about the people who bankroll the Raiden-Hybrid Program, Sam?"

She furrowed her brow and shook her head: no.

"Neither do I. The only thing I *do* know is that Sven Wraith is afraid of them. I happen to be afraid of *him*, truth be told, so anything that has the power to spook that cane-toting bastard and rattle his glass heart brings up an inconceivable terror in me."

"It was one of the Hybrids, wasn't it? What the hell happened here?"

"From that dazed look on your face when I first saw you downstairs— that vapid little trance— you probably have a very good idea about what happened..."

The pilot bit her lip. "I—"

"Doesn't matter. I'm going to tell you about it, and *show you*, too, before any cover-ups come down over us. Wraith and Roont are stuck at EPDN waiting for transports and they can't interfere with me, for once, but I don't know when they'll get back. Samantha, I can't expose what's been happening here— what's being *done* to you all— because I can't risk the consequences, the threat to—" She bowed her head.

"Because it could be more than *my* life in the broiler, that's why..."

Sam stepped back, eyes wide, surprised by this revelation and its implications.

“Doctor: are you saying someone threatened your—”

“They didn’t have to. I’m smart enough to catch a scent on the wind without anyone pointing it out to me. They probably killed my first nurse, too; I can’t prove that, of course, but I also can’t risk getting that call from Evergreen Primary telling me that my daughter’s had an ‘accident’ either. Samantha, I am *not* joking about any of this...”

Shafts of yellow light glittered off the pilot’s freckled cheeks as the elevator descended. Sam slumped down against the back wall and shook her head:

“Murder... extortion... and for what?”

“To build a bigger monster-trap, I suppose. ‘Victory at any cost’, that’s Wraith’s motto, and the motto of the people he’s working for. To that end they’ve had the *TSS* butchered and flayed beyond any sense of sanity. You’ve all been made to suffer because of them and now... well, now it seems that we didn’t really know the half of it, did we?”

“What kind of messed-up nightmare is this?”

The doctor stared down at Samantha with sympathetic eyes, but with a blank and clinical scowl:

“You mean a place where you can’t tell one kind of ‘monster’ from another? That’s simple: it’s the same place we’ve been all along, Sam...” The woman faced forward and sighed. “Purgatory, of course.”

The elevator droned on in silence. Eventually the doctor smiled warmly and slid down next to Samantha.

“I know it’s a mess, Sam, and you didn’t volunteer to put yourself through all this, but there it is. What can I say? In the meantime I can give you something light for your head, if you like...”

“No. Nothing like that. I *would* ask you to pinch me, but that seems cliché, doesn’t it? But anything to rub-out this ‘shock’...”

“‘Not a medical term’. Tch!” Her grin widened. “I think Chenine’s dry sense of humor is rubbing off on you, Captain.”

Sam looked over at the woman with a far more composed face. A sardonic curl wormed over her lips:

“In that case don’t bother pinching: shoot me, instead.”

IV.

He bolted upright.

And when his wrists caught on their bonds he came slamming back down against the table hard enough to bring spots to his eyes. He hung his head to one side and wretched, not a vomit full of bile and stomach contents (which he didn’t have, anyway), but a sickly black tar that exploded from his lips like bubblegum and landed on the septic infirmary floor as fine powdered silt: granules of sand.

Justin lay on his back and panted; he squinted up at the demonically bright observation lights shining down on him.

An infirmary? It’s Base-10... The infirmary?

He pouted.

I spend a hell of a lot more time in here than the average soldier, I bet...

He got up on his elbows as far as he could: the cruel four-points held his wrists and legs taut, damn near spread-eagle.

"I'm a prisoner? Why?"

Justin stared down at his naked body, dreamy and unfocused as if he were looking at someone else lying in his place. Everything seemed to be in order: his skin was intact, but strangely all those patchwork scars he bore had turned a curious color, beet red, as if he'd gotten some serious sun. Several of them also bore very nasty black bruises underneath. The wall in front of him was reflective glass; he cocked his head to one side, noticing a strange mark on his forehead. It was not a bruise, but that's all Justin could say about it; the thing was dull, a faded splatter, as if he'd been shot with a paintball gun and neglected to clean himself for a week. That or maybe he got stinking drunk and tried to convert to Hinduism but couldn't find any red dyes and made do with some India ink.

He found that explanation unlikely.

On top of everything else his left hand burned, or at least it tingled mightily. He rotated his wrist in the cuff and surveyed his open palm: a black streak marred the flesh there, too, but it was not like the dull black splatter on his head. This crooked line was undoubtedly a burn, but not the kind anyone would pick up in a fire. It was too 'orderly' and perfect for that, with clear definition and perfectly charred consistency all across its length.

After all, fire's not the only way to get burned, is it?

Question was: did he have a 'cause' to go with this particular 'effect'?

"I remember: *Ozymandian Veil*... the Salt-O-Scots... Connor..."

He blinked. A drop of sweat curled down his brow; it rolled over his cheek like a burning tear and landed beside him with a hollow ping.

"Godthab... the Saltatory-Conductors..."

There was a sound, not unpleasant, like rain falling on a roof. Justin took a few minutes to finally realize that it was his right leg, trembling in the leather cuff that held it, rattling against the table with an irregular thump.

"I remember: preflight. Breakfast at the pub. Bottlenose dolphins..."

He arched his brow.

"Strawberry milkshakes?"

"And then..."

And then...

Then?

"Take-off..." Justin leaned back. "Our initial formation. Target interception. Execution of operations..."

His breaths grew deep. Another drop of sweat landed beside him.

"The entire engagement..."

A knot rose in his throat.

The growl started as a soft mewl, but grew into a vicious roar:

"Why can't I remember?!"

V.

The doctor shuttled Samantha through the infirmary, past a legion of base security personnel and into the operating room corridor.

“We’ll go in order of cases, I think: ‘good, better and best’...”

The pilot looked at the doctor incredulously.

“...as far as information goes. That’s what’s important right now.” The woman shook her head. “As far as the people *themselves* go it’s obviously a case of ‘bad, worse and worst’.”

They reached the stark gray doorway to a recovery room and the doctor offered her face to the retinal scanner.

“What’s in *here* is easy on the eyes, at least...”

She wasn’t sugarcoating things: there was one bed in the room, plugged into a wall of monitors, and cradled against the mattress was a silver-headed Ketoni pop-tart. Chovert was unconscious; her creamy white body lay motionless, delicate, and as innocent as new-fallen snow with her hands even strategically placed for optimal modesty. Take out the infirmary bed and all those obtrusive medical monitors and the scene was idyllic. It was artistic, even.

Angelic.

Sam looked away, her teeth braced in a nascent snarl.

“I figured that since you two share a barrack you wouldn’t mind...”

The pilot pulled her teeth back behind her lips: “No, I don’t have any problems, doctor.” When she looked closer at the girl’s body her brow ticked. “What’re those lines?”

The doctor motioned to Chenine’s body, inviting Sam’s touch.

“Indentations? Burns, even? No: just marks...” Sam ran a finger along one discolored groove in the girl’s skin, running laterally over her midsection halfway between her bellybutton and her chest. It was one of nearly two dozen crisscrossing marks weaving over Chenine’s trunk, arms, thighs and legs.

“Ring any bells, Captain?”

Sam looked up. “Yeah: criminology classes...” she stared into space. “Like bodies I’d seen: textbook crime scene photos, and such. These are rope marks, aren’t they? What the hell—”

“Two Dancers from the *Eighty-Eight Squadron* found her about a half-mile from a refurbished ski lodge the AM set up as a rendezvous point for their pilots and artillery personnel.”

“Frogs from the *Eighty-Eighters*? The *QVH*? Those boys were playing decoy for the Mass; they weren’t even deployed on Earth.”

“They were pulling a double-shift, sent to mop things up in Old Santiago, but by the time they got into Chile the party was over—”

“Typical.”

“—and a pair of them found the wreckage of R-H-CRTS while out for a hike. Chenine’s Raiden disappeared from radar ever since the fleet regrouped and it was presumed lost. Imagine their surprise when they find it sticking up out of the ground near the rendezvous point, still smoldering from a crash landing. And covered— literally *covered*— in spent Bydo blood. Layers of it: fresh, dried, and everything in between.”

“Who the hell tied her up like that?”

The doctor shook her head. “You don’t understand: she came *out* of the cockpit like that, Sam. They found her about 100 feet from the ship—”

“Not bloody likely.”

“—inching across the mountainside like an earthworm. Well, they cut her loose as best they could and she immediately sprinted off to the ski lodge, hijacked a parked R-Type Dancer and jetted back to Base-10 like a bat out of hell.”

“People don't just ‘hijack’ R-Types...”

The woman shrugged. “She got into the *Silver Halide*, anyhow. When the ship's security system registered her warm-body it contacted the pilot inside the lodge; apparently Chenine had a brief radio chat with him and the pilot ended up cutting his Raiden loose for her.”

“Why the hell would someone ever do such a thing?”

“Couldn't say. Captain's a certain Kenzu Onizuka, though, and apparently he *thought* he was giving his ship to a woman named ‘Camille Steen’, if that means anything to you at all...”

“Well: what then? How'd she end up in here?”

The doctor pulled a tray from under the bed and gave it to Sam: inside was a wrinkled paper husk, iridescent like a pool of gasoline on asphalt, brittle to the touch and oily on the skin.

“What is it?”

“It's all that's left of Chenine's *Liefde* suit.”

“Really? Certainly gone through the wringer...”

“No, it's ‘gone through’ about 200,000 volts at 5 amperes; that was the rating on the junction box she ran into, anyway.”

“Why'd she do that?”

“She was running, most likely: for her life. The point of contact was her hand, there: you can see the crisp electrical burn.”

“What was she running from?”

“Later.” The doctor motioned to a light projection column sticking out the side of a computer console across the room. She tapped out a few keystrokes and instantly a holographic image flitted to life on a beam of pink light: it was an s-shaped collection of bone and metal implants.

“This is Chenine's spine.” The doctor motioned to two vertebrae in particular: one a cervical and the other an upper thoracic. “It's all false-color imaging, but you can still make it out, right?”

Sam squinted at the bones. Both of them were gaudy with pink and red and blue hues, but each also bore something else: dark black ‘holes’ wormed through each of them, each seeming to bleed down into the spinal cavity itself.

“Not holes.” The doctor anticipated her question. “The colors are based on material density: light to dark is lightest to heaviest. The material inside those cavities is thick like a metal, but organic like bone. Not only that, but in both places it extends *beyond* the spinal cavity and into the cord itself.”

“Into... the cord?”

“Sam—hard as this is to imagine—Chenine's spine was torn apart during the battle, but something else happened too: something literally... well, *caulked* her full of an organic solvent, a kind of metal reagent adapted perfectly to suit a biological system, in this case her protective spinal bones and even all the axonal minutiae *inside* the cord.”

“Like a biological patch, you mean? Who could do that kind of thing?”

“No earthly hand. I'm not being facetious, either.”

“But spinal reconstruction surgery *is* routine—”

“—for *superficial* damage. Sam, you need to understand the amount of trauma we're talking about, here: this cord was savaged, cut all the way through in *two* places. Dealing with wounds like that I could've possibly had Chenine spoon-feeding herself in six months, and with a dozen surgeries and constant physical therapy I'd give her a 40% chance of walking on crutches within *two years*. That's going against my nature and being optimistic. *Naively* optimistic. As it is now her body is fine; she's actually in excellent condition, and as soon as she wakes up she'll be ready to run a marathon if she wanted to.”

Sam sat at the console and put her head in her hands: “Right, so, theoretically what would someone need to—”

“Solder a torn spine back together instantly, and on command? And ‘theoretically’, you ask? Well, besides the nonexistent bio-metallic media I'd need a supercomputer to keep track of electrochemical signaling, an invasive reconstruction agent—insanely-complicated nanobots, the science-fantasy variety, or more likely some kind of patient-specific adaptive flash virus— in order to coerce axonal growth in all the necessary cells and then, last but not least, I'd need near-total control over the patient's lower *and* higher brain function in order to properly ‘reset’ spinal signaling. And that further implies that I'd need to know a few other trivial things, like the nature of consciousness, individuality, what a memory is exactly and how to keep it all intact while the rest of the electrical system reboots. It's all simple, really.” The doctor looked down at Sam. “*Theoretically*, at least.”

“I didn't get a word of that.”

“You're not supposed to. I won't mince words here because we don't have time. Whatever it takes to perform such radical repairs eludes us, and by a *wide* margin, but it doesn't elude the Raiden-Hybrids. Chenine's ship *healed* her, whatever part of it Wraith and Roont have been keeping secret from everyone. By that I mean that part of the *Chaste Gazer* that's *living* and *aware*...”

Samantha put her head against the table and shook it.

The woman continued: “To say the job is ‘thorough’ is a gross insult: whatever was done to Chenine, and whatever was done *of* her, was seamless. Even when we dunked her in Karat an hour ago we found no trace of contaminants, Bydo or otherwise. It's incredible. It gets more curious, too: Chenine said something to those two pilots who found her. It was just a whisper, as they put it, and she didn't elaborate. Want to know what she said?”

Sam shook her head again. The doctor answered anyway:

“‘*Ils ne sont pas des enfants*’.”

“My frog is too rusty to follow you, ma'am...”

“‘They are not children’. That's what Chenine said. ‘They are not children’. Justin Storm has a certain recurrent hallucination: a little child— ‘Quint’, he calls it— but now it seems that two of you are plagued by the same phantoms.”

Sam buried her head even deeper under her arms.

“Two out of three. Is that right, though? *Is* it two out of three?”

Samantha said nothing.

“Sam: is it *really* two out of—”

“No: it’s three for three.” She looked up. “And I wasn’t... wasn’t ‘healed’ by anything out in the Slingshot Mass: I nearly died. No, scratch that: I was nearly killed. Whatever the fuck is hiding in my vessel tried to off me, and it nearly succeeded. What *are* they, doctor?”

“I can’t answer that question.” Her face rose with an ironic smile. “I’d need to know ‘a few other trivial things’ to give you an answer, Samantha.”

“What happened to Chovert’s bonds? Where did they go?”

“She brought some back with her: a few cords left dangling around her waist and shoulders.”

“What were they made of?”

The doctor slammed a large heavy bin down against the table; silvery-black dust lay inside like a bed of sand.

“Something with a short shelf-life; all the cords disintegrated into metal dust right after she got here.”

“Why was she so crazed to come back to Base-10, huh? That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Just what about any of this *does* make sense, Sam? I’m not giving you answers here, only evidence, and I want you to have as much of it as possible.”

Sam looked around the room: “Why isn’t anyone guarding her, huh?”

“As you can imagine all my nurses are rather busy at the moment.” The doctor shrugged: “Don’t worry, though: I’ll have someone in here to look after her soon, even if I have to commandeer a cafeteria employee. She’ll be safe for the time being, come hell or high water.”

“Or both, wouldn’t you know...”

The next piece of ‘evidence’ was waiting down the hall: a body lay shrouded beneath a bed sheet, nothing of it visible save for a tuft of spiky pink hair jutting out the top. When the doctor pulled back the sheet Jen Drake went into a giggling fit; her eyes were unfocused— glassy as marbles— and her mouth was slack.

“She’s on locals and a CNS depressant; Jen won’t add much to the conversation, but at the moment she’s more a conversation *piece* in and of herself.”

The ensign looked up at the doctor, then at Sam. She grinned like an infant.

“Heloooooooo...” She cooed.

Sam waved at her reassuringly. “Why didn’t you put her under with general anesthesia?”

“She didn’t need it. We’ve got limited supplies in our infirmary and I’ve got a hierarchy for dispensing quality sedatives to base personnel; it goes ‘Typers, Korangers, artillerymen, deckhands, techies and medics’. Jen’s right down at the bottom of the list, but don’t feel bad for her: she won’t be in the business of forming new memories until long after this stuff loses its edge.”

“Honored to be at the top of the pecking order and all, but you can give her my ration of good stuff, if you want...”

The doctor shook her head. “You missed the point. Linked pilots’ bodies can respond to *real* trauma in very unsettling ways; if one of you were brought in here after getting cut in half by an accident on the mooring floor your body might respond to the injury the way they’ve *learned* to respond to such an ‘injury’ sustained through the link: apathetically. I can work as fast as I want to patch-up your body, but if all your blood

vessels refuse to take their own natural defensive measures in response to the injury then you'll bleed-out long before I can even get you on an operating table. The only way to take absolute control over the body is to nuke your minds into oblivion, not to be vulgar about it. So in the final analysis I've got you three at the head of the list as a matter of logistics, not necessarily out of respect. Sorry."

"So what happened to Jen?"

"She was... attacked." The doctor lifted Jen's sheets and revealed a patchwork of bandages, several already beginning to bleed through. They dotted the techie's abdomen from her stomach to parts below, increasing steadily in size from top to bottom, starting off as small as the width of a soda can and ending in a much larger pad, at least the size of a six-pack.

It occurred to Sam that she was dehydrated.

Time enough for that later on...

"Was she shot? Stabbed?"

The doctor covered Jen back up and shook her head. "Not exactly. Jen was... lain upon."

"What?"

"She was attacked in the docking ring. She managed to get to a supply box and grabbed an *Ab Ex Mortis* injector tube. When the creature flipped her supine she stabbed it through the forehead, smack between the eyes."

"Did she kill it?"

"No, she made it angry."

Sam frowned. "I see." She blinked. "Wait, what: 'flipped her supine'?"

The doctor took a breath. "Flipped her supine...and *laid* on her."

"Laid..." Sam stared at her boots, then looked back up with wide eyes: "As in... *laid*?"

The doctor nodded. "That's the one. It knocked her head into the ground and Jen goes down for the count, and then ten seconds later JG Tabris interrupts things with a 45-caliber handgun: five shots from long range, three of which tore into the creature's back." She scowled. "Not bad shooting for a technical specialist, really."

"He saved Jen?"

The doctor nodded, but grudgingly.

"And he killed it?"

"No, he made it angry." She motioned to the infirmary proper. "He was lucky to get out of the thing's way before it ran him over; as it stands he'll need a dozen stitches in his leg, and by all accounts he came damn-close to losing it altogether. Still, our little friend Tabris got off quite easy, relatively speaking." She narrowed her eyes. "Scot-free, I'd say."

"I've more'n inclination to give him the Scotch *verdict*, m'self!"

Samantha swung around on her heels so fast that she nearly bumped Jen off her bed. As it was the incapacitated girl merely tittered with indiscriminant pleasure at the jostle. Sam stared into a pair of strong hazel eyes leering back at her from the gloom of a corner. The darkness couldn't hope to mute the fiery red glow of the man's hair; he was seated in a chair with a rain poncho shielding the right half of his body.

"What, Trent!"

"H'lo there, lassie."

Samantha smiled instinctively, damned overjoyed to see the burly Scot's shining face, but when she looked at the battered thing resting on the table beside him her smile was tempered.

"Trent, is that a—"

"—casualty o' circumstance, tha's all." He picked up the object with his left hand and shrugged. "An' I do believe I voided its warranty, t' be sure."

"I... I didn't know you had a—"

"The fact's not advertised, not by me at least, and I'd just as soon it not be advertised by you either, bonnie Samantha..."

"Of course not, Trent. But how did that happen?"

"What, how'd it come to be busted apart thusly? Take a guess, dear one. An' it's just as well I brought my bloody right up to shield m'self, too: I'm a lefty by rule and by instinct, although I thought enough in this case to have my right take the blow and damn-well saved my other one, di'in't I?"

"You ran into the enemy?"

Trent snorted. He stared at the ground. "The... *creature*, as we're sayin'. An' yes: tha' I did. Your wee silver mop-top sprinted right past me in the corridor after I landed, and then she e'en darts *right past* a damn contingent of buckaroos wi' their MP-180's. They were set up to draw beads when the creature comes their way and then she goes leapfrogging the line. What a cheek that lass has!"

Samantha sat down; she needed a moment to decipher this.

"Chovert? You saw Chovert in the docking ring? And she *purposely* jumped past our base security's perimeter?"

"T'was a trap if e'er there was one. An' a good one, at that. But she went jackrabbit right through the thing as if she hadn't a brain in her head!"

"Why did you follow?"

The Scotsman looked up with a wan smile. "I never said *I* had much up there, either." He shifted in his chair, uncomfortable, and cinched that red poncho even tighter over his right side. "Next time I see the lass— way on down the ring— she's toast, an' quite literally: on the ground, whole body steaming and lying in a soupy puddle tha' used t' be her flight suit. When I came to her side, well, that's when I was set upon..."

"The creature? It went after you?"

Trent shook his head and leaned back. "No, it did not. It went after wee Miss Chenine."

"You stopped it, then. I mean: *blocked* it, right?"

"As such."

"You saved Chovert's life, Connor."

He grunted distantly. "Aye: I'll put m'self in for a medal, an' all." By his tone of voice it was clear that he would not. "Anyway, as a consequence, off goes m' clumsy li'l appendix, an' then *down* goes the creature. For the count, at that."

"What: it just died?"

"It dropped, as such. An' in a steamin' heap to rival Miss Chenine's. It 'peared t' be previously frazzled, if ya understand: on the verge of checkin' out, regardless what I did."

"And you had your Aegis, didn't you?"

Connor nodded slowly.

“So you finished it off? *You're* the hero of the day.”

Connor shook his head even more slowly.

Sam scrunched her face. “Then what the *fuck* happened next? Did we ice that bastard or not, huh? Is it *still* down there? Do *I* need to go over there and provide the *coup-de-motherfucking-bloody-grâce* or *what?*”

Something happened that brought all the blood out of Sam's face; it was a simple thing, but so uncharacteristic and so unexpected that it couldn't be more unnerving. Connor's eyebrows crested to form a mournful arched steeple. His eyes even shivered with liquid: the man was very nearly on the verge of tears.

“L— lassie: what... what have they told you? What d'ya know, as such, *about* the intruder?”

There was a pause between them; it lasted nearly twenty seconds.

“D'ya not know... not know what it *was*? W— who...”

Connor stared down at the floor; he did not speak again.

Sam turned on her heels: she'd forgotten about the doctor's patient.

“And Jen: what's her prognosis, doctor?”

“She'll live.” The doctor shook her head. “And with no major impairments, other than her womb; that couldn't be saved, unfortunately. The trauma to it was far too severe.”

“Doctor: I want to know what the hell—” Sam stopped: Jen herself was tugging at the woman, pulling Sam down by the neckline of her *Liefde* suit.

“Captain... hey: Captain...”

Jen leaned down and put her head beside the drugged techie's lips.

“Yeah, Drake? What is it?”

“Captain...” Jen's velvet eyes rolled around in their sockets, then she focused on Samantha's hair. The techie's eyes moved down to Sam's eyes, then her lips, and finally her chest.

“Captain...” She grinned like a schoolgirl and ruffled her lashes. “Y— you're looking *goooooood* today, ma'am... Captain, ma'am: *sir*...” Jen tried to salute, failed, and then stroked Sam's shoulder with an uncoordinated hand. Sam gently pulled away.

The doctor sighed. “That's all just subconscious stuff, you know. It's feelings she'd never act upon while sober; if I were you I'd just forget about it, Sam.”

The woman nodded. “Done. But what in the hell did all of this? And where is it now?”

The ensign's body tensed. Jen's eyes hardened into daggers as her cheeks twitched with unsightly wrinkles:

“Anglerfish! Anglerfish, anglerfish: *anglerfish!*”

Both women blinked at the girl. Jen finally took another breath and slumped back down on her pillow:

“I've never seen an anglerfish; have you? Not until then, that is, and not an *anglerfish*— not for true— but for function, if not form. Y'know: technical specifications... design... nature is copyleft, y'know... *veeeeery* copyleft: it allows for rebuilds...” A knot in the girl's throat broke and she sobbed:

“I mean: reverse engineering, and all that...”

Jen seemed ready to launch even further into this tearful tirade, but a quick adjustment of her bed's monitoring system allowed the doctor to ramp up her sedatives

on the spot; the girl sunk down into the bed and within seconds she bore all the countenance of a corpse.

“Why the hell was Tabris armed when he went down into the docking ring? Where *exactly* was Drake attacked? What the fuck is Connor doing over here from Godthab, huh?” Sam turned around and looked at the Scotsman:

“Just what the hell kind of incarnation committed these acts?”

Connor did not answer. The doctor only replied after a long pause:

“I think it’s time to show you, Sam. It’s only next door. Are you ready?”

This time it was Samantha who didn’t answer.

VI.

“Only a little further, now...”

“Tch! Tell that to my aching back!”

“How’s the line? Taut?”

“Yeah, although I’m precious more concerned about the strength of this sack...”

“Relax: Kam vouched for the product, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, and Kam’s got smarts, but he ain’t exactly all knowing, is he?”

“He knows more’n you, at least. That’s good enough for *me*...”

“Ha! ‘Amen’ to that, I suppose...”

The sun had set low in Japan many hours ago and it wouldn’t rise for many more yet. This didn’t mean the pair of men had to work in darkness, or even by starlight: the sky above still shone with a neon glassy radiance. This was a testament to the power of human engineering: so many hours after shutdown EPDN still managed to bathe the black sand beaches of Okushiri Island in a wan green candlelight.

Beyond the desolate slope of island scrub and brambles there was a plain: a plateau stretching miles wide and glistening silver in the fire of EPDN. In all those miles not an acre of land was visible: all the earth was blighted with the massive skeletal remains of whale-like behemoths. They were carcasses, each and every one, lying in somber repose like tombstones in a cemetery. Some were as small as Olympic swimming pools, no more than a few stories high, while others were as large as the stadium complex you might find one in, towering dozens of stories over the hardscrabble island earth. In fact they *were* all tombstones, because this place was perhaps the largest cemetery in the world—in the *history* of the world, even—but it was not built for any human souls. This was a boneyard.

To be more specific it was *the* boneyard: the final resting place for all of the Allied Military’s obsolete transport vessels and warships.

Totems of death and decay lingered here in every facet imaginable, and only three signs of life dared disturb the proud slumber of the metal giants: two men stumbling through rows of old vessels and the massive brown sack they dragged between them, writhing and bucking at random intervals with some wretched and most unhappy critter hidden beneath.

Soon the men stumbled into the husk of one particularly massive ship. The nameplate was rusted away from years of abandonment to the saltwater breeze and its text was barely legible:

“AMT 1-mark-naught, special to the Superior Joint Command: *The Tychotill*. Launched 2077.”

Here they parted: one man stayed back near the squeaky iron door, the sack beneath his feet straining to escape his grasp, while the other man sprinted up a spiral walkway of cargo bays and catwalks. *The Tychotill* was lain flat after its decommission—murdered by the newly-minted *Onychophage's* superiority— but a decade of settling saw its heavy aft section press into the soft earth, leaving its shorn nose jutting up above the land like the flaccid point of a witch's hat. All along the way there were men and women engaged in various tasks: sleeping, eating, crowded around one piece of technology or another, most of them simply monitoring the array of 'brown recluse' signal killers positioned throughout the ship's carcass. Unity had five of them, to be exact, and those state-of-the-art jammers were just enough to keep the Allied Military off their doorstep.

But only *just*.

After 250 meters of hard walking around a 45-degree incline the man was nearly breathless, but when he burst through a retrofitted oak doorway and into the former bridge of the ship he tucked any semblance of fatigue away from view.

Three men and a woman stood in this room, all leaning casually against various dinosaur consoles and rusted furniture. At their center was a chair— like the doorway it had been retrofitted into the ship— plush with black leather and, most importantly, jutting out of the floor at a proper angle to keep its occupant upright in the leaning vessel. The occupant in question was hunched forward, chin to his stubbed fingernails, with a ratty red-and-black book perched on crossed legs. He was currently speaking to the woman, and at the man's entrance he rattled off one last line to her:

“I agree. The advantages of using Atropos' services this time around were spectacular; better than last time, for sure. Make a formal offer at the next opportunity. Quadruple the fee, if need be. And, hell, he's a Great City dweller, isn't he? I can be on the horn with about two-dozen contacts in Basal Ganglia that I haven't totally burned though yet: they can get him *whatever* the hell he wants. There's no point in someone like Atropos being all sore at us like that...”

Then Kenneth Allie McCaul smiled up at the visitor with coffee-stained teeth.

“We've got another one downstairs, Kam,” the man said.

“Well, now: don't be all business like that! You must be tired from your run up the stairs: we could hear you from the main hatchway, you know.” McCaul's smile widened.

“Sorry, Kam, but I didn't wanna waste your time.”

“Digressing, you mean?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“Oh, I *like* it when somebody digresses. It's most interesting, and all.” McCaul shrugged his scrawny shoulders. “If it were just me I could chat all day, but *he* does need to commiserate with our Fallen friends, doesn't he?”

It started raining outside; the ship's bridge was shorn in two, and it ended not twenty feet from McCaul's seat. Outside in the naked night a cackle of thunder shook their massive tin can.

“What friendly Bydo brethren washed up on our shores so recently?” McCaul asked.

“A No-See-Um. Half of one, anyway.”

“Which half?”

“The top part.”

“Good, good.” McCaul brushed back his unwieldy blond hair and nodded. “Take it to him, then: stat. And for the sake of the Great Communion be gentle! He tells me that all the others you’ve brought him were so traumatized by their trips that they wouldn’t...” McCaul wound one hand through the air, “they wouldn’t *talk* to him. When they’re all crazed like that— y’know, going ‘rogue’— they wind up hurting themselves and even dying; the poor things! We can’t have that, can we?”

The man nodded and backed out of the doorway. McCaul motioned with one crooked finger before he left:

“And one more thing.”

“Yeah, Kam?”

“Tell him that the members of the *Tears’ Shower Squadron* are still alive and kicking: all three. And— more importantly— their blessed brood, too.”

Ten minutes later the two men were down below, literally: the bowels of the old ship— those levels that once served as the engine and reactor rooms— were sunk far beneath the earth, below sea-level, even. It was all darkness here, broken only by the obscene pink light of glowsticks hung around each man’s neck. The stink of mold and still water oozed through the stale air. No one ever came down here for anything, such was the Unity members’ disdain for this dark catacomb; at the moment there was only one resident in the miserable labyrinth.

That resident didn’t require any light at all.

They arrived at a scarred wall of iron. The man who did not speak with McCaul approached it and rapped on a massive door. His knocks echoed throughout the black nether region, but were met only with silence. The pair stood in silence for over a minute before screwing up enough courage: they put their hands to the wheel and slowly twisted until the door budged open.

Here, too, was blackness. They cast the writhing sack into the room, not daring to peek inside. After a moment the man who had spoken with McCaul took it upon himself to step inside and check on the wellbeing of their ‘honored guest’.

He saw nothing at first: the room was damp— humid— and condensation coated the far walls. The mist was cloying. He called out, but no one answered.

Then, from the far side of the room, a pair of eyes opened wide.

“*Gug.*” A throat screeched. “*Gug-a-hug.*”

The burning yellow eyes crawled through the darkness, bobbing and stumbling as the body they belonged to struggled on all fours. The Tove had been in pieces when brought here— less an arm and a leg— and just when the man started wondering whether the creature’s nipple cannons had been sheared-off or not another shape rose out of the soup, but this one was very unlike the mottled incarnation: it was elegant and, in its own right, sublimely beautiful.

And, in its own right, it was magnificently horrible.

A head descended to meet the struggling Tove, craning down on an impossibly twisted neck. Bright eyes shone in the darkness with candid, almost maternal affection. A beak found the Tove’s nape, and then went to nuzzling. The miserable Tove slumped down, sedate, against the larger creature’s frame.

“*Gug-a-hug...*”

And two seconds later that incarnation went ballistic.

The Tove screamed out so loud and with such a pitch to send the man to his knees. At the sound, and at the struggle, the larger creature disappeared in the mist, and another scream filled the room. This one was so violent, so primal in its animal fury, that it brought a squirt of blood out the man's right ear canal. As he went down clutching his head in pain the Tove went to pieces: unimaginable jaws rent the thing in two and it crumbled beneath an onslaught of invisible razor-sharp blades.

“Crunch... crunch... crunch...”

A sick, terrible munching noise arose from that far corner.

“Ulgh!”

The stench of Bydo blood hit his nostrils; it reeked of burned motor oil and rotten onions. The man retched. Two eyes glared up from the darkness at this: they were luminous, but they were neither Bydo nor avian in their inspiration.

“Urp!” The man gagged as he tried to fight the vomit back down his throat. He turned to leave the room but the chamber's rancid humidity spiked and he found himself immersed in fog instead. Stumbling though the soup, he ran smack into another man's chest.

This man wore a bright purple tunic. He stared down his nose at the intruder with unsettling poise. His face was pallid and blighted with wrinkles like a too-loose Cataclysm Day mask on a child's face— a cheap imitation of life— and his dead black marble eyes leered through the darkness with the stern glare of a 40-year-old. All down either cheek ran a deep wrinkle— almost a scar, almost the outline of a jawbone itself— cutting straight to his chin: two vicious, black tears. He leered at the intruder with a set of yellowed teeth. Those teeth were sticky with the remains of a dark black syrup.

He spoke two words, very slowly, with a voice like sandpaper grinding silk:

“Help you?”

“A— a—” The man gibbered. He pointed at the sack with a weak hand.

The phantom cocked an eyebrow. “A— a ‘nother?”

The man nodded. Sweat cascaded down his forehead, mostly a product of the atmosphere.

Mostly.

Antithesis went to his knees and cradled the brown sack with delicate hands. He rubbed one slippery cheek against the material and cooed.

The man coughed. “And we've got news from the battle: the *Tears' Shower*—”

“—the *Platonic Love*,” Antithesis hissed: “is it alive?”

“Yes.”

The creature grunted. For a few seconds he stared into space, saying nothing.

“U— ulgh!”

The haze grew so deep before him that the man's vision clouded. He drew a sharp breath: his nose burned. His nose *was* burning. He tried to sneeze, or wag his head to put out that ungodly fire, but nothing gave him relief. That sensation of raw immolation, and a painful ‘sleepy’ tingling, slunk up in between his eyes and then exploded through his head, as if some manic had just taken an ice pick to his skull.

Seconds later that pain evaporated; his vision returned to normal and he found Antithesis still leering up at him, cheek against that brown sack, and eyes glowing like hot coals. They returned to cinders almost instantly.

“‘‘ Loverboy, too...’’ the creature laughed uproariously. ‘‘ Loverboy is still alive? A-ha! Hahaha!’’

‘‘ Justin Storm attacked Base-10 after he was finished with Godthab.’’ The man stepped back a few paces. ‘‘ You were right: Storm is reckless, a real berserker. He’s impulsive as a bitch in heat, too. With his anger— with all that irrational hatred— he can’t help but lash out like a barracuda in bloody waters: it shouldn’t be too hard to lasso a person who’s *that* predictable.’’

The creature said nothing to this, so the man tried to break the silence:

‘‘ Lemme tell you: dimes to dollars Unity *will* be able to get its hands on the—’’

‘‘ Not irrational.’’ Antithesis said.

‘‘ What?’’

The creature smiled; it was not a wholesome sight.

‘‘ I said ‘not irrational’. Loverboy is not an irrational being.’’

‘‘ Well, if he’s got a method to his madness, then I’d say he’s one fucking immoral prick, at the very least.’’

Antithesis stood up and cocked a dead eyebrow. ‘‘ Are you a fool? Loverboy is *not* an immoral being, either. What he’s done his entire life is live under a system that provides him with nothing but fear and pain, and yet he’s simply resentful against that aggressor: a despotic sea of humanity suffocating him. He’s not even particularly rebellious. Well, that makes him an idiot, and not malevolent. That narrow little road your species has taken him down is choking him, and for the first time he’s catching a tiny glimpse of something beyond the pale. Loverboy is earning the ability to stretch that limited little frame of his across *infinite* horizons, but he’s only just taken his first few steps off the road. He’s a baby breeching the womb, fool, incapable of comprehending the justness or unjustness of a deed. Oh-eee, *ooooh-eee...*’’ Antithesis howled with perched lips, a laughing fire blazing in his eyes.

The man squinted: ‘‘ His changes, you mean? But that’s not the path Unity has in mind for humanity! Storm didn’t exactly go from a frog to a prince, did he?’’

‘‘ No, he went from tadpole to frog, actually: his actions at Base-10 were *arational*, and his thought process is *amoral*, because he doesn’t have the good sense at this point to understand that frogs are *allowed* to eat tadpoles. Tch! Whatever he did was a mindless child’s game— the roasting of ants on a sidewalk, maybe. No, no: it’s more like roasting scorpions, isn’t it, because those stupid little insects *are* harmful to the body, if otherwise insignificant in the grand scheme of things. And you know what? All that roasting *is* a public service when you think about it— slaughtering scorpions to let bare feet rule the sidewalk— and even if the unthinking child doesn’t *understand* what it’s doing it doesn’t make the deed any less special. Oh, no, no, no: Loverboy’s hatred can’t be faulted at all, and in fact it’s downright *moral* of him, even if he can’t quite see that.’’

‘‘ You can’t mean that it’s ethical to run around killing people?’’

‘‘ Ethical? A-ha! Hahaha! *Ethical?* The idea of ‘ethics’ gives rights to people and things that don’t deserve them, and by a wide margin at that! It’s an unnecessary embellishment to the idea of life. Take it away and you’re left with one thing: the only true moral to the story.’’

‘‘ Moral?’’

‘‘ ‘Life looks out for *life*.’ Morality is to do right by oneself. If the only way our little Loverboy thinks he can survive is by giving the world-at-large a good thrashing then

he's being most 'unethical', but don't you dare fault him for his principles: as far as means-to-ends goes he's on wholly moral ground, and that's all there is to it."

The creature hunkered down on his knees and loosened the bindings around the ratty brown bag; instantly a bloodied head emerged, complete with bright yellow slit eyes and a sharp, vicious beak. He stroked the nape of the No-See-Um's neck. The swan-demon stared back at him, unthinking. Eventually it began to coo softly.

The man wiped down the ring of sweat around his neck:

"Lemme ask you this, if I might: just what use do you think Justin Storm can be to us? He must *be* of some use, right? I mean, if he really is the first step in the evolution—"

"He is incompatible with your 'vision'." Antithesis answered. "Mister McCaul and the rest of your group are operating on the basis of compassion: you want to save your species no matter what, and no matter how deserving the rest of you are. Well, goodie for you-ey! What an excellent protector of wolves the sheep is! You wanna take those scorpions off the sidewalk and turn 'em into bare soles— a noble effort, sure, and *ethical* to the last drop— and in doing so you will be made strong: all your enemies will strike at your heel, while you shall strike at their heads. Miff muff, griff gruff: *gooooood* stuff! But Loverboy's motivation for shakin' an' bakin' is far more primal than that, and therefore significantly more advanced..."

Antithesis grinned. His marble eyes sparked with yellow fire around the rims, like a corona surrounding an eclipse, and his teeth spotted up with drool.

"He may very well have to be destroyed, when all's said and done. Oh, well: no loss, really..." Antithesis embraced the swan-demon in an intimate hug, his hands wandering all along the monster's body. The pair remained frozen in that hug for some time.

All at once the No-See-Um's eyes sparked to life; the incarnation flailed its body to and fro and screamed, all the while struggling to escape Antithesis' grasp.

"Rrrrrrrraaagh!"

The man stepped back. Antithesis took the incarnation by its throat and drove its body into the scorched metal wall of the room. The pair literally flew back and forth, back and forth, until the swan-demon was battered beyond recognition: in one hand Antithesis held part of the creature's severed spine, and in the other its devastated head:

"Speak to me, at the very least! Scream sour nothings, at the *very* least! Fucking *whore!*" He threw the decapitated head against the wall and snarled.

Hot bile again rose in the man's throat; he made for the room's exit, but was stopped by the creature, now inexplicably standing in front of the door:

"Sorry you had to see that." It cooed.

"I— it's alright."

"Another." The creature demanded. "Now. And tell Mister McCaul that I'm ready to meet with Alletalen at his leisure: he'll need to do us another little favor before the fireworks on Lake Victoria are all set to 'det'."

"And his payment?" The man asked. "Kam's still not quite sure how we're gonna go after—"

"You don't need to worry about that: Loverboy will come to us. I guarantee it. It's the simplest thing in the world, driving human behavior, and I'll have him visit you here in no time."

The man shook his head: "Of course. And you've been right on the money in every other matter too. Kam is right: you are very like a god..."

The creature smiled. It stared down at the black blood of the swan-demon collected around his crusty nails:

"The Bydo are perfect, you know, and I'm just another vision of that perfection. The Great Communion is an ice cream sundae, and a *delicious* one at that..." he licked the blood off his hands, his oversized tongue greedily sapping up the fluid, "and so am I: but *I've* got a cherry on my top, wouldn't you know it? Or I suppose it's more appropriate to say that my cherry was popped. Tch! The way you pitiable little mammals organize your noggins isn't totally worthless, after all, not when applied to standing perfection. And why not? Nature doesn't deal in copyright, anyway, so what's the problem with taking up the best of both worlds? No, no: I'd say that I'm not a god in the very least..." his grin widened: "I'm just a humble profit."

VII.

For a woman of few words Samantha was able to summarize her feelings even more succinctly than normal:

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care." The doctor answered. "It's the truth, anyway."

Justin Storm lay before them in his four-point restraints, sporting only a folded pair of blue scrubs bunched over his midsection, placed just before Samantha entered the locked-down ward.

While the entire world was going to pot all around her, the doctor's sense of prudishness was really very amusing.

"None of this is— in any way, shape or form— at all bloody possible..."

"Not *probable* Sam, but again: I'm just reporting facts here—"

Samantha kicked one of the collection trays hard enough to spill black sand all across the floor:

"Well your facts don't make any fucking sense *either*, do they?"

She stormed out of the room, followed closely by the doctor.

All in all, Justin thought, Samantha was downright upset.

The Typer opened his eyes and got to his elbows right after the door hissed shut. He went back to jostling at the leather cuffs around his wrists: they were fastened far too loose. Maybe they'd hold up well enough for a normal grunt around base, but not for someone used to flying a linked ship. Whoever fastened these things had a bleeding heart riddled with compassion.

Tsk, tsk, doctor...

Justin twisted his left hand around until his palm was facing upward.

It's not smart to be 'compassionate', not if you want to catch one of us by the toe...

He pushed outward with all his might, digging his thumb's oversized metacarpal bone against that scratchy cuff.

...or even by the hand...

Pressure, pressure: his entire left arm quivered with the strain. Sweat blossomed on his forehead, but then the pain evaporated as his mind steamrolled over the agony with an unnatural rush of endorphin-related bliss.

... 'cause to hold any of us, you have to be just as merciless against us...

When the pressure didn't do it Justin lost his patience and quickly twisted his wrist to the side; that got the result he was looking for. The crisp snap came in synch with a high-pitch mewl from his lips. A rush of color exploded across his mind's eye: vicious red fireworks. His muscles temporarily lost their tone and he collapsed onto the metal bed, but got back on his elbows soon enough.

...as we're willing to be merciless against ourselves.

His thumb dangled uselessly out of place: a helpless mound of flesh sitting atop a shattered column of bone. He threaded the remains of his hand through the cuff, gingerly unfastened his other limbs and then took up the powdered blue scrubs with a smile.

"Thanks for the threads at least, doc..."

He stumbled on unsure feet and made his way to a cabinet: he found enough gauze to bind the wreckage of his thumb in with the rest of his hand. Justin was no scholar of human anatomy, and he didn't know exactly how a thumb might 'break' when pressured to do so. He assumed (or at least hoped) that it all worked like a shoulder: somehow dislocating and then 'relocating' with relative ease, instead of going to thousands of thin slivers like a glass goblet smashed against the floor.

In any event he could say that he learned something today.

A few of his personal effects waited for him in the next room. Thank merciful heaven: his flask was among them! Justin swigged from the thing greedily, eager to do anything to curb that excruciating pain slowly throbbing its way up to the surface of his mind. Among his other effects were the remains of his flightsuit: it was in tatters, and covered with human blood. He stared at it for a moment, then he looked down at his right hand. He flexed his digits slowly.

All at once an image flashed through his head: five fingers, black as obsidian, with five cruel nail points, all bathed in blood. But it wasn't red blood: the steaming syrup gummed around those fingers like spent motor oil. And that smell...

That smell...

Well...

The smell was...

"Disgusting."

Disgusting?...

Really?

No. Not that. It was different: it was...

"It was..."

...intoxicating...

He wagged his head. Then, for good measure if for no other reason, he bashed his left fist against the tabletop.

Due to his amazing lack of foresight Justin spent the next five minutes on his knees, fighting back a tortured scream with a sputter of foam roiling on his lips and tears brimming over his eyes.

"Bogey on your six..." he grunted. "That was all: it's gone now..." Justin squeezed his eyes shut and desperately tried to visualize his cockpit. The sensations link

in his ship earned its keep by tricking his mind into thinking that his body was in actual pain, but turnabout was fair play, and Justin consciously forced his noggin to accept an equally counterintuitive 'truth': *this* pain was not real, either.

The mantra worked only in the sense that he didn't faint outright from the pain; otherwise it was not particularly effective.

He buffered his hand with even more gauze and then surveyed the main exit. Two dark silhouettes graced the other side of a warped glass wall, one on either side of the infirmary door, each bearing the unmistakable shadow of an MP-180 at their hip: heavy security, to say the least. He crept back into his holding cell. From there Justin managed to work the back door open and then he finally emerged outside the main infirmary.

At this point he thought it might be a good idea to scramble up to the seventeenth floor barracks and slip into his civvies.

Before anyone gets suspicious of a barefoot, shirtless guy in scrub bottoms wandering around the base corridors...

He made it a total of three steps.

"'lo over there, buckaroo."

At first Justin's blood froze at being addressed like this— that he was 'busted'— but when he recognized that priggish voice— matched with the condescending tone— any trace of fear in his blood gave way to a very different emotion.

"I figured you might slip out the back door like that..."

He faced the shadow along the wall and snarled:

"Cigarette-chomping bastard!"

The flare of a match pierced the darkness, exposing Samuel Roont's sharp ears and beady little eyes. He smiled at Justin and lit a cigarette in his mouth, grinning like a coyote might.

"No chomping today, though." A plume of black smoke exploded from his nostrils. "Today's more a day for ashes, I think."

"You god-damned asshole motherfucking son-of-a-bitch!"

Roont sneered, but kept hold of the cigarette with his teeth. "My mother, Mister AGP, happened to be one of the best damn prostitutes in Rotterdam. Catered to a very high-class clientele. It was enough that she could foot the bills for my undergraduate education, anyway. The old gal may not have been the most moral lady to ever grace the Blue Marble, but she was downright cordial in her conversation." The good doctor's sneer widened: "I'm the son of a whore, Mister AGP, and not the son of a bitch. Get it right, please. Also, I never fucked my mother, to my recollection."

Justin blinked twice; he didn't know what to make of this sudden candor. His sneer soon returned, however:

"That just leaves the 'god-damned asshole' part, then."

Roont plucked the cigarette from his mouth and nodded. "I never said you were *all* wrong, you know." He held the smoldering stick out and motioned for Justin to take it. When he didn't Roont pressed it into his hand:

"It'll help you come down from the limerence. Trust me."

Justin only crammed the thing between his lips because he damn-well wanted a cigarette at the moment, more so than he could ever remember, and *not* because it was the 'doctor's order'.

When he turned to storm off Roont was ready with a few quick jabs:

“What’s the plan now, Storm?”

“Get away from you, get away from Wraith, and get together with the Military Investigative Branch. *That’s* the plan.”

“You can do that,” Roont admitted. “But how about something more concrete?”

He stopped.

“Concrete? What are you talking about?” He turned to face Roont with venomous, untrusting eyes. Half of his cigarette was already in cinders.

“Did you enjoy your little joyride? Something like sticking an electrical plug into a nuclear reactor, wasn’t it? Of course, technically, *you’re* the one that’s getting penetrated on all these little ‘joint operations’, aren’t you? Or at least you’re the one that ends up with steamin’ piles of spent goo all over you—”

The pilot snarled and turned on his heels.

“I can make it so that never happens again. Not to you, and not to *anyone*.”

Justin stopped again.

“How?”

“Like I said: ‘today’s a day for ashes’, Mister AGP. Hey, look at that tick in your face! You don’t like it when I call you that, do you? You can lose the name— as well as *all* your current problems— if we just took that ship by the neck and throttle it dead, right?”

Justin turned around.

“Kill it? Wipe out the Bydo flesh inside my Raiden? Destroy the *Platonic Love*?”

Roont shrugged. “Your voice is quivering: why is that? It seems the easiest path, doesn’t it? Your precious MIB won’t put a stop to this program, boy— you can bet every grain of sand in Isla Lian on that— so don’t think that a public tantrum will stop us. But what’s with that quiver in your voice? You of all people should be on-board for scrapping this particular abomination, buckaroo. Unless, of course, you actually *liked* the things you did inside that morbid little shell of concentrated evil...”

Justin’s throat quivered. He wrinkled his nose and continued down the corridor. Roont was merciless in his pursuit:

“And now little Fiver’s sniffing like a proper bunny! Where’re you off to, cottontail? Gonna find yourself a nice carrot, maybe?”

“To hell with you! I wouldn’t trust you to lace up a pair of fucking shoes, Roont. You wanna kill the *Love*? Fine: you got my blessing. Blow the unholy little fuck back to hell. Just don’t bother me about it.”

“Not so fast! I need you in the cockpit; you have to be there to keep things under control during the procedure! Damn it, AGP!”

Justin was nearly out of earshot when Roont sucker-punched him below the belt. It was a damn hard thing to make a person with Justin’s personality feel *worse* about themselves— kind of analogous to convincing a Holocaust survivor to be even *more* angry about that whole ‘Final Solution’ thing— but of any blow that could possibly be given this was one of the few that counted:

“You nearly killed her, you know.”

The floor squeaked; Justin’s bare feet slid to a halt.

“Little Miss CRTS, I mean. Her body’s broken, Storm: nicks to her spine and half a dozen other places, too. All of it was courtesy of someone who went quite a ways out of their way to give her a good thrashing.”

Justin said nothing.

“Get any jollies out of it? Made you feel more like a man, did it? How ironic!”

“I... I don't—I can't remember. I have... no memory of—”

Roont clenched his jaw: “Well the *Platonic Love* does. As a matter of fact, Storm, I recall that your vessel already tried to shuffle off Miss Chovert's lovely mortal coil once before, right? Tell me: what marvelous human brain was giving the marching orders, then? Fact is R-H-AGP has a decidedly low opinion of Little Miss Chenine, I think. But here and now you *personally* took it upon yourself to beat the ever-loving tar out of—”

“No: that's not true!” Justin turned on his heels, green eyes glistening and brow furrowed.

Roont approached the pilot, his voice calmer than before:

“The only thing that's ‘true’ here is that next time we have this discussion about another ‘incident’ with your Raiden we'll be talking over a casket. *That's* a prediction you can take to the bank. And you want another free prediction? I'll bet anything that casket will have a blood-red Western End rose lying on top of it, too. She cares an *awful* lot for those things, after all.” Roont came so close to Justin's face that they could have shared the cigarette between them:

“So tell me: do *you*?”

Justin stared at Roont's shoes.

“You're not gonna find an answer down there on my loafers—”

“What would I have to do?” Justin looked up, his face still boiling with less-than-subtle hatred. “Theoretically?”

The good doctor smiled:

“Take a little boy to the pediatrician, that's all.”

Justin's brow ticked.

“Sit him up on the exam table and hold his hand: keep him calm and still while the docty-wockty prepares a needie-weedie for his little veiny-weiny.” The man's teeth came leering out of his grin:

“And keep that little dear from making a mess of the doctor's office while the lethal injection boils up inside his body and kills him deader than fuck on a Tuesday morning. Think you can do that, ‘Mister AGP’?”

VIII.

The first thing she felt was that smooth, subtle tingling against her back. It moved on, until from her shoulders to her toenails her body oozed and bobbed on top of that liquid bliss. Not water— nothing so vile as that— but something fluidic.

That was the right way to describe it: fluidic.

Lovely word... pity one doesn't get to use it often...

It was strange beyond reproach, as caustic as it was clean, like an ocean of hydrogen peroxide cradling her little supine frame.

Altogether, she thought, it was not particularly unpleasant.

Twenty more lifetimes of this and I just might come clean...

“Do, dee-do, doh-dooo...”

Her eyes flitted open.

“Hmm, he-hmmm, he-humm...”

She got to her haunches, sending a bed of pale blue liquid swirling in all directions: every drop of it evaporated into nothingness, leaving her alone in a place given over to thick, miserable fog.

Tap... tap... tap...

A lily-white dress cavorted in the distance. Tiny black dress shoes jumped hopscotch across a noisy tile floor.

“Do, dee-do, he-hummm!”

Tittering.

Not laughing. There’s an honest-to-goodness difference between a genuine titter and a laugh, with few people capable of pulling off the former. That was a product of indescribable innocence— or unimaginable naiveté, take your pick— and some people might not even recognize a ‘titter’ when they hear it. She, for one, generally could not, except in this case.

And even then it was only because she recognized the ‘titterer’ in question.

And am I the ‘titteree’, then?

“Juvenile wordplay.” Chenine scoffed and shook her head.

Then, as if on cue, the juvenile in question came to rest ten feet from Chenine, arms set out in precarious balance and one foot extended awkwardly in the air. She looked up at the pilot with a gigantic pair of radiant blue eyes. Pearly white teeth sparkled with a dazzling, disarming smile beneath a tiny button nose.

As a child, and even as a very *little* child, Chenine always thought her nose was a tad too small for her face. Now, face to face with her mirror image (fourteen years her junior, give or take), she still held that opinion.

It isn’t even a ‘button’ so much as an oversized zit...

Then, of course, there was that hair color...

Suddenly a gust of wind kicked up around them; rows of gossamer curtains behind the little girl fluttered free in the empty air. Her delicate white dress rippled in intricate, modest layers with the breeze like the precious petals of a chaste flower.

Behind the towering thin curtains, larger than life: a silhouette, and a smile.

That smile...

Chenine clenched her fist, and then unclenched it.

Nothing happened for a time, so she did it again.

Then the child noticed this shadow standing behind her and turned to face the specter with a radiant grin:

“Momma!”

The silhouette disappeared amongst the gossamer curtains, slowly at first, but then darting with impossible swiftness and manic gyrations.

The juvenile jumped up at once, racing after the phantom:

“Momma! Momma!”

Chenine (the big one) hit a full-speed sprint after only three steps; she brought down the galloping kid in a full-contact tackle.

“Ulph!” The tiny girl cried.

All those sparkling white curtains whipped about in a frenzy as the dark silhouette ran further into the satin jungle.

“Nooo: Momma! Momma: I’m coming!”

The child struggled vehemently beneath Chenine's body; she was surprisingly strong.

"No!" Chenine hissed. "No, you don't. Not to her; *not* with her!"

When the little kid escaped Chenine's grasp she hit her with another tackle, this one far more brutal, pinning her little legs together with her own knees and holding her tiny stick arms firm behind her back:

"*Not* like her!"

"Momma! Momaaaah!"

Chenine struggled to hold her tight; all around her the curtains whipped in front of her face, around her head as if to suffocate her, and they slapped her all over her body like stinging wet towels.

"Not... to... her..." Chenine was no longer hissing: she was snarling.

When those malicious curtains began to slap down on her back like a gauntlet of cat 'o nine tails Chenine raised her head and did something quite out of character:

She growled.

One hand against the struggling child's back, pinning her in place...

...and the other flies through dead air, nabs a curtain head on, rips it cleanly in two...

And then quickly, impossibly, unexpectedly comes the rain: black tar, thick as molasses and reeking like spent motor oil. Grab another curtain, tear another curtain: release another vile storm cloud.

Screaming... bleeding.... growling...

And sobbing:

"Momma! Momaaaaaa—"

"—aaaachoo!"

She opened one eye, and then the other.

"Do, dee-do, doh-dooo..."

Recovered from the sneeze, a child's absent singing continues.

"Why are you here?" Chenine asked.

Piperel looked up from her coloring book and sat up in her chair:

"You're awake!"

"Obviously."

The little girl let loose a very sunny smile, one that Chenine did not reciprocate. It took the child a minute to realize that the pilot was still waiting for an answer. The kid hopped on her chair and followed through with a very enthusiastic (if uncoordinated) salute:

"Infirmery security, at your service!"

Chenine sat up and pulled the infirmery bed sheets tight around her body. She shook her head.

"I haven't been out for *that* long..."

Piperel tittered. "I've been debudized!"

The pilot blinked. "Deputized?"

"That's what I said. Mommy wanted me to watch you 'cause—"

Chenine cocked her head: "Where is the pilot of the *Platonic Love*?"

“Mister Storm?” Piperel cocked her head to the opposite side with perfect symmetry. She answered with cadence to match Chenine’s: “I’m sorry: I do not know.”

Oh, for the love of God...

The child then stared down at the floor, swaying one tiny foot. “But Mister Storm... well, he’s sick, is what mommy says. *Very* sick, I think...”

“What does ‘mommy’ say about me, then?”

The girl looked back up: “Oh, you’re okay, Miss Greenfield! Or at least you’re *gonna* be.”

Chenine puckered her lips. “‘Greenfield’?”

Piperel blushed. “I’m not supposed to call adults by their first name, and momma says that calling you that is less insulting than bugderin’ your last name.”

“Tongue’s not ripe enough for Ketoni names, is it?” Chenine shook her head and sighed. “It’s really butchering either way, isn’t it? Besides, no one else around here ever bothers to pronounce my last name correctly: why should you be any different?”

“I wanna get it right, ma’am—”

“Do not call me that, either.”

“—an’ that’s the only way I can say it proper.” Piperel perked her head up, her giant eyes sparkling with suppressed hope: “Unless... well, unless you wanted to *let* me call you by your first name, that is...”

Chenine glanced at the infirmary door: “I need to get out of here. Right now.”

“But, I’m supposed to *watch* you...”

“Then watch me while I walk.” Chenine glared at the child. “This is important.”

Piperel took a step back, but then nodded. “Umm... ‘kay. Oh: do you want some clothes?”

The pilot crossed her arms over her chest when it became clear that this was not a rhetorical question. Piperel soon got the message.

“Oh, oh: of *course* you do! Right...” She took up a bundle of scrubs resting on her chair and offered them to Chenine. The pilot took them wordlessly and without a hint of appreciation.

Ultimately, however, she did allow a faint smile to cross her lips.

“At least you kept them warm for me...”

Piperel, for her part, smiled.

And then she tittered.

IX.

Every ounce of energy in the sensations-link cascaded through the main line, a focused waterfall of raw data. The power behind those circuits crested in short order, rising to levels of theoretical-impossibility: a Pragma-Class Link, in and of itself, should not possess nearly such power or such efficiency. And it certainly should not possess the kind of drive that Scott saw in it now: manic, animal energy, and a single-minded devotion to loose its bonds and submerge its operator in that brilliant electrical waterfall of data.

Submerge, or ‘smother’, take your pick.

The *Platonic Love*'s sensation-link was no longer acting as a mere conduit between man and machine. It was searching, frantic, desperate, wriggling like an eyeball lost to uncontrolled saccades.

...and with all the seeming of a demon that is screaming...

Even with such impressive overclocking from the Pragma-Link the electrical shunts still held strong. Scott did, however, have to continually adjust them to keep the ship's signals out of Justin Storm's head. This was analogous to trying to bail water out of a kitchen colander thrown into a sink, and just about as easy: he was up to 10 adjustments every minute, his fingers frantically dashing across the console. Soon he'd have to do even more just to keep Justin's brain 'dry', as it were.

Times I wonder why I ever gave up piano...

Someone like Laura Hayle might be able to work their fingers that quickly, but Scott Tabris certainly could not.

"What's it up to?" Roont demanded.

"Reconfiguring the field, and fast." Scott answered. "It's at ten cycles per minute... no, wait: fifteen. Now twenty! Shit..."

"Attack focus?"

"Right now? His medulla oblongata. That and the pons: the vital stuff. They're the priority for protection right now—"

"Decoys!" Roont snarled. "Nothing but decoys! Don't allow yourself to be fooled by such juvenile chicanery, idiot! It's not going to mess with those areas—"

"If it does it could kill him!"

"—it's not going to mess with those areas because it doesn't *want* to fucking kill him! The only thing it might want to do is force the boy into 'sleep-mode', but it can't induce REM from the pons alone. There's no reason it should want to brute-force itself into that area other than to pull the wool over your eyes: drop the shunts back there, let it do as it will in that area and look for any other—"

"Fuck." Scott's voice was not agitated, but matter-of-fact. He could have been describing the weather outside, for all his intonation, and that tone of voice was, from someone like him, not at all a good sign.

"What, now?"

"Twenty-five cycle per minute, focused *waaay* anterior— I mean rostral, sorry: stimulus signals are coming in on a bee-line, like a bullet. All focused on the insula."

"Beaching its data on the Island of Reil. Hmph!" Roont sneered and shook his head. Scott had been fooled. He'd been fooled but good, too: he'd left Justin's entire insular cortex exposed: the primary wiring for, among other things, the sensation of pain. At this point there was likely no other safeguard to consider.

Scott shook his head and looked up at Roont:

"I think it's got us."

"Fucking fantastic." Roont stared out the control room window: half-a-dozed feet from the glass barrier the cockpit of the *Platonic Love* hovered, suspended in the air by the docking bay mecha arm and a series of cables and pipes. The ship itself was once again contained in an elegant silver shell, bearing serial numbers, name and everything in laser-etched calligraphy. Although Roont had only returned to base within the last few hours he had time to tend to the vessel— with Scott's lackluster assistance— namely placing it in that attractive metal shroud once again.

'Shroud'?

It was much more a burial cloth at this point, Scott thought.

Seven massive silver tubes jutted from the rear of the *Platonic Love*, all of them inexplicably buried deep down into the hafnium carbide shell, stuck through the craft itself as if the Raiden's superstructure was nothing more than a pile of melted butter. Black syrup—the Antibydo solution—boiled away inside each one of these, slowly dripping down through the shining columns and along the innards of the craft.

With a spoonful of luck and Storm's assistance they established AW throughout the Bydo flesh, and *absolute* AW at that, so every ounce of protest from the Bydo flesh was nothing; it was giving off one meaningless, soundless scream as the lethal syrup in those control rods choked the life out of it. But there was still one protest the flesh could give, and one person it could force its pain onto: a last-ditch, desperate assault to save itself. It could share its pain with its pilot. Scott was supposed to prevent this, but now he had utterly and completely failed.

Roont shook his head. "Well: the pain is going to make him seize, then probably go into link shock. There's the chance of a coma, sure—especially if the shock radiates out and damages his more 'vital' areas. If that happens it happens, but I don't want Mister AGP pulling the plug when that pain slams him, so be ready to spike the cockpit with—"

"Hey, wait: the signals to his insula are all gone!"

"What? How?"

Scott shook his head. "I... I don't know: the *Love*— it had the whole cortex— I'm sure of it—but then the focus died down. It just disconnected for no reason."

"Everywhere? You got all lobes secure?"

"No: the pulses moved back. *Way* back: Brodmann's 17."

"The occipital lobe? The primary *visual* cortex?" Roont looked out the window and sneered at the silver sphere. "What the fuck is it doing inside his visual cortex when it had all of his pain receptors nailed down dead to rights?"

"I don't know..." Scott hammered away at his console, "but we've got the insular cortex back under lock and key: it can't hack its way back in, now."

"Oh, what a bad move!" The doctor chuckled. "Our little devil is positively delirious, methinks!"

Scott reconfirmed all his readings and then set the computers to automatically protect each of Justin's remaining neural pathways. The techie sprawled back in his chair and sighed.

That was when he noticed the eyes on the other side of the glass.

Storm's teeth were grit to the breaking point; two very troubled eyes glared into the control room.

"I— uh—" The pilot's lip quivered.

"What's going on, AGP?" Roont asked.

"Y— we—" Storm shook his head. "We need to stop." He shook his head again, but then stared down at his lap, lips quivering anew. "We need to stop, *now!*"

"Calm down, Justin," Scott called. "We've got your head on straight for you: the flesh can't force you to feel any pain at all, now. Just keep your devotion at—"

The pilot glared back at him; a brilliant silver tear ran down one cheek.

“Goddamnit: he’s in *pain*! I can’t— can’t— I—” Storm looked down at his lap. His face contorted with a tortured labyrinth of wrinkles, as if he had a dead kitten sprawled out over his scrub bottoms. “H— his *skin*! Goddamnit! I— I won’t...”

“We ain’t stopping now, AGP.” Roont shook his head and checked his monitors. “We’re less than a minute from irreversible terminal damage throughout the clonal cell colony and there is no way in the name of heaven or hell that we’re gonna take our razor blade away from this little devil’s throat—”

The glass barrier in front of the good doctor exploded in a shower of snowflakes; the reeking scent of spent gunpowder permeated the sterile control room air. Roont fell back on Scott’s console and Scott’s chair went sailing back against the far wall. A cloud of smoke blossomed around the *Love’s* open cockpit, clearing only after a dozen seconds.

The first thing that caught Scott’s attention was the black, abyssal barrel of the Aegis staring both him and Roont down. The second thing was the tortured eyes of Justin Storm, tearful and bloodshot.

“Stop... the... procedure.” Justin’s voice trembled like a songbird’s. “Right now.” He manually cocked the sawn-off with the same hand that held it.

Roont adjusted his glasses and got to his feet. “I thought we were going to take his Aegis out during refit, weren’t we, JG?”

Scott brushed a powder of glass flakes from his shirt: “That was on my to-do list...”

“*Roont!*” Justin screamed.

“Moot point, now.” The good doctor shook his head. “He’s liable to kill us both.”

“It’s just as well: if he doesn’t, then I probably will.”

Roont spun around: standing in the doorway of the control room, bearing the fiercest and darkest of scowls, Sven Wraith glared at the doctor and let loose a contemptuous snarl. Chenine Chovert stood beside him, hands delicately folded over her midsection, her body girded in powder-blue medical scrubs.

“Remove those *AEM* injectors, Samuel. Right now,” Wraith said.

With a shotgun barrel pointed at his back and the angry RL staring him down from the front Roont had little choice: he ended the procedure. Within seconds all seven metal spikes impaling the *Love’s* rear hull were withdrawn on hydraulic pistons, squeaking noisily like a set of rusty steak knives set to a grindstone.

The noise matched the current mood in the control room quite well, actually.

No one spoke for several seconds— a lifetime— and then steel-toed boots broke the silence: Samantha Rayne burst into the room from the opposite doorway.

“Alright: where in the name of fuck is Roo—”

She stopped in her tracks. Sam perched her lips, first looking down Justin’s Aegis barrel, then at Doctor Roont and Scott huddled together in one corner, and then finally at RL Wraith and Chenine; these latter two stared back at her with all the life of two dead bodies.

“This is—”

“Awkward.” Chenine finished.

Wraith kept his eyes on Samantha and motioned to Justin:

“Go help your squadmate out of his ship, Captain.”

Storm turned his shotgun on the RL: “To hell with that! I’m not taking orders from some lying prick bastard scum like—”

Wraith held up his gloved hand; a small pad rested between his fingers. He pushed a little red button and a very loud whining noise sounded from the *Love*.

“Ghaaaaaaaaaah!”

Justin seized. Every muscle in his body locked up and spasmed; blue electrical fire danced all along the cockpit interior. One second later this stopped—replaced with a misty shroud of fog, as in a rainstorm on hot asphalt—and the pilot's body fell forward, limp.

Wraith wagged his control pad back and forth:

“He's had problems with compliance in the past, and I can't really afford to have that, you know.” He again faced Samantha, who by now bore the most dangerous of scowls upon her face; one of her fists trembled in a tight ball. The RL spoke in a lower voice: “He'll be very angry when he comes to, Rayne, and maybe even more irrational than he already is: you can either have it out with me right here and right now or you can go look after your squadmate, but you cannot do both. Choose, girl.”

Sam's fist trembled even more; a drop of blood landed on the slimy metal floor. The girl bit her lip and took one step toward Wraith, her nose half-an-inch from his.

Incidentally, no one else in the room happened to take a breath at that moment.

Then the former commando acted: with curt motion Samantha stepped around Wraith and kicked open the control room door. It slammed shut behind her with a reverberating echo.

“I'll deal with you later, Samuel.” Wraith pointed at the doctor. He turned to Chenine: “And thank you again for giving me the heads-up on this unauthorized activity, Miss Chovert.”

The girl shook her head. She was staring at nothing in particular.

“Don't thank me. I didn't do it for you, Aryl. You should know that.”

Scott blinked. He got to his feet:

“You *knew* we were scrubbing the *Platonic Love*? Miss Chovert: how in the world could you have possibly known—”

“I know *him*. And I knew that he would blame his Raiden for what happened to us, because he's not capable of blaming the real agent responsible for this event.”

Scott blinked again.

“Himself,” Chenine clarified.

A snicker filled the room. It soon rose to a belly laugh. Sam Roont slapped his knee:

“Cold-hearted little bitch! Lovely, lovely! And no wonder he wants you dead! Still: you'd think Storm would have himself a good bonk on you first, so why he picked a lesbo goth-tart like Drake to satisfy his animal urges I'll never know—”

Suddenly Sam Roont's head went in one direction and his jaw in another. The good doctor careened into the far wall and then slumped to his knees. He sat there, hunched and stunned, cradling his lower face as a trickle of blood curled down one corner of his mouth.

Scott stood close beside, his fist still extended.

Roont glared first at Scott, then at Wraith:

“*Gobdh!*” He exclaimed.

Wraith pointed at the doctor again. "You deserved that one." He then looked down at Chenine, still at his side, and snarled. "And you: come with me." He beckoned with one hand as he stepped through the doorway.

"Very well." Chenine nodded, obsequious. She followed the RL outside and then Scott and Roont were left by themselves, the only noise a soft wheeze coming from between the doctor's bruised lips.

Roont got to his feet and wiped his chin:

"I think that we should have at it, Scotty-boy: we can go at it right now, too, and then I'll show you who wears the fucking balls in *my* department—"

"I wouldn't bother. With your stupid Antipathy, doctor, I'm sure you could beat me: hands down."

Roont's face drooped; he glared at Scott with a pathetic scowl, as if he'd just been castrated.

"Yeah, that's right." Scott crossed his arms. "The whole fucking Project: your stupid virus— what do you call it, 'Angelbreath'? And then there are your friends in high places, and your god-damned sacrificial lambs in the *TSS*: oh, you're a real tough guy, aren't you?"

Roont sat down in his chair. He wiped his chin again and licked his lips. He took out a cigarette from his breast pocket— broken in two from all the excitement— and jammed it between his teeth:

"Fancy that. Well, I think that we... I think that we should have a talk, Scotty-boy..."

X.

Justin rolled out of the cockpit as soon as the mecha-arm set the *Love* down on the mooring floor. He stumbled, woozy, then he screamed and threw his Aegis clear across the bay floor.

"Those things're expensive, lieutenant."

Justin looked up: Samantha walked across the bay and met him head-on. The woman stepped close to him, put her hands on his bare shoulders and pulled him close.

He swallowed uncomfortably as Samantha encircled her arms around his neck, completing the embrace. She said nothing.

"Sam? W— what're you doing—"

Her knee came up. Justin went down.

"*Ulph!*" He practically slammed his forehead against the metal floor.

"You knew..." Samantha looked down at him, her copper eyes stern. There was something else in her eyes, though: a quivering. The woman was not overcome with fury, or with any particular emotion.

Rather, she simply appeared to be 'hurt'.

"You knew about the Raiden-Hybrids, Justin, and you didn't tell me. Neither did Chenine, but she's got an excuse..." Sam got on one knee, at eye level with Justin.

"She's just a living computer: a self-absorbed egoist. You're different. You're a human, aren't you? So you should have known how much your little secrets stood to hurt me, shouldn't you have?"

Justin stared at the floor. He didn't answer her.

Samantha shook her head. She picked up an item that had fallen from Justin's scrub bottoms in the racking: the silver flask of the imbalanced heart.

"Mind if I borrow this? I feel like I need it..."

"No, I don't." Justin answered.

She walked off three paces before turning:

"Why didn't you go through with it, huh? Why didn't you kill the *Platonic Love*?"

Justin looked to one side. "I... because Roont wanted me to kill it, that's why. Anything that asshole wants done can't be a good thing."

Sam didn't remotely believe him, and she let him know as much:

"Fine. If you don't want to tell me the truth then I don't care. We're due in medical within the hour: all three of us."

"Are they pressing charges? Should I expect to be arrested?"

Sam shook her head. "Who the fuck *would* they arrest, Storm? Wraith's more likely to get collared than you: whoever—I mean *whatever* did all those things to the base is long gone anyway, isn't it? All it left behind in its wake is... well, you."

Justin put his head back down against the cold metal.

"Roont... he lied."

"What?"

"About Chenine. I saw her in the control room. I knew it: I knew that I didn't hurt her..."

"Not for want of tryin', but yeah: Chovert was lucky, I guess."

Justin looked up:

"Lucky?"

Sam bit her lip. "Justin: how much... well, what do you remember? Can you remember—"

"What: others? There were *others*? Who?"

She shook her head: "No one's in the oblong box, Storm, so there's no point going into it—"

"Who else did I hurt, goddamnit!?"

"Drop it, pilot." Sam furrowed her brow. "*You* didn't really hurt anyone, did you?" The woman stormed out of the launch bay before he could reply to her, swinging the silver flask over her head: "and when you see me in medical I'm not bloody likely to be sober, so I apologize in advance if I speak my mind a bit."

"Never been much of a problem for you, has it?" Justin whispered this to the empty bay. He got to his feet, still cradling his gauze-clad hand against his bare chest. It was hurting even more now, so he cupped his free hand over it as well. Justin stared down at that hand: for some reason he felt a great sense of uncleanness from it, as if a dark and sooty grime was layered up inside each of his nail beds, oozing and festering. It was something very black, and very unpleasant.

"And... that smell..." Justin closed his eyes. A wave of emotion surged through his body, and it disturbed him as much as it titillated him:

It was pleasure. Pure, raw and animal.

"Beautiful..." He whispered.

...*Who the fuck would they arrest, Storm? Wraith's more likely to get collared than you: whatever did all those things to the base is long gone anyway, isn't it? ...*

He flexed his hand: once, twice, three times.

“Long gone?”

How far is the distance from the squeaky clean front of a nail down to the dark, stained underside lurking in the bed? That was the ‘length’ of distance, as Justin saw it: the distance to the dirt beneath the nail. And how thick is a human nail, anyway?

“Not much thicker than a razor, is it?”

Justin didn't know exactly how far gone the thing that attacked Base-10 was, but one thing was for certain: it hadn't traveled nearly far enough for comfort. And the scary thing was that it might never travel far enough— for anyone's comfort— as long as Justin Storm was alive and as long as the Raiden-Hybrids drew breath.

And, specifically, as long as he was the pilot of the *Platonic Love*.

“Bullshit.” Justin growled and smashed his left fist against the dormant hull of his R-Type unit.

Due to his amazing lack of foresight Justin spent the next five minutes on his knees, fighting back a tortured scream with a sputter of foam roiling on his lips and tears brimming over his eyes.

