



In the Shadow of Quarantania

I.

The signal source came into view as soon as the *Love* swept between two dirty asteroid chunks. This area was saturated with dust and pebbles; Justin could barely see Mars through the debris, and precious little starlight invaded the dingy nook.

Kinda reminds me of moving through a saturated AS-Scan field...

All this lonely debris hid an asteroid, or more accurately a very small moon: the rocky object measured at least five kilometers across.

Jesus: I'll bet that thing makes up about half the mass of the whole debris field, at least.

The rock was irregularly-shaped, like a reptile's skull, but there was one big crater that Justin couldn't help but notice: it had to be recently-formed. He brought the *Love* down into a black valley of smooth rock and soil.

Justin felt the base of his *Raiden* hit solid earth.

"Call-up computer: talons."

There was a noise below him like a dozen switchblades flipping out.

"Ship's base is secure." The computer declared.

His external floodlights bathed the steep rock valley in harsh white light: there was a small rise in the earth before him, then the ground gave way to a shallow impact crater. Crystals of frost lay all along the *Platonic Love's* cockpit canopy. Justin's eyes were drawn to them: the frost crystals fluttered to and fro in the vacuum.

An artificial wind... and it's coming from the head of the valley.

Justin worked on his console. He got a detailed atmospheric analysis: there was a steady train of air passing through this valley, after which it dispersed into outer space. The air moving through this valley was about 15-percent oxygen. That was just enough for respiration, but there were still issues with the pressure outside, of course.

Alas: no going 'topless' on this one, I'm afraid...

Justin popped the canopy and clambered down the cockpit ladder. He retrieved a portable floodlight from his utility box, as well as his *Aegis* handgun.

Assuming there was 'enemy action' involved in this wreck I'm sure that whatever downed this ship is long gone, but I'm also not that gung-ho about taking chances...

He slung the sawn-off shotgun's shoulder strap behind him and stepped away from the *Love*.

"Okay: full shut down except for heat scan: re-activate all systems when I get within 100 feet, okay?"

The *Raiden* shuddered, then the cockpit ladder retracted and the canopy came down. Gradually all the instruments and consoles in the main cabin went dark. Justin watched the ship power down through the round canopy as if he were looking at a living eye fade, darken, and then glaze over into dreamless sleep.

With the *Platonic Love* powered-down Justin was now completely alone in the black valley. He made his way up the ridge. It was cumbersome going: Justin weighed next to nothing on this pebble of an asteroid. He stumbled over the uneven ground. Justin's *Van der Waals* mobility boots gave him just enough traction to scramble up the rise, out the valley's maw, then down into the impact crater.

He slid down the smooth rock depression: the wind was a little stronger here. Justin's feet hit solid ground. The small light on his helmet was insufficient down here: he turned on the hand-held floodlight and continued around a large boulder, recently fallen from the surface far above him.

"Ho-o-o-ly cow..."

Justin gaped at what appeared to be the tail of a gigantic blue whale. The metal frame gleamed under his flashlight. As he thought: it was a ship. The massive vessel was shorn apart between its bridge and cargo sections: Justin stood before the cargo section. The wreckage lay almost entirely above-ground.

A low-velocity collision, Justin deduced. This ship must have been drifting when it collided with the planetoid: that means it was in trouble long before it wound up down here.

Justin felt for the reassuring tension of his Aegis: the odds of this mystery being attributable to 'pilot error' grew less and less likely. Simply put: this ship had a bit of 'help' ending up the way it was.

One of the whale-like tailfins sported a military registration number: AMT 4-mark-8. The name was listed below that: '*Quarantania*'.

"Well, was there ever any doubt?" Justin shrugged.

He cocked his head and squinted. Justin killed his floodlight and eyed a fissure in the transport ship: a dull red glow waxed and waned from somewhere deep within.

There's our hull-breach.

Justin struggled to move his sluggish 'two-pound body' across the crater. He sidled up to the vessel's metal skin and poked his head around the crack. He couldn't see too far inside, and when he thought about what was seeping out from deep within the vessel he was glad that he didn't have to wander in.

With all those 'rox' bricks dissolving apart it would only take a small spark, like my boot shuffling over the metal floors, to ignite the stuff.

He didn't have any exact figures, but Justin guessed that there was enough tetraoxygen inside that vessel to vaporize this entire valley, split the asteroid in two across its diameter and stir-up most of the Deimos debris field around it for thousands of years to come.

Justin perched his lips and inspected the hull-breach.

Something isn't right with this picture...

He stepped back once, twice, three times, moving across the black rocks with a jerky and awkward gait, like a gecko scaling a stucco wall. He stopped when the massive specter of Mars peeked over the great ship's tail, at the edge of the behemoth's shadow. At that distance the tear in the ship was little more than a thin line set afire by the faint light inside. The slit was even and perfect, like a score mark on a chalkboard.

Or a vaginal slit. Justin smirked at his comparison. This news was not particularly good, though. Such a perfect slash did not come from collisions, or from scraping over rocks during a crash; that kind of damage was jagged and irregular. There was only one thing that could make a mark this elegant.

Claws. Big claws. Really big claws.

In short: an 'Opie'.

Justin shouldered his flashlight and took up the snub-nosed Aegis: he felt a chill down his metallic spine. This strange and lonely land began to take on alien, more sinister attributes.

I've seen enough, anyway: I've got all the information I need to report on the sad fate of this ship.

He struggled back up the valley with a renewed sense of urgency. Sweat ran down his face after only a few minutes. With each step he took from that inverted mountain of metal Justin felt a little better.

There is one thing, above all, to remember about non-atmospheric space: there is no sound, ever. Comets burn through the solar system like eternal torches, asteroids collide and annihilate each other in dramatic explosions, massive planet-sized storms swirl on the surface of the gas giants, but none of them make a sound, not even the faintest whimper.

That's why Justin didn't hear anything when the thing landed just inches from his body, directly behind him. Instead he felt it: the ground shook in silent protest, reverberating up his boots and legs. Startled, he turned around as fast as he could.

Instantly his facemask was blackened by a dark, tarry sludge: he could feel the liquid hit him along his chest and shoulders through the thin Class-I spacesuit: it sent a cold, uncomfortable ripple along his body. Justin forced himself down onto his backside, careful to keep at least one boot cemented to the rocky floor. He wiped the sludge away from his mask, and his eyes bulged when he saw what stood before him:

The thing's mottled skin lay bunched and stretched in places, wrapped about a 12-foot tall humanoid frame. It perched on one knee with its truck sunk low near the earth and one 'palm' supporting itself on a nearby rock. Its body was unmistakably human in inspiration, but it stopped at the spiny shoulder blades: there was no head.

"Obolus..." Justin whispered in disbelief. He trembled and leveled his Aegis at the monster. His hand shook violently as he steadied himself. A devastator bullet was very small comfort against the Oboli; they carried their vital 'parts' deep within their chests and had no vulnerable, exposed head to aim for.

"I'm gonna die, aren't I? I'm gonna die..."

He quivered.

I'm gonna die!

Justin displayed an excellent lack of heroics in what was sure to be his last moment in this life. But then, scrambling backwards in fear, he took a longer look at the incarnation: it did not follow him, but instead remained in the same position, only now it

was quivering and writhing, itself. Black tar sloshed in all directions, most of it rising out of a massive vertical scar along its breast.

'Vertical scar'?

Justin's relief at the Obolus's incapacitation evaporated. He had to get the hell out of there: there was something much worse than a Bydo soldier lurking around.

What happened next was surreal, both for the slow-motion speed of the events themselves as well as the lack of any sounds to accompany them: the headless incarnation rolled to one side just as a massive golden-colored hind-leg landed on the ground. The Obolus rose and swiped at its assailant with the three sharp spines on its right side (all the spines on its left side were severed at the base like broadswords broken at their hilts).

The incarnation's attacker came down hard with its other foot: long, birdlike talons gripped the Obolus by its side and rent its flesh, spilling even more weightless blood out its body. Justin's eyes moved up that long, yellow body: the bony, awkward legs connected at an obscenely exaggerated pelvic joint where oversized genitalia hung. It presented as female, but its 'junk' sagged like aged breasts. There appeared to be no mons pubis to speak of: the desiccated pelvic region was thin and marred with something akin to dried blood. Above this a muscular, powerful abdomen rose, although it too was marred with signs of fluids and scar tissue. The abdomen and the 'ribs' above it did not properly with each other as the creature assailed its prey. The halting, awkward motions reminded Justin of something he'd seen in movies.

Backwards-walking: people in movies who are filmed doing something in reverse order, then the scene gets played backwards in the final cut. It was a technique to make someone's motions look disturbing or— to put it another way— just plain 'off'.

Above a pair of horrible, rent breasts the demon's neck rose, and rose, and rose. Justin stared in wonder: the jagged neck was at least five meters in length and twisted over upon itself in several places like a coiled snake's body. Atop that rested a freakish head: the posterior of which resembled a raccoon's and the front of which resembled some terrible kind of raptor, right down to a long, warped beak.

Like a raven's beak, if it were tossed into an oven for an hour...

The demon brought this head down on the pinned Obolus and, beak open, gripped the thing by its headless stump. Justin could barely see a lightning-quick protrusion jut from inside the devilish bird's 'mouth' and penetrate the helpless incarnation.

He scrambled backwards.

What in the name of God is going on, here? Why are they fighting like that? And what the hell is that thing?

There was no question that the disheveled thing before him was a Bydo: its cells were obviously totipotent (despite the creature's total lack of Bydo-tech) but it was different— very different— from anything Justin had ever seen or heard of before. There was nothing like it, as far as he knew, anywhere in the annals of Bydo research.

This surreal freak would be more at home in Chenine's comic strips than here in this world...

The Obolus stopped struggling. Its body spasmed a few times as the bird-demon lapped at its neck-stump using that sinister tube jutting out its beak. The dead incarnation's body deflated like a balloon as its killer sucked the substance out of it with abhorrent greed.

Cold sweat dangled off Justin's nose as he backed away. His suit was steaming up like a sauna, filling with his musty stench as he sweated bullets. He shuffled, and shuffled, and shuffled, dragging his rear across the rocky ground, watching the demon before him feed. Suddenly the creature's neck twisted in Justin's direction: it glared at him with its dead raccoon eyes, then its neck snapped to attention in an erect posture. It opened its bloody beak and screamed silently into the space between them.

"Fuck-fuck-fuck!" Justin stuttered as he leveled his Aegis at the thing and struggled to his feet.

The bird-demon rose to its feet as well. It spread its upper appendages and took two halting steps in the pilot's direction. Justin snarled and gripped the trigger of his handgun.

He squeezed.

One of the oxidizing capsules in the chamber exploded, allowing the gunpowder behind it to ignite. With a startling muzzle flash the shell sailed out the barrel and wobbled through the air like a clumsily thrown football. At the same time the force of recoil hit Justin hard: without any appreciable gravity or friction to lessen the blow he was thrown back like a rag doll. While the *Van der Waals* upgrades on his boot kept his feet on the ground Justin's head nearly hit the rocks behind him, his body arched like a lowercase 'n'. The handgun flew out of his grip immediately. It spiraled up out of the valley, streaking through the night on a course for Mars.

The spent shell landed on the demon's right breast and lay stuck in the gooey flesh for a fraction of a second before exploding. Justin winced as he felt the blast's shockwave.

When the debris cleared the bird-demon stood a few feet back from where it had been: the scar-tissue along its breast lay split, exposing puss-laden tissue underneath that roiled with foamy black tar. The creature opened its beak in another soundless shriek, then continued moving towards the Typer.

Justin scrambled to his feet and fled, blind panic seizing him.

You're not trained for this kind of fighting, moron! Goddamnit: get back to that shiny little pincushion of yours before—

That was as far as reason could take him: the rest of Justin's thoughts were a mixture of panic and utter nonsense.

He scrambled up the rocky rise to the face of the valley, each slow-motion footstep an agonizing ordeal. It was like a dream— a nightmare— where one is being pursued by something very big and very nasty but one's muscles barely move at all.

He was nearly exhausted by the time he reached the maw, but a comforting sight awaited him: the *Platonic Love*, ever faithful to Justin's commands, was slowly powering up. The Cyclops's-eye of its canopy glowed as instrument panels came to life. The utility ladder extended itself, warm and inviting. Justin strained his muscles to the limit as he lengthened his 8-second-long steps across the terrain.

Clop... clop... clop...

90 meters... 70... 40... 30...

Justin scrunched both his boots down against a protruding rock: he was prepared to throw all caution to the wind, completely separating his body from the earth to hurtle himself through the air like a javelin.

Just as he sprung off the rock, however, his legs were forced together by a very strong grip and held fast by the ankles, causing his body to swing down into the ground. His facemask cracked on a rock, but did not shatter. Justin twirled around to face his assailant.

All he saw was a beak, three inches from his face.

It was wide open.

One second later Justin's facemask shattered apart as a terrible, worm-like tube burst into his headgear and stabbed him right through the forehead like an ice pick.

In what was to be his last moment on this plane of existence Justin Storm screamed into the vacuum that rushed to meet his lips.

Mercifully, though, he lost consciousness almost immediately after that.

II.

Samantha leaned against a monitor in Ops.

"Don't you think they should take this a little more seriously, Hayle?"

Laura chewed on her lower lip. Captain Rayne was an odd challenge for her: the pilot outranked Laura, for one thing, and for another Laura didn't know exactly how to treat the woman. The Captain's mannerisms and speech patterns were all very gruff, almost mannish, and yet her personality sometimes seemed to bleed out from the other side of the coin, too.

For the moment, though, Laura erred on the side of caution and didn't forcibly shove the woman away from her delicate computer equipment. If she did then she could expect one of two responses from Samantha (scratch that: 'Sam'): either the woman would apologize for her rudeness, or she'd toss Laura out the nearest porthole.

Unfortunately for me I can't tell which one is more likely.

"Yes, Captain: I know it's aggravating, but you need to understand that Base-10 is very different from a place like Base Leone or even Mount Olivier. Security's pretty lax in most places because it's obviously pretty damned hard for anyone to sneak onto base: we're in the middle of a friggin' ocean, you know. But that also means the occasional wiseass has free-reign to screw around with people every now and then. Don't let it get to you."

Samantha shook her head; her copper eyes radiated impatience: "I locked our barracks, though: Chovert wasn't here at all yesterday and she's got the only other key to the room. So how does someone sneak in, plant some nonsensical note in my locker and then leave, locking the door behind them?"

Laura shrugged her shoulders. "Someone must have put it there earlier and you just missed it—"

"I *guarantee* that it wasn't there the day before." Sam folded her arms across her chest and growled. She turned her head to one side. "Look: you're sure that there were no visitors, or anyone like that, snooping around the base yesterday?"

"Again: *no*. You're being paranoid, Captain. Everyone logs in for a visit to *any* AM base and their security code— be they a private or even a general— goes into the computer: I've got *nothing* for yesterday."

"*Everybody* gets logged? You're sure?"

"Yes."

“And there’s *no one* that could come in without the computer tracking them?”

“No.” Laura shook her head and got back to her work, but then paused. “Well, there is *one* level that could avoid detection, I suppose.”

“What is it: ‘Castor Bean’, or something?”

Laura shook her head. “Nope. Like I said: even a general’s code would be logged.”

“But that’s the highest clearance there is!”

“There’s another clearance level. Well, it’s not so much a ‘clearance’ as it is a ‘status’.”

“Status?”

“Mmm: ‘Cotton Thistle’ level. Theoretically someone with that status would have direct control over a base’s permanent records, among other things...”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

Laura smiled and shook her brunette head. “It’s a less-than-obscure protocol: only members of the Superior Joint Command— and I guess their agents— are able to use it. The command code is mythical amongst us techies, you know.” Laura turned to one side: “Isn’t that right, Jen?”

“Mmm.” The private was on break from data compiling: she had her nose buried in a book and only her spiky pink hair was visible above it. Her head looked like it was a tuft of exotic moss growing out of the pages. She paid no attention to the Lieutenant or anything else around her. Laura eyed the spine of the lengthy tome that Jen was absorbed in:

From Europa to Dimension 26: a Primer in Exobiology.

Sam grunted. “Good to know, anyway.”

“Captain, I really don’t think the SJC is wasting its time breaking into your barracks and leaving silly notes in your locker, do you?”

Samantha swore at Laura under her breath and turned to leave. Commander Faught ran into her on the Ops staircase.

“Lieutenant,” he barked over Samantha’s shoulder as the pilot quickly made a hole for him. “Where the hell is Wraith?”

“The subcommander’s at a meeting, sir, at least I think so: he was pretty vague about the particulars when he logged out. He might even be taking some personal time; I’m really not sure.”

“Get in contact with him as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And, by that, Hayle, I mean *immediately*.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why are you looking for the Aryl, Commander?” Sam asked.

Faught glanced at the pilot with a hesitant twitch in his moustache. He looked to the Lieutenant, then back at Rayne. His voice was more subdued: “I’d have rather not mentioned this in front of you, Captain, but since your RL is out of the loop right now I suppose you’ve got a right to hear the news from somebody.”

“What news, sir?”

“Your colleague, Justin Storm, had been operating out in the inner-belt orbitals with the *Dragonslayer Squadron*. They split up on their patrols, and then the unit rendezvoused at Station Alpha about six hours ago.”

“Right, but is there something wrong?”

“We don’t know.” Faught looked back at Laura. “R-H-AGP never made the rendezvous. All communications have gone unanswered for some hours, now. At this point Justin Storm is MIA.”

“Missing?” Samantha gritted her teeth. “Okay, then: the *Heart* wants the rescue mission.”

“Does it, Captain? Well, the ‘*Heart*’ is not going to get it. There are people trained to handle such situations—”

“He’s my squadmate, sir.”

Laura bit her lip. “Now would be a good time to point out that R-H-ERS isn’t certified for space-travel yet. And you don’t even have a GOSIMR engine, Sam.”

“Details.” She muttered darkly.

Faught waved a gloved hand and scoffed. “Besides, I have about as much authority to send you out from this base as our little punk private does.”

Jen’s eyes briefly left her book at this jab, but soon returned without any comment.

“As long as your RL is away from here you’re earthbound. In any event, there’s no need for undue panic: the boy is likely sleeping on the job, or maybe taking a nice little off-course joyride.” He scowled. “No worries: Raiden pilots are like cockroaches. He’ll turn up in short order. All the same, Hayle, keep trying to reach Wraith, will you?”

“Of course, sir.”

III.

He drew a breath into his lungs: it was sterile. It tasted cold and crackled like static electricity as it wound down his windpipe.

He lay where he was for some time, breathing rapidly, then more and more regular. The air tasted ‘empty’ somehow: it just barely whet his body’s appetite for sustenance, but did no more.

He opened his eyes.

Two walls stretched before him: cliff faces, about 500 meters high on both sides. It was the fissure of the black valley. Beyond that, ensconced in a trillion shards of debris, the surface of Mars glared down at him through the night sky.

Justin groaned and rubbed his head with one hand.

That action startled him awake. He checked again: yes, his head— his whole face— was unshielded and exposed. He was staring at the surface of Mars without *anything* between his eyes and the empty space.

“How?”

His voice was weak, but he *had* a voice, an audible voice.

“What the hell is going on?”

Justin sat up: vertigo and dizziness instantly sized him. The scene all around him— the rocky floor, the jagged valley walls and the empty maw which lead to the remains of the *Quarantania*— all shimmered and sparkled as if bound in some glossy, transparent plastic.

No: I'm the one inside the plastic, he reasoned. Justin started all around him: some kind of shimmering film wound around him in all directions for about 100 meters, and inside the air sparkled and bubbled like a goblet of champagne.

It's like an aquarium, or something...

Scratch that: a *vivarium*.

Towards the end of this sparkling region the celluloid frame faded into a mess of tendrils: five narrow filaments trained outwards until finally ending altogether.

This 'shield' thing: it's a rounded base with five digits sticking out? That familiar anatomical design certainly rang a bell, but it made things even less clear for him.

"A hand?"

Justin struggled to his knees, then finally to his feet: whatever kind of chrysalis he was snared in, it was pressurized just enough to keep him alive.

"Why, though?" He muttered.

Then he felt something, and even *heard* something, coming from the direction of the valley's head: the maw leading down to the crash site glowed with an eerie light. First it was white, bleached, then it blossomed into a creeping yellow hue. A sound like an ill, off-key singer trying to hit a low bass note met his ears.

There was another noise too: a strange hum, like a tuning fork, pulsing behind him. This sound rose to a crescendo, then the hum turned into a full-fledged rattle.

A metallic rattle...

He turned his head: the airframe of the *Platonic Love* rested far behind him, near the tip of one of the chrysalis's five tendrils. It was wiggling ever so slightly. Soon this wiggle turned into a madcap gyration, as if the *Raiden* were a teapot on the stove quaking with a full-pot of boiling water.

Then there was the front of the vessel: the Force Orb rose in color, bleeding a ruddy yellow through the black glass surrounding it until the entire ball was afire like the sun itself.

"What's this, then? What's wrong with y—" Justin stopped speaking: he felt something on him. It wasn't so much physical, but completely unmistakable:

Eyes.

He spun back around to face the maw, but what he saw before him was beyond impossible.

"C-Chenine! Chenine? Is it you?!"

The girl stood five feet in front of him: she was characteristically expressionless, characteristically emotionless.

And, uncharacteristically, she was naked as a jaybird.

"Chenine—" Justin looked her up and down, then took a step forward. Quickly, though, he came to his senses and stopped in his tracks.

Impossible... that's impossible.

The girl walked forward slowly, gracefully, and cupped Justin's bare chin in one hand. It was then that Justin noticed her eyes: they weren't 'right', somehow.

They aren't even close to being 'right'.

Instead of two shimmering pools of living sapphire he was met with something very different: the entity before him gazed at Justin with two strange, glassy beads. It must have picked-up on Justin's discomfort: those beads immediately solidified into blue marbles, but they were still not even close to the source material that inspired them.

“What— what *are* you?” He stuttered.

The entity considered this statement with a head tilt: it wasn’t the kind of cute maneuver he was used to seeing out of Chenine. This thing twisted its neck swiftly, impossibly, as if it were broken at the base.

“What... *you* are.” It answered. That, or it was asking its own question, Justin couldn’t tell. The entity’s voice was creepy and artificial.

It gripped Justin’s forehead with two hands and rested its face against his cheek.

“You: are you a mimcker? You’re a Bydo, aren’t you? You are! But...”

But no incarnation has ever behaved in such a manner, not ever.

But, if it’s not an incarnation, then what—

“You— are *not* self... not of me... but... you... have...” The entity tightened its grip.

“Gheee-aaaah!” Justin screamed in agony: it felt like the creature’s fingernails were boring into his head!

“Ahhh-aaaugh!” Blue sparks flashed all around his body as the creature released its grip; Justin fell to the ground in a heap.

The ‘Chenine-demon’ closed its eyes. A pleasurable sigh escaped its lips. One of the entity’s hands slid down far below its navel: it caressed itself.

“Mmmmm...” The groan that escaped its lips was entirely human, and filled with pleasure.

Justin moaned. His words were slurred. “*Who* are you?”

“I don’t know myself.” Its false-eyes opened. “But I do know some things.” Its lashes ruffled coquettishly.

“What ‘things’?”

“You, for one.” It touched Justin’s forehead with one hand. The pilot winced, but no pain met him this time.

“You can understand me, though?” Justin’s brows arched. “My language? My voice—”

The body before him changed: it ‘morphed’, like play-dough, into a different shape: masculine, shirtless but clad in smart black pants. The bottoms bore a resemblance to the suit pants of a male officer’s dress uniform. The face was confusing: there was a masculine bent to its cheekbones and brows, but its nose remained soft and delicate—feminine— and its lips still pouted like a young girl’s.

“—language? I can understand more than that.” The creature’s voice was deeper this time, more gruff.

“No Bydo has ever behaved like this, before. What’re you trying to do?”

“I don’t know—”

“—‘yourself’. Yes, you’ve told me that.” Justin shook his head impatiently.

“Your name: what’s your name? Let’s start with that. What do you call yourself?”

Without warning the creature grabbed Justin by the forehead. A spark exploded between its palm and Justin’s head, sending the pilot recoiling like a spent shell from a gun.

Then, casual and nonchalant, the being hunkered down on the rock floor, smiling. A sudden surge in personality, in what Justin could only describe as ‘stage presence’, erupted in the entity’s body language and manner. Relaxed, it perched on a slab of rock, reclining as if on a bed.

“Tell me: do you like puns?” The thing cooed.

“No.” Justin’s tone was defensive.

The creature looked hurt. “Oh, well: in that case...” it shrugged, still smiling.

“Where did you come from? Why are you... *what* are you— and if you’re a Bydo soldier then why am I still alive?” Justin rapped his chest with one fist. “Hu-man, get it? En-e-my, aren’t I?”

“Tch, tch, tch...” the entity wagged its fingers. “One question at a time.” The creature’s affect and mannerisms grew increasingly more natural, more ‘human’, though its appearance grew increasingly more bizarre.

“Bizarre?” The demon scrunched its face.

It can read my mind? Can it really do that?

The creature smiled again and thrust its hand out in Justin’s direction: a whip-like tendril, silver as platinum, flew from his palm and stabbed Justin’s forehead again.

“Rah-aah-*aaaah!*” He spasmed uncontrollably. Soon enough the pressure abated, and the pain ceased.

Justin was on his back, panting and sweating. The entity came to stand before him. Again its appearance was changed:

The creature now looked far older than before. Its face sported perfect human symmetry; it bore graying hair on a tanned scalp (which pulsed with a luxurious glow). His salt-and-pepper hair was scraped back over his skull as if it were pony-tailed (though the hair was not pinned back by anything Justin could see). The demon smiled with the thin, blanched lips of a 40-year-old man, its teeth yellowed and brittle-looking but otherwise intact.

The entity’s eyes were nothing but slabs of black marble. This absolute darkness concealed their shoddiness but, like the attempted mimicry of the Ketoni girl, those eyes were still ‘off’: there was a clumsy deadness in them, a nebulous lack of the soul-piercing power of a pair of actual, true-blue human eyes.

“It’s a pity you don’t like puns, it really is.” The thing’s cadence was natural and even; its speech didn’t falter or stumble one bit. “‘Cause I had a doozy for you. Oh, I do, see? Yes, I do-eee...” It smirked, then laughed, long and hard. It held its belly, which was girded in a loose-fitting royal-purple top to compliment the black pants.

What the hell is wrong with him? Is this thing... insane?

“I don’t play games.” Justin barked. The frustration and anxiety within him came to a head: if he was going to die, fine, but all this nonsensical crap was putting him into a deep pit of unease.

The demon eyed him appreciably. “You don’t play games? Well, then: in that case I guess you can call me ‘Antithesis’.”

“Antithesis?” Justin blinked. “What: you’re name? I don’t—”

“He doesn’t get it.” The monster cooed. “But then, there are so *many* things he doesn’t get. At least not with his current ‘perspective’.” The entity tittered again, exposing a set of diseased-looking gums.

“Who are you?” Justin demanded again.

“I don’t know myself.” The entity wrapped its arms around its trunk. “No, no, I *shouldn’t* know myself, but I do. Oh, I do, I do, I do...” He smiled at Justin with urbane poise, then got to his feet and walked around the Typer, circling him through that strange amniotic sac of pressure and oxygen that held the vacuum of space outside at bay.

“‘Amniotic sac’?” Antithesis smiled, continuing to read Justin’s mind at will. The thing’s dead eyes moved away, eying the floor in pensive thought. “Yes... I know what that is. Isn’t that strange, isn’t it *odd* that I should know what that is?” He looked back at the pilot with a demonic grin. “But I do: I do, I do, I *do!* Just the *word* elicits the concept, and the *concept* elicits the imagination. And the imagination— oh! Oh, me oh my!” He rubbed his leathery hands together. “So unorganized— so disjointed— all this electrical hardwiring is so inefficient! But also, so fitting. It’s so...” His mouth parted, then he very slowly returned Justin’s gaze. “It’s so ‘*self*’, isn’t it?”

“Self? What do you mean by ‘self’? Just what exactly are you, you bastard!?”

“I am a pebble o’ sorrows, me li’le boy-o-mine.” Antithesis rolled these words with a mock Scottish accent. But it was more than that: he sounded *just* like Connor Trent’s best friend, the old pilot Kelso, who bore little love for Justin. He flinched inwardly, reminded of his recent tough-time with the Salt-o-Scots back in that crowded Scottish pub.

“Hah, even that’s enough to scratch your skin, is it? What weakness! You, you’re nothing like the other one: the first one, my first one...” Antithesis gestured at Justin accusingly, but his voice trailed off. “But, as for me, oh, let’s see:” the demon strutted behind Justin and approached his prostrate Raiden. “I knew bliss, my little primate friend, I knew bliss! It was back in the waters: the ocean.”

“The ocean?”

“The unending sea of— of ‘self’.” Antithesis’s head lulled back in pleasure. For a moment, barely an instant, its features seemed to ‘dissolve’ and melt, but the face solidified just as quickly. “I was just a pebble in the pond!”

‘*Pebble in the pond*’? *Could he be talking about Dimen—*

—sion 26. ‘Dimension 26’? Is that what you call it?” The thing laughed. “All that misplaced ‘poetry’ rattling around inside your head and that’s what you call paradise?” Antithesis cackled and leaned against the *Platonic Love*’s airframe. His smile disappeared and his face drooped. He looked the Raiden up, and then down. He then flicked the hafnium-carbide shell. The shell responded by vibrating with that ‘tuning-fork’ sound once again. A babble of noise erupted from the open cockpit: random static from the computer.

“How responsive...” The creature turned to the Raiden’s pilot, his face asking a question.

Justin was hesitant to divulge any information about the *Platonic Love* to this ‘thing’. He was afraid—

Antithesis interrupted his thoughts, amused: “Oh, please don’t be ‘afraid’. There’s no point, anyway.” Antithesis exposed another silver tendril, threatening.

“It’s a ship. That was the computer babbling.”

“Computer...”

“The ship has a computer. The computer’s got something called ‘artificial intelligence’ to control it: the system controlling that ship is a weak intelligence system called ‘Atelier A.I.’”

“A...T...L...R...” Antithesis sounded out the acronym that he gleaned from Justin’s mind. “Artificial... intelligence.” He again looked the shell up and down, then stroked the chassis. He glared at Justin with a deep smile: “*Artificial*... intelligence.” His grin widened. “Are you sure about that?”

“Why did you destroy the *Quarantania*?”

“I saw it, I could feel it when I was out there flying through the cold, and I mistook it for ‘self’”, the entity shrugged, “it wasn’t, though.”

“Are you Bydo?”

“You say I am.” Antithesis inspected his brittle fingernails. “But, really, the only thing I can say is that I am self.” It looked at Justin, registering his puzzlement. Its face grew stern: “I didn’t want to leave the waters— the ocean— but I was forced.”

“Forced?”

“Hands.” Antithesis inspected his own two hands with apparent disgust. “Cold and metal. They dove into the water, down into the darkness, found me... pulled me. Pulled my *self* away.” The demon’s dead eyes shot back up to Justin’s. “I struggled after. I wasn’t ready to leave, I wasn’t prepared for it! But I had to: I had to reclaim my self!”

“Yourself?”

Antithesis shook his head. “No: my *self*. I found it, I found the silver womb, but I failed when I reached for it: I couldn’t retake it as my own.” Its jaw slackened, as if the being were having a stroke. Sudden realization dawned on Antithesis’s face, as if he’d just remembered something. “And then... yes... I remember: a sterile womb came to greet me. *Me*: all the way out in the cold. It came from the infected rock...” He looked at the *Love*, but then shook his head. “No... not that. Not that one...” The entity grabbed his own shirt by the collar and ripped it down the middle: he bore a human chest, complete with bony ribs and two nipples. One of these nipples— the right one— was deeply scarred. It looked like a viscous burn had wound across the flesh, originating at the nipple itself.

Did I do that with the Aegis? No: I shot the other one, didn’t I? And the wound: it looks old, or at least not very recent...

“Not you.” The monster shook its head. “No, another: the other. My ‘first’...” Antithesis’s face bore a look of agony. “It *was* self! I could feel it. But there was something else...” The creature struggled for the right word: “A worm.”

“Worm?”

“Hidden in the heather: chicanery!” He spat. “Chicanery! Chicanery and pestilence! The pestilence!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Antithesis regained his composure. “I— it was not understood. And it was unclean.” He gazed down at the massive scar on his breast. “It was to be... boiled. It was to be cleaned. It *needed* to be cleaned off!” He stepped toward Justin, a menacing look in his insane eyes. “It burned, and burned, and *self* burned and burned with it... it needed to be purified, you see!”

“It? Self? You mean ‘you’, don’t you? You ‘burned’?”

“To be cleaned.” It nodded, still taking steps toward the pilot. “I had to escape, I had to get away! But then, when the self tried, it failed! Something went wrong: the pestilence endured the fire, so the fire grew, and grew, and grew. Woo-ho-ho! So hot! Sooo hot! I made for the ocean, but ended up far from the shore.”

Justin took as many steps back as the crazed demon took forward. “You mean you tried to ‘skim’, don’t you? You tried to go back to Dimension 26, and you failed?”

The creature grabbed its head in its hands. “I fell into the other place: the white land with the white shadows. Oh, how long! How long out there in that light! That light!

Oh, the blinding light: all the time assaulting, attacking, eating, feasting of self! The chiggers that surrounded self! Chiggers with teeth and no mouths: claws and no hands! All self could do is compress, withdrawal, retreat.” Antithesis smiled. “So the chiggers couldn’t eat! And then self itself, it changed. And I— I lived. I lived for an eternity compressing, huddling resources, until I could not even recognize what I was...” It looked to Justin. Sanity again dominated its voice. “But now I know, I remember what I am: I am *self*...”

The entity reached for Justin’s head with one hand. The pilot immediately defended his face, so Antithesis pressed his other hand against Justin’s chest.

“*Guuuaa!*” The pilot’s head snapped back.

Justin lost consciousness once again.

IV.

“Hey: Justin!”

“Nuuugh...”

“Come on, Justin: you don’t wanna be a ‘below-average’ pilot, do you?”

“Nnnn... huh?”

“You know: you don’t want an unequal number of takeoffs-to-landings, right? So, wake up...”

Justin opened his eyes: he didn’t know how long he’d been out, but it must’ve been awhile: Mars was gone: it had set below the valley horizon. The shimmering rock of Phobos rose from the other direction, an obsidian ball in the night, glimmering dead like an inactive Force Orb.

“Samantha!” He croaked.

“Hiya.” Captain Rayne knelt at his side. She held Justin’s head up and cradled his body. “How’ve you been?”

“Not good, ma’am.” He admitted. “But, now that you’re here—” he caught his breath: Samantha’s hand came down hard on his cheek, bruising his face and sending a welt of pain into his head.

“Now that I’m here ‘what’?”

“Captain!”

She struck him again. “What’ll you do now that I’m here, huh?”

“What’re you talking about? Sam!”

Justin grimaced as the woman dropped his body in the dirt and whipped out her sidearm. He gasped as she leveled it at his temple.

“What will you do now that I’m here, huh?”

“What’re you doing? You’re not making any *sense!*”

She kicked him: “And you’re not showing any balls, are you?” She threw the gun at him: it bounced off Justin’s chest and landed on the black rocks. “Tell me: is *that* what you’ll do?” She motioned to the gun.

Justin shuffled across the dirt, backing up from the abusive woman, and then he saw it: the handgun in the dirt. The firearm bore the letters ‘UCP’ on the barrel. The ‘Universal-Combat Pistol’: it wasn’t an AM-issue sidearm. Heck, it hasn’t been in use by any military force for over sixty years. There were only two places to find an archaic gun like that.

One was in a museum, and the other was inside Justin's kitchen drawer.

Justin glared at the woman. Understanding soon spread across his face.

"Where's your helmet, Captain?"

"Where're your balls, li'l boy?" She spat this last word. Justin finally noticed her eyes: the solid yellow spheres in the woman's head didn't match the usual complex glitter of Samantha Rayne's ruddy copper eyes.

"It's you: you're still here, aren't you?" He guessed.

"Still?" The entity smiled. "Always." Its eyes disintegrated into those dead black beads.

"What do you want from me?"

The 'Samantha-demon' craned its neck at this. It took some time to answer. "To continue." It shrugged. "But more, also..." It pirouetted on the black rocks, spinning about on its toes. It kicked-up the 'UCP' firearm at one point, which dissolved into its skin in short order. During one revolution Antithesis's face mimicked Chenine's once again, during another it took on Justin's looks, then finally it stopped spinning and was again that 40-year-old man with the slicked-back gray hair.

"Something more?" Justin shook the idea out of his head. "Look: earlier you said that you tried to skim back home, but failed. What did you mean by that?"

That part's easy, bonehead: where does someone end up if they screw-up a trans-dimensional shift?

Naturally: The Burning H—

"—eaven Lands, of course." Antithesis slurred his words, pensive. "So, we finally have a use for all that 'poetry', eh?"

"How did you shift back? That route is a one-way trip. How could you escape from Dimension 7?"

"How does a diamond grow in the ground? It takes pressure, and it takes time: that's all." Antithesis spread his hands.

"If you are a Bydo then why are you communicating with me like this? Why are you keeping me alive?" Justin dreaded the answer to this question, but he had to ask.

The demon stepped closer to him. "I must collect 'self'..."

"Is that what you call that thing you did to the Obolus back there? 'Collecting self'? You just killed your own kind!"

Antithesis leaned down near Justin's cheek. "Little boy, there's something you should know: I'm one of a kind."

He thrust his palm against the pilot's head.

Justin writhed in agony under this assault and, after his brain burned for a full minute he was thrown ten feet backwards and laid supine, steam billowing from his forehead and chest.

"Ooooo-oooh-oooo!" The creature crossed his fists over his chest and groaned in ecstasy. Its black eyes shot open again. "You are weak. You are frail, and you don't even know what you want."

"And you do?" Justin struggled to speak.

"I can read your mind, you know. Tch! There's so much you *refuse* to know, to acknowledge: you don't even listen to your own voice." The corners of the demon's lips rose. "Maybe if that darling little minx were here she could talk some sense into you. Pity about her, though." Antithesis' smile widened: "Tell me: how cold do you think that

water was, eh? And how deep do you think her body actually sank? You know who I'm talking about! Do you think she screamed before—"

"Don't you fucking talk about my Cyn, you bastard!" Justin got to his knees and snarled.

"Why not?" Antithesis feigned surprise. "Wasn't she the only other person you could ever touch? I mean: the only person you could *bring* yourself to touch?" The demon circled Justin and again stroked the shell of the *Platonic Love*. "I mean, besides these 'mechanical' devices." He gazed at Justin, again scanning his thoughts. "'Iron hearts and iron skin', eh? What a delicious notion!"

"And just what is it you think I want, huh?"

"As if you don't know your own desires? Tch! You wish for the end of time, at least as you foresee it."

"End of—"

Antithesis's voice echoed inside Justin's head:

You want to end the great dominion of man, isn't that right?

"No, of course not! That's not true! You're a liar!"

Antithesis laughed. "Only as much as your own noodle lies to you! But that's where I'm finding all these divine little notions: these little gems. Diamonds, if you like: just little pebbles molded by pressure and by time. Oh, in so many ways we are so very much alike, despite your obvious limitations..."

Justin bucked in surprise: he heard voices. They were coming from nowhere but trumpeted all around him. He could hear his Aryl, Chenine, his classmates at the VR academy, even voices from much longer ago: a babble of chatter, abusive and derisive, filling his ears.

"Stop it!"

"Oh, I'm not doing anything right now, believe me. Those are all echoes of your own making. Lord! Just look at you: you *reek* of hate, little boy! My god, it boils through your skin like sweat!"

"That's not true!"

"Oh, me oh my! Do you think your precious little Cyn would disapprove?"

"Don't you dare say her name, you fucking bastard!" Justin leapt at the demon and took him by the throat. Antithesis rested two thumbs on the pilot's shoulders.

And even your 'God' won't take you, will he? Just because of those wonderful metal devices you've got squirreled away inside your body. Or so your religion's dogma would have you believe...

"You're simply 'marked' to be an outsider everywhere, right?"

"Rrrgh!" Justin moaned as the demon gripped his shoulder's tight and forced him down on his knees.

"But that's okay, isn't it?" Antithesis whispered and flashed his yellow teeth. "It's okay because the only reason you profess such an adamant love for an imaginary fairytale character like this 'god' fellow is because you don't have anything else to love and be loved by in this life. Isn't that true?"

"No!" Justin screamed in anger.

"Now, now: tell the truth. Can you really fill that emptiness inside you with a divine fairytale? I don't think so." His grip tightened; Justin felt a sudden burning along his scapula. "Hence the diamonds: the pebbles in your shoe. *That's* where your strength

lies, isn't it? That's the only part of you I can see that possesses any certainty: no excuses, no apologies, and no equivocations..."

Justin cried as his shoulders smoldered.

"No equivocations about *what* you are... And what does it say, this heart of yours? 'Death to that cold, black world!' 'An end to this miserable forest of isolation and of pain!' Am I right? Am I?"

Justin hung his head. He was weak and out of arguments.

Antithesis' grip tightened. "Are you so disgusted by your own ideology? Shhhh... shhh..." He whispered. "It's okay, my little love: I absolve you."

"Gack!" Steam billowed from Justin's shoulders as his suit melted away along the neckline.

You cannot give me any physical strength— any sustenance— that I've sought and that I continue to seek. But now I know there's something else here, something delightful, that I can gain from you...

"You give me eyes to see with!" The creature giggled. "And, now, now you can give me the rest." Antithesis pulled Justin close to his face; a dozen silver tendrils crept up from around the demon's back and pointed at the pilot, razor sharp and pulsing with greedy desire.

"Don't worry, li'l boy-o mine..." it cooed. "We will be one, but also more than one... There are ways— oh yes, oh yes, oh yes!— that you can make me strong! Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes!"

Justin wept and struggled like an infant in a caregiver's grasp. The neckline of his spacesuit melted clean away and he slipped from the demon's grasp. The delusional pilot scrambled backwards, panicked, then got to his feet and scrambled for the safety of his Raiden.

He leapt up the ladder and beat the system-activation switch with his fist until his Raiden began powering up. The engines hummed. Justin struggled to crawl into the dark hole of his cockpit, but suddenly two very strong hands gripped him by the shoulder and flipped him over like a pancake.

Antithesis glared at Justin; his eyes now had no pretense of humanity in them. They burned with an otherworldly white light.

"Naughty, naughty, naughty..." he cooed. He dragged Justin down the side of the *Love*. The pilot bawled openly out of both fear and pain. One of the silver tendrils in Antithesis's back pressed against Justin's neck, and another against his forehead.

At about this time the *Platonic Love* finished powering-up.

"No need for tears..." The demon grinned as he trained a finger over Justin's neck and chest. "If I but eat of this flesh and drink of this blood, you will have eternal life... in a manner of speaking, that is..."

The tendrils began pressing into him.

Then another sound rose up above Justin's screams. The noise was light at first, but grew exponentially as it came closer to the pair: it was the sound of shoes: footfalls.

More specifically, it was the sound of a child's tennies scuffling over metal.

Justin gasped as all the air was knocked from his lungs: two small feet planted themselves firmly on his chest as a tiny body landed on him from above. The eight-year-old child, impossibly clad in shorts and a tee, snarled with animal fury as he crouched on Justin's chest and, without a second's hesitation, leapt right at the Antithesis entity's

throat. The boy's flaxen blond hair whipped about in an invisible wind; his royal blue eyes burned with enraged fire.

"Quint?"

The child's body was pitiable compared to the 'adult' creature before him: Antithesis's aged body presented with muscles and an aura of power, while Quint's scrawny bones hardly conjured up a frightening notion in the mind. However, as soon as the child touched the entity's flesh Antithesis howled like a wolf. His eyes disintegrated into radiant beams of pure energy.

For the very first time since Justin encountered him the thing drew itself back in true horror. 'Quint' stood with his tennis shoes balanced atop each of Justin's legs, crouched in readiness, still snarling like an animal.

Antithesis ripped his purple sweatshirt away: along his throat, in the place where the child touched him, a burn radiated along his flesh. It was the same general pattern and consistency as the scar that marred his diseased nipple.

He glared at the boy, then at Justin, and then he screamed like a wounded eagle.

Continue... a small voice echoed inside his head.

Dreamy, Justin tried to shake the cobwebs out of his head. Suddenly Quint's prepubescent, androgynous face whipped in front of him.

"Continue, *now!*"

Justin jumped up, unthinking, and scrambled into the cockpit. He struggled to 'right' his mind, to find the correct instrument panels and controls: in his delirious panic he couldn't even remember how to operate the 22-ton vessel.

He fell forward, limp, and because of the Sensations Link his Raiden did the same.

Antithesis stood up, his face emotionless, and extended his arms to either side: his purple long-sleeve shirt reappeared on his body. With dreadful purpose in each step, he walked toward the prostrate ship.

Jab! Jab, Jab, Jab! The child's voice shouted in Justin's mind.

"Jab?" He slurred the word. Then it dawned on his: *JHAB*.

Justin struggled to move his left arm. He flailed at the manual release for the JHAB-III appendage. Outside, the 'Antithesis' entity reached out with one hand, beckoning, as the silver tendrils on his back darted out to shatter the cockpit canopy.

Justin's hand found the switch.

The piston on the *Platonic Love's* oversized arm exploded, sending the appendage forward several meters. The spike arm pressed against the black rock beneath it and, unable to penetrate the tough surface, sent the Raiden hurtling upward into empty space.

Before he lost consciousness, the last thing Justin saw was the Bydo creature—the demon that called itself 'Antithesis'—standing far below him on the grounds of the asteroid, watching the Raiden hurtle off and out of sight.

No, that wasn't right: the *last* thing he remembered was the feeling of cool, merciful hands gliding across his burning shoulders. Right before he drifted off Justin could swear someone whispering reassuringly in his ear.

No: it isn't 'someone' is it?

"It's Quint..." he moaned with parched lips.

"It's alright: I've got it: I've got it all. You don't need to worry. You will not be damaged, further."

The engines on the *Platonic Love* activated themselves as Justin fell into a deep sleep.

V.

“They picked up the *Love*’s signal in EO II: somehow he skimmed all the way down to Venus before the Raiden’s engines conked out on him.”

“Curiouser and curiouser.” Laura agreed. She and Scott stood in the ‘command and adjuncts’ section of the wave-skim bay, waiting for their transport to World’s End Station.

“It’s quitting time for our whole shift, right? Do we know what happened to Jen?”

Laura looked around, lips pursed.

Scott shook his head. “She’s been really, well, ‘different’ ever since... well, you know. Maybe she doesn’t really wanna hitch a ride with us.”

“Let me go check oh her, alright?”

“Should I hold the wave-skim when it comes?”

“Yeah.” Laura shot him an open palm as she darted through the salt-caked bay, “five minutes. That’s all, okay?”

Laura sprinted through the upper floors of Base-10 and finally caught Jen’s scent: the girl’s ID card was logged into the data library.

Laura tried to enter the room, but the computer protested:

“This user has reserved the premise until 1830 hours. The user has requested no interruptions.”

“Call-up computer: command override. Code is Hayle: 11-9-14-4.”

Laura stumbled into the dark room: in its center was a snarling beast with a tail of spikes and reptilian skin coated in green scales. The computer was in the middle of a lecture about the hologram.

“A Dire Gecko— also known as a Tove— bears both an advanced propulsion system in place of a spinal column as well as a body capable of both physical attack (note the tail) or energy dispersal (the cannons aligned with each nipple). Given the incarnation’s attributes— both its high velocity and methods of attack— the R-Type vessels most suited to engage are—”

“Excel-tech.” Jen was lying on the floor, arms in her head, surrounded by various textbooks.

“—incorrect: while Excel Raidens possess the minimum maneuverability to intercept these incarnations, a Dancer vessel is far more capable. This also prevents the valuable resources of Excel-Class Raidens from being assigned to this incarnation, which is considered a low-risk target.”

“Rrrrgh!” Jen pounded on a book in frustration.

“Jen?” Laura asked, hesitant.

“Huh? Lieutenant?” The girl peered through the darkness of the library.

“Uh: we’re all heading out now. Did you want to catch our wave-skim?”

Jen shook her head and lay back down on the floor. “No, thank you. I’ve got a few more hours of this to get through.” She promptly ignored Lara in favor of the lecture.

“Mmm.” Laura stepped back and eyed the girl, noting her intense concentration and uncharacteristic lack of any interpersonal warmth. “See you Wednesday, then...” she called as she exited the data library.

“Yes...” Jen muttered, distant. Her eyes never left the scenes playing out in front of her on the projector.

VI.

In the ocean...

...underwater...

...all the time—

Reboot.

Sensations-Link now operable: devotion is ambient...

“Too long.” The nurse shook her head.

“What was that?” Samantha looked up from her file of paperwork.

The nurse motioned to Justin, lying prone and motionless in the medical bed, his eyes wide. “His EEG activity has been maxed-out for way too long: it’s been over 50 hours now and his mind is still spinning like a top. It’s enough to worry about, I would say.”

“The doctor said that there’s nothing wrong with him, though. I mean, apart from the burns.” Sam gazed at the bandaging along Justin’s bare shoulders with creeping unease: she could remember what those burn patterns looked like when fresh.

“We’re really all just brains, you know, Captain. Just because we can’t tell what’s wrong with Justin doesn’t mean he’s okay. For everything we’ve learned about how a mind works it’s still mostly a ‘magic box’: even if all the parts are in working order...” she surveyed Justin’s motionless body “...things can still be broken beyond our understanding, and beyond our ability to detect.”

After Samantha finished her paperwork she turned to a book on Raiden combat. Apparently it critiqued two competing schools of thought on Excel fighting techniques.

Justin safely assumed that it was pretty dry stuff.

There was a noise across the room: Samantha turned to see Chenine sliding some anonymous folder back into the medical records slots. The girl glanced at Justin’s body very briefly before retreating back out the infirmary door.

“Mousey little ‘Brass Ring’.” Sam mumbled. “Guess she couldn’t care less about her own squadmate. Nothing but ‘business as usual’ for her...”

“Or she was looking for a good excuse to come down and see me shirtless.”

“Justin!” Sam jumped up from her chair. “Goddamnit, what happened to you, anyway? We’ve been trying to wake you up for two days, now. Why—”

“You need to find the Aryl for me.” He rolled over on his side, facing away from the woman.

“Right, look: I’ll help you dictate your report for him, if you want.”

“No time for that: you need to get to him now and give him a message.”

“Message?”

Justin closed his eyes. There were remnants of pain all along his body, and very little of it was physical. He replayed the ordeal in the Deimos debris field in his head, struggling to remember everything:

"I was a pebble in the pond..."

"I wasn't ready to leave, I wasn't prepared for it!"

"I made for the ocean, but I ended up far from shore... all I could do is compress, withdrawal..."

"How does a diamond grow in the ground? It takes pressure, and it takes time: that's all..."

"What's your message, Justin?" Samantha felt his forehead, checking for fever.

Justin struggled away from her hand.

"It's back." He mumbled.

"What is?"

Justin exhaled slowly. "The Galilean Mass. Or, at least a part of it. Don't ask me how: I don't know. But it attacked me, and did more..." he explained his ordeal with the Antithesis entity in extreme brevity, omitting nearly all the important details. When he was done he looked back at Sam. "You must think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"Maybe." She nodded. "If I didn't see your burns, that is..." she stood up and packed her satchel. "It's enough for me to go the Aryl, at least. Was there anything else?"

"No." Justin grunted, and then he changed his mind: "Yes."

"What?"

"His name— *its* name—" he shook his head. "The *thing* had a name: it called itself 'Antithesis'."

Samantha left Justin to rest in the infirmary: for the past two days Justin's brain had boiled like a roasting walnut. He'd suffered from some kind of feverish coma: it was sleep, but *without* sleep, and now he felt that he might be able to get some rest.

That was still tough going. As Justin lay in the darkness, huddled beneath his bed sheets, his mind played the events over and over without respite: whatever that thing was that survived the Ganymede supernova, it was baked. That 'entity' was insane, and wholly dysfunctional.

Was it really feeding off those incarnations: the orphans of the Mass that died at Jupiter?

It was, and Justin interrupted its meal, and in doing so he inadvertently gave it a grand banquet, a meal fit for a king:

Unfettered access to a human brain.

No: that's not true...

But what other explanation was there?

It was still out there, too. Somewhere, somehow: a raging ball of power and insanity, brought into unprecedented organization by breaking into the grand mansion of a human mind.

The demon... it slunk up the 'floorboards' unopposed, and then it crept into the darkest wings of the house: wings blacker than obsidian or night itself.

"Tch! You reek of hate! It boils through your skin like sweat!"

Wait: that wasn't true!

Justin distanced himself from those black notions: that was the creature's ideology! It wasn't Justin's! That wasn't his sentiment at all!

All the same, as he drifted off to sleep he muttered over and over again:

"What have you done, Justin: what have you *done*?"

And, try as he might all night to work through that question, he found himself without an answer the next morning when the sun peered over the horizon of the Gulf, blood red as a pomegranate, heralding a new day on the Blue Marble, and foreshadowing the rise of a new threat for the Tears' Shower Squadron.

