



Somos

I.

Gisele sighed into her coffee cup. Her breath wafted across the liquid and sent a train of steam upon the frosted windowpane before her. Kaiser Square sprawled below—dirty and melancholy—under a soot-laden sky. This was the innermost ring of the Western Wastes. As 3:00 PM rolled around the region was due for its daily shower of sleet and black snow. It was clockwork: the ugly weather formed on the grey moors behind the Square, rolled in over the Kaiser Banks, then descend to Nash Ultima and finally fizzled out across Trident’s Bay.

Gisele didn’t care about such things, or such places. The only things that mattered to this bony little brunette were the state of her ‘business’ and her own survival.

And, at the moment, the outlook on both of these things was looking up.

She fingered a wad of brightly-colored *LC* chits. “This is too much, Eddie.”

“Call it a ‘retainer’, then. For the next time I’m in Westland.” Eddie Velasquez hammered away at the girl’s computer. The sooty window’s light barely outlined the elder man’s scraggily beard and hard face; he bore a serious cut on his chin. The man leaned close to the monitory, his eyes weary. He drank from a half-filled bottle of whisky as he puffed at a cigarette.

“What’d they do to you, Eddie, huh?” Gisele went to him and trained her fingers along the collar of his shoddy brown overcoat. The scars beneath his clothing ran deep, and they were quite fresh. Gisele had been curious about them all night, but she waited until this morning to question him about it.

“There was no ‘they’: it was just one guy.” Smoke billowed from Eddie’s lips as he spoke.

“Who?”

“A ‘competitor’ of mine. I ran into the bastard down in Tierra del Fuego.”

The girl rested her head on his shoulder. “What were you doing all the way down there?”

“Same old, same old: following a lead.” He shrugged Gisele off and continued hammering away at the console. “I was able to track that damn computer virus back to its source: it was this shoddy little shack in a remote village of southern Patagonia. Ugly little place, too. But when I let myself in I realized that the whole set-up was shielded in three layers of signal-dampener. Matter of fact, it was no less than that ‘keratinocyte’ shit.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that the pissy little shack was actually a high-tech bastion. Someone was putting together some very nasty stuff in there.”

“So you broke the case, then?”

Velasquez snorted. “Hardly. I was one of the last gumshoes to arrive at the party: the place was ransacked, most of the hardware was destroyed, and the only person in there— this pathetic little pimply-faced techie— was beaten within an inch of his life.” Eddie lit another cigarette. “He died before I could get anything out of him, except for one thing.”

“What was that?” Gisele nuzzled his neck.

“He didn’t put the virus in Epdin. Says he *wrote* it, but didn’t place it. The little bastard claimed all he did was send the initiator signal that triggered it.”

“You believe him?”

Eddie shrugged. “Dyin’ men don’t tell tall tales.”

Gisele caressed the gash on Velasquez’s chin. “But, these cuts—”

“I ran into my ‘competitor’ down in the village after I found the dead techie. He wasn’t happy to see me.” His cold eyes glistened like shards of ice.

Gisele pouted. “What’d you do to him?”

“Nothin’ he wouldn’t have done to me.” Eddie puffed at the cigarette, nonchalant. He eyed the young prostitute as she backed away from him. “That bothers you, does it? He killed my only lead, Jizzie, and he was about to kill me.”

The girl didn’t respond to this; she held her lip in her teeth and stared at Velasquez’s feet.

“He knew the brakes, and I knew the brakes: that’s just the kind of people we are. I’m not gonna apologize for it, and you don’t have the right to ask me to, anyway. Besides, this is all just gutter rats offing gutter rats: you know exactly what type of people we are.”

“Sometimes I just don’t expect to see that kind of macho cowboy bullshit coming from a guy who’s old enough to be my dad—” the girl clucked her tongue and shook her head. “I’m sorry about that, Eddie: never mind.”

Velasquez guffawed. “Your dad? What the hell kind of relationship did *you* have going on at home?”

“Never mind that.” She scowled. “Look, do you actually *know* that he killed your techie?”

“Had to’ve.” Eddie shrugged. “That’s the only explanation.” He leaned back in the chair. “Well: there was this one guy nosing around near the shack when I got there. I only saw him through the fog, but Lord! Ten feet tall, if he was an inch, and arms like tree trunks.” He stabbed his cigarette out in one palm. “But that old village is a bona-fide Regressor area: the people there are dirt poor and work with their hands, so they breed pretty large, overall. He was probably a local.” Eddie rose and stretched, letting out a massive yawn. “Anyway, the trail’s dead, for now, at least.”

A tone sounded from the computer.

“Mail.” Eddie slunk to one side, deferring to Gisele. He took the opportunity to steal some coffee from the girl’s moldy carafe in the adjoining kitchen.

“There’s one universal rule that people who don’t make their own coffee must follow: never criticize your host’s pot...”

“What was that, Eddie?”

“Nothing.”

Gisele perched her lips while she scanned the monitor. “Eddie: this mail isn’t for me.”

“Spam, or something? That’d be pretty ballsy of someone, wouldn’t it? I mean, given the AM’s harsh penalties for ‘frivolous communications’—”

“It’s for you.” She muttered.

Velasquez narrowed his eyes and stumbled over to the monitor. “Well, I’ll be. You haven’t been listing me as a ‘reference’ to other johns, have you?”

She shot him an icy stare.

“No, of course not: sorry.” He muttered.

The mail was from an anonymous sender and was, indeed, addressed to Velasquez, though it was sent to the girl’s mail account. There was no message inside, only an attachment.

“Corporal Joseph A. Dastarke.” He scanned the page: it was an incomplete personnel record, the kind of thing usually kept in some dingy AM basement at Spindlespire Ridge.

“Who’s he?” Gisele read over Eddie’s shoulder.

“No idea.” Velasquez’s eyes were drawn to one highlighted section. “This says that he’s a Delta-grade augment with the Experimental Technologies Squadron: a ‘cherry-popper’.”

The girl wrinkled her nose. “Cherry-popper?”

“Never mind that. But according to this he was discharged from the Allied Military a short time after the Epdin meltdown.”

“Does this mean someone wants you to talk to him?”

Eddie deleted the message and shrugged. “Seems so. In any event, it looks like I’ve finally got something that I haven’t had in a long time.”

“A lead?”

“Better: a *source*.” He shook his overcoat out and picked up his large firearm sitting beside the chair. “Although this looks more like a wild goose chase than anything productive.”

When Gisele gave him a questioning look, Eddie explained. “Mister ‘Dastarke’s’ last known address raises an eyebrow, to say the least.”

“Why? Where does he live, now?”

“Apparently he’s been incarcerated at the Asphodaline Island Psychiatric Institute ever since his discharge a few months ago. Humph! This should be an interesting chat.”

“So, you wanna talk to him?”

“Someone wants me to, apparently, and that’s good enough for me.” Eddie stepped over to the girl, still perched in the rickety wooden chair, and looked in her eyes. After a moment he produced a ratty wallet and demanded: “How much for the day, Gizzie?”

“Eddie: you don’t need—”

“How much?”

The girl paused. She looked outside: the afternoon sludge was already coming down in the Square below. The temperature was about to drop 10 degrees, then the ground would muck-up as precipitation accumulated in the streets.

It’s a lousy day for street-trolling, anyway...

“Five.” She spoke in a shamed whisper, her head low.

Velasquez dutifully flipped out 500 £€’s and pressed them into her hands, which lay cupped over her breasts in defensive posture.

“And that’s the *whole* day I’m buying? Scout’s honor?”

“Yes.” Gisele sulked like a chastised child.

“Get some sleep, Gizzie: you look like you could use it. And have something to eat while you’re at it.”

“When’ll you be back around here?” She asked.

Eddie shrugged as he stepped through the door. “I’ll come back before the sun starts shining over the Kaiser Banks.”

Gisele pouted and crossed her arms.

In other words: sometime before the end of time...

II.

Bitterly cold waves pounded the struts of Orion Outpost. The smell of rotting fish and salt permeated the open-air landing pad. The sky was dark blue and moody; the sun wouldn’t come up on the horizon for another half-hour.

The gnomish man’s gimp leg thumped across the metal deck as he approached the three pilots. Samantha, Justin and Chenine sat on a pile of crates, partially buffered from the stiff pre-dawn breeze.

“Who’re you all, then?” The wrinkly man demanded.

Sam waited a moment for either Justin or Chenine to answer. When neither did she replied: “We’re Raiden pilots from Base-10.”

“Eh.” The man scratched his mottled forehead and nodded. “Your RL phoned ahead. Lemme get that cargo for ya’.” He hobbled off.

“Hibakusha.” Samantha muttered after the stunted man was out of earshot. “Can’t help but feel sorry for them, but I wish the brass would press more of them into retirement. They’re depressing to look at.”

“I wouldn’t go around saying that on base,” Justin advised.

“Why not?”

“You haven’t met Pyotr Frieze yet, have you? Well: he’s one of them, and if you get on his bad side you might just find your Raiden up on blocks for a month or so.”

“I thought Roont was the R-H maintenance guy.”

“Only for the R-Types’ ‘special’ parts: Pyotr takes care of all the rest.”

Samantha put a juice-box to her lips and sucked on the straw. “And he’s good, is he?”

“He is the best.” Chenine muttered. The girl sat perched on a crate several meters from Justin and Samantha, dutifully scratching out the day’s sudoku puzzle.

“He’s honest, at least.” Justin added as he sent another small stone skipping out over the water below them.

Sam blinked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means he doesn’t tell any lies, unlike some people on base.”

“Well: at least he doesn’t tell tall tales, right?” The woman smirked.

Justin sighed and absently rattled the stones in his hand. He wasn’t really that pissed off by the fact that no one— from his Aryl down to his squadmates— believed the story of his encounter at Mars, but he was absolutely enraged that neither Wraith nor Roont were willing to provide him with any more information about the R-H’s. He’d gone to both men, obviously digging for clues, and both times he’d been rebuffed and, in the case of Sven Wraith, he was even threatened.

Something about his encounter with that ‘Antithesis’ thing really rubbed him the wrong way, though, and Justin found that— for whatever reason— his balls were dropping on this issue: he wouldn’t take all that secrecy crap anymore, or the mysteries. Anyway, he knew who to go to for more information— *whom* to go to— and he fully intended to do so at the next available opportunity.

“I understand,” Sam continued, “that the— uh— ‘link’ can screw with people’s minds, isn’t that right? All I’m saying is, especially since you’re a Perfect Fifth, guys like you are—”

“—guys like me are much better at building strong relationships with our links, Captain, and my link doesn’t tell me any lies, alright?”

Chenine looked up from her sudoku puzzle at this statement. She stared at Justin with her cold, sapphire eyes.

“You heard me, Starfighter.” He declared. “I don’t think the link has *ever* lied to me. Not even once.”

The Ketoni girl perched her lips, then sighed. She returned her attention to the puzzle.

Chenine prides herself on not being affected by her link one little bit; she think she has more control over it than I do. If she won’t try to refute my statement then it means she’s had a weird experience, too.

“But you won’t cop to it, will you: you arrogant little bitch?” Waves crashing on the strut eclipsed Justin’s whispers.

The gnomish quartermaster returned just seconds later. “Hey: your cargo’s all loaded up in the hold of that cutesy little swan-ship over there.”

“It’s a crane.” Chenine corrected.

“Whatever. You’re cleared for departure whenever.”

Sam jumped up off her crate. “Right, guys: let’s get the hell out of here.”

III.

Justin began his approach report immediately after the three Raidens thundered down into the Greater Gulf area.

“Well, I’m spacesick again, and dead tired, but it looks like the operation to Orion Station is coming to an end...” he provided a play-by-play report on their mission, then killed the audio feed.

Samantha Rayne contacted him a few seconds later.

“I’ve been wondering about the way you and Chovert do those reports...”

“Are we doing something wrong?” Justin looked to his starboard: the sleek, silver *Platinum Heart* glided through the air like an elegant shard of glass. The rays of the morning sun nearly blinded Justin as he stared at the dazzling Raiden.

“Nothing wrong, but I’m just curious about the way you guys start them. I mean, earlier today during the roll-out Chovert said something about a ‘vulture in the air’, or something like that, and then there’s that phrase you said just now...”

Justin smiled and stretched his limbs. He gave his limbs a rest and switched over to link-based control of his ship. “Oh, that. I guess that’s a little hard to explain. When I joined the squad— this was after Chenine was already here— I noticed that she always started her roll-out reports with that strange phrase. I’ve never asked her about it: I think it’s just some misplaced sense of poetry on her part.”

“And so you responded with that whiney little phrase of your own?”

“Well, I’m not much for poetry. Anyway, I thought it was only fair that I got my own little sound-bite to rattle off.” His grin widened. “And it’s the only way I can really ‘complain’ to the brass. And if there’s one thing I’ve always enjoyed, it’s complaining.”

“Very weird,” she appraised.

“You think so?”

“*Chovert’s* ‘sound-bite’ is, anyway. Any idea what it means?”

“No.” He shook his head. Then Justin remembered something from a while back: when he was in the girl’s apartment— ever so briefly— he recalled the girl’s lack of personal effects save for a few framed pictures.

“Well: she’s got this picture in her apartment. It’s really blurry, but it shows something flying against a blue sky. It’s probably a big bird, but whether it’s a vulture, or even an eagle, I don’t really know. It looks like the kind of sloppy picture that a little kid might take.” He pursed his lips. “Well, Captain: any ideas for yourself?”

“What do you mean?”

“What’s your nifty little catchphrase gonna be?”

The woman scoffed into Justin’s ears. “I’m not really the type of person that gets off on that sort of thing, Storm.”

Justin smirked. “Well, guess what, ma’am: we are.”

IV.

The pasty-faced woman flipped through her docket. Eddie watched her, impatient, from the other side of the cracked and stained security glass.

“He’s a spitter, you know.”

“Say what, now?” Eddie picked up his head.

“Dastarke: he spits. Fair warning, that’s all...” the mercilessly bright mercury bulbs on the ward exaggerated every wrinkle and blemish in the charge nurse’s face.

Eddie had only been here a few minutes, but he already hated this place. Somehow it seemed like the cold, depressing hallways of the Asphodaline Island Psychiatric Facility were alive in a very unsettling way: Eddie felt like the building itself was diving into his mind.

This is, after all, a place where every blemish and fault in that magical little box we call a brain gets highlighted, exaggerated, catalogued...

“Renovating, are we?” Eddie tried to make small-talk as he motioned to the cracked concrete walls of the lobby. Scaffolds stretched all the way up to the vaulted ceiling on all sides.

“Rebuilding.” She answered. “We share this island with Bydo Labs, you know, and their recent ‘escapee’ managed to bang-up our facility pretty good before it was brought down in Elysia.” She scoffed. “The tightwads over at the HRP won’t even shell out enough dough for us to get fully patched up.”

“Well: you can’t spell ‘fatally-massive budgetary disaster’ without ‘*Die Fledermaus*’, can you?” Eddie produced a small piece of gum. It was sheathed in a colorful golden wrapper and laden with sweet nicotine. “Well: thanks for the tip about the spitting.” He wadded the drug-laced gum in his mouth and pocketed the wrapper.

“Ahhh, yes: Corporal Dastarke. Room 118-C. Rather tragic case, it is.” The physician, sporting a stereotypical white lab coat, nodded in that overly-grave manner that every wannabe soap-opera doctor has down so well.

“And there’s no apparent reason for his, uh—”

“—condition? Oh, no, no. We’ve no idea how or why, but there it is.”

“And what is ‘it’, exactly?” Eddie pressed.

The doctor stopped at the entrance to Ward-C (their fancy name for the ‘Chronic Condition’ ward).

“*It* is his brain.” He answered.

“I gathered as much. And the problem, specifically, is...” Eddie gestured with his hands, impatient.

The door to Ward-C opened with a rattle. The doctor motioned down the somber gray corridor towards Dastarke’s cell and sighed.

“The ‘problem’ is a complex pattern of neurolysis in his neonatal cortex. In layman’s terms, Mister Velasquez, his higher brain functions have been scrambled like an egg.”

“Okay: so just how lucid can I expect him to be, if at all?”

“Let me try to explain this in a way you can more easily understand: Joseph Dastarke has, in effect, been the recipient of a malicious, extremely precise and non-invasive frontal lobotomy.”

Eddie clucked his tongue. “Right: I think I gotcha, doc.”

The man in room 118-C was unrecognizable from the gruff, poised soldier that Eddie assumed he was at his prime. The withered husk that was once ‘Joseph Dastarke’ lay huddled in one corner of the tiny cell, scrunched up on the corner of his bed and pressed into a compact ball, as tightly as possible, trembling as if the floor were made of lava. The shivering man was gaunt: his bony ribcage peeked out of a thin green medical gown. His arms— little more than twigs on a withered trunk— slunk up and down his legs as if he were brushing invisible insects off his body.

The most troubling aspect of the man was, of course, his face. The former-corporal's eyes bulged like a fly's: he maintained an uneasy and downright creepy Cheshire cat grin with his parched and cracked lips. His hygiene was sorely lacking: Eddie could smell the man from outside the room.

"Is it okay if I..." He motioned into the cell.

The doctor nodded. "For five minutes, maximum. Dastarke presents as a non-violent case." He leaned over and spoke to the patient like a parent would address a child. "Isn't that right? Aren't you, Joey?"

"Soy. Soy: soy, soy, soy, soy!" He mumbled, softly at first, then his hoarse voice rose into a shriek to match any mad raven that Eddie had ever heard.

The doctor slid the door open and gestured to the man.

"Remember the rules, Mister Velasquez, and everything will be fine."

"Thanks." Eddie mumbled with an insincere tone as he crept into the room. The Corporal gasped and pulled back at first, but as Eddie eased himself onto the opposite side of the bed the man suddenly lunged in his direction.

Velasquez hid his discomfort as the corporal fingered his brown overcoat. He appeared mystified by the gumshoe's ratty fedora, so Eddie handed it over to him. Dastarke grinned at him, his chipped teeth and slobbery gums all too reminiscent of the gleeful grin of a little kid.

The appearance is uncanny, and more than a little unsettling...

Eddie noticed the doctor watching him like a hawk, so he decided to take a chance.

"Remember me, Joey? You remember your Cousin Eddie, don't you?"

The man cocked his head back and forth, much like a perplexed parakeet.

Eddie was already thinking up excuses for the cagy doctor (who was already two heartbeats away from tossing the disreputable-looking Velasquez out on his ass) when Dastarke's grim face suddenly brightened.

"You... are me are me am you!" He clapped his hands fervently.

"Uh... huh?"

Dastarke jumped up and down on the bed. "Soy que eres que es! Somos que son: somos que son!" He fell to his knees, at eye-level with Velasquez.

"*Somos que son!*" He whispered again.

"That's great, Joey, really it is." Eddie patted the man's back, mindful of any other crazy spasms the man might go through. He looked over at the doctor on the other side of the bars. "Well: I guess the poor guy can just barely remember me, huh?"

"Perhaps..." The old doctor scratched his chin. Eddie could tell he wasn't convinced.

Who cares: I just need a moment more, anyway.

Dastarke showed Eddie his collection of 'art projects': pathetic dough-molds of rudimentary figures like trees and animals. All the goopy figurines were terribly off in both form and proportion; even his 'snakes' (little more than hand-rolled pieces of dough with dots for eyes and lines for mouths) were lumpy and uneven. A kindergarteners' arts and crafts class would be Michelangelo's studio compared to the corporal's 'projects'.

"Oh, that's great Joey: really good."

The doctor mentioned something about Dastarke losing most of his fine motor-coordination after his mysterious illness struck him. Eddie decided that he wasn't lying.

Before testing the waters with the lunatic, however, Eddie did notice one piece of art that stood out from the rest. It was different, both for its obvious improvement in quality and the fact that it was, unlike every other piece of ‘art’, glazed, kiln-fired and painted (albeit sloppily).

It was a simple figurine depicting a tiny body girded in cut-off shorts and a tee. It was a boy. It looked like Dastarke spent most of his time painting the child’s hair and eyes: the former a radiant silver hue and the latter a deep, ocean-like blue. The eyes were too big for the body, but nonetheless there was something very appealing about the figurine; Eddie couldn’t really say what it was.

“A good-looking boy.” He summed up his thoughts as he turned the artwork over in his hands.

Dastarke was neatly rearranging some of his other ‘artworks’ in the corner and snickering happily at all the attention he was getting. When he turned and saw Eddie fingering the sculpture, however, his demeanor instantly changed.

“Nooooooo!” He bawled. Dastarke snatched-up the figurine and quickly dropped it in the corner with his other pieces, buried in the back of the pile. “Mustn’t, mustn’t, mustn’t, *mustn’t!*” The wild-eyed man cleared his throat and started coughing up phlegm, aiming all his efforts squarely at the figurine.

“Okay, okay!” Eddie pleaded with the man to calm down: his cries had elicited the doctor’s scrutiny. “Listen: listen, Joey.” He put his arm on the man’s bony shoulder as he whispered. “Listen: I’ve got to ask you about something very important.” He pulled the man closer to his ratty bed, away from the prying ears of the doctor outside. “Joey: do you know anything about a virus? A *vi-rus*.”

Dastarke babbled to himself for a moment, and then his face brightened.

“Yes!” He exclaimed.

Eddie motioned for him to lower his voice. “And? What about it, Joey?”

“Don’t worry: we all wash our hands here: no viruses in sight, no sir! Not on *this* ward!”

Eddie groaned and fell back on the bed.

Dastarke, much taken with the odd behavior, mimicked Eddie’s action.

“Two minutes.” The doctor cautioned.

“What happened to you, anyway, Joey?”

“What happened?”

“Before you were taken *here*.” He patted the bed to illustrate his point.

“What happened?” The man repeated. “Self-not-self happened. But it was self, too, you see? In a way, anyway. Somos que son, after all: somos que son!”

“What were you doing, Joey? What were you doing when you... before you came here?”

Dastarke rested his head on the bed, as if in thought. Suddenly his eyes glassed over. He stared at the gumshoe with great focus. Eddie was horrified by the man’s eyes: there was something in those glassy beads that hadn’t been there before.

Is it sanity? Or maybe even more insanity?

He couldn’t tell which.

“Blue: Eddie, Eddie, Eddie! Blue!” Dastarke gibbered, then rose to his feet. “Blue happened. Blue: *Blue!*”

“Blue?”

“Blue-eyed Blue! Not my boy! Not mine: he’s a mine! Blue who does not want mine, so take mind! Take mine!”

The doctor stepped into the room.

“Ah: here we are, again. Joey’s always going on about his little ‘Blue’.” He motioned to the captivating child-figurine at the top of the pile. “It’s some kind of neurotic obsession of his: an imaginary little boy, or maybe the memory of some real child he knew at one point.” He lead Dastarke to the bed and looked at Eddie. “Oh, I don’t mean to say that his obsession indicates a pedophilic interest, you understand: probably just a very unhealthy ‘fixation’.”

“I see.” Eddie scrunched his face in a mixture of puzzlement and irritation. He cursed his failure here, and the waste of time and cash he spent to get out to this ugly concrete hellhole of an asylum.

There’s no worthwhile information to get out of this pathetic husk of a soldier.

Eddie stood to leave. “I’d better let ‘Joey’ here get some rest, doc.” He tried his best to sound civil, but didn’t succeed.

Suddenly, with no provocation, Dastarke leapt up and grabbed something off his bedside shelf. He thrust it into Eddie’s hands.

“See Blue, too? Will you see Blue, too?”

Velasquez stepped back, baffled, as the doctor pulled his patient into the corner. He examined the object that Joey had given him: it was a card, a plastic electronic pass-card. The gold-colored thing sparkled in the drab light of the cell.

“Ah, yes: that’s one of Joey’s prized possessions. We let him keep it because he insists upon it, and there’s really nothing dangerous he can do with it. But he sometimes tries to give it away to people that he ‘likes’.” The doctor extended a hand. “Rules are rules, Mister Velasquez. We can’t have our patients giving away such ‘gifts’.”

Velasquez turned the card over in his hand. He looked at Dastarke once again, and then made a decision.

“Sure thing, doc.” He extended his hand, then suddenly sneezed into the sleeve of his overcoat. He wiped his nose with a handkerchief from his pocket.

“Ah! Excuse me: the dust in here is something else!” He stepped past the doctor and pressed the golden object into Dastarke’s quivering hands.

“See Blue, too!” The insane man whispered, grinning like a feeble devil, as he cupped his hands closed. “See Blue, too!”

“And now, Mister Velasquez, your time is up, I’m afraid.” The doctor hustled Eddie out of the ward.

Back at the nurses’ station Eddie flopped his old fedora back over his head.

“Listen, Doc: you said that Corporal Dast—I mean, ‘Joey’, was given an ‘electrical lobotomy’, or something like that, right?”

“Essentially correct.”

“What kind of thing could cause that?”

“If we knew that, Mister Veasquez, we’d have a better idea of how to treat him. Not that there’s much left in his frontal lobes to ‘treat’ anyway, I’m afraid.”

Five minutes later he was tromping down the shoreline road leading away from the institute. Eddie stopped near the gravelly slope that lead to the water. His hand rooted around in his pocket: he didn’t know what to make of this lunatic, this madman that

someone had sent him to see, but evidently this certain someone believes that there's *something* about him that's important.

Eddie clutched the object in his pocket, more confident on his next course of action.

"Pisser." He mumbled. "It's worth a look, at least..."

V.

The red-breasted cardinals were out in Southland. The island chain was deep into the height of its summer season, and all the trees around Bydo Labs bloomed with ridiculously large, scented cherry blossoms.

A deckhand greeted the pilots as they clambered out of their ships.

"Right: who are you guys?"

"We're a Raiden unit from Base-10." Sam answered.

"Ah: then you're here for the Orb." He nodded. "We can get one synched-up for you in an hour; just make sure the control rods on your receiving ship are extended and ready for inspection." He looked past the trio and eyed the nose of the *Platinum Heart*, the only Raiden that didn't have a cold, black ball hovering on its nose. He nodded, then went off to alert his superiors.

With all that settled Chenine ascended the *Chaste Gazer's* ladder and set herself in the cockpit, intent on sleeping-out the wait. Justin stayed around for a few minutes, but then started wandering off in the direction of the civilian sector.

"Where the hell're you going?" Sam demanded.

"I thought I'd head over to the local pub. I've been there before, and the bartender—"

"You're not getting sauced on company time, pilot." Sam snarled. "And we shouldn't even be messing with the civvys around here, anyway."

This dressing-down had a dramatic effect on the pilot. Justin flushed and agreed to wait out his time in Southland where he was.

Seniority means nothing in this group. Sam smiled to herself. *One of these pilots is a puppy-dog, and the other is a sloth.* She could complain about this unorthodox setup all she wanted, but at least she had the ability to exercise a little control over the situation.

And that's always good...

She caught Storm taking a few swigs from a silver flask at one point, but she didn't press her luck.

Might as well let the baby have his bottle, for now at least.

The next day Samantha ran into Chenine in their barracks. The Ketoni tart was examining her little vase. She thumped on the small glass vessel: it reverberated, sending ripples through the water and making the giant rose in the center quiver.

"It is a nice thing." She commented, mostly to herself.

"I guess." Samantha answered from across the barracks. She was busy tugging and pulling at her flight boots, jamming her suit-clad feet into the foot holes. "I really wouldn't know."

"I suppose that former commandos have little use for roses." The girl mused. She stuffed the vase in the back of her locker. "But then again, neither do I." Chenine rose off

the bench, but all of a sudden she drew in a sharp breath and clutched her lower stomach, doubling over in pain.

“You alright over there?”

Chenine only replied with an indignant grunt. She removed her hands after a moment and got to her feet once again.

“So where’re you off to, Chovert?”

“Global standby. And I have a package to pick-up from New Europe.”

“How exciting.” Sam grunted as she shoved one foot into her boot.

Chenine closed her locker. “You don’t like it here, do you Captain?”

“When did I ever say that?”

“You don’t have to. Anyway: it’s just an observation.”

“It’s the wrong one. Heck, how well do you think you can actually read people, li’l Miss Brass Ring?”

The Ketoni girl paused mid-step and looked at Samantha. The Captain clucked her tongue, as if she’d just said something that she didn’t mean to.

“Brass-what, Captain?”

Sam bit her tongue. “Forget it.” She moved over to one of the barrack’s sinks and did her best to put her hair up (Sam was still adjusting to her longer hair, and she wielded it with little skill). After setting-up a clumsy bun she stood before the sink’s mirror and did her best to stretch the tight black *Liefde* flight-suit into a more comfortable position as it cradled her body.

When she was done Samantha stopped a moment and stared at her reflection. She noted every asset of her body, brought out and into focus by the tight suit: the vulnerable slope of her exposed throat, the naked, tanned bulges of her collarbones peeking out above the suit’s neckline, the curves of her breasts jutting out over the smooth black pillar that was her abdomen. Her hips sat in perfect symmetry atop her sleek, powerful legs, every muscle of which could be seen as they worked, flexing and extending through the flimsy midnight garment.

This isn’t a suit at all: it’s really more like a second-skin...

Samantha trained a finger across one of her collarbones. “It’s strange.”

“What?”

“When I joined the commandos— when I joined the military— I learned to not think of my squadmates as males, or as females. We were soldiers first, and we understood that we had to sacrifice all the ‘trappings’ of our gender in order to become killing machines: that’s what we were trained to be good at, and it’s our first duty, anyway.”

“To be more like the Bydo, you mean?”

Sam turned to face the girl. “No: that’s *not* what I meant, Chovert. Are you criticizing SPAR for their methods?”

“No, I’m just observing that—”

“Good: because hearing someone like you tell me that a marine commando is somehow ‘less’ than human just because we train hard and fight hard is the worst case of a pot calling a kettle black that I’ve ever seen. And if you don’t believe me then check out those spikes in your back sometime.”

“I’m just observing that the commandos emulate the Bydo’s *mental* mindset, their violent nature: Typers emulate the Bydo’s *physical* state, the condition of their bodies, at

least to a certain degree.” Chenine shrugged. Her voice lacked the righteous indignation of the Captain’s.

“You’re talking about Bydo-tech, right? And don’t call us ‘Typers’, for God’s sake. You know that you’re insulting yourself when you say that, right Chovert?”

“I also know that you don’t like me very much, either: do you, Captain?” For all the emotion in her voice Chenine could have been chatting about the weather.

“Oh, no: you’re terrific, really.” Sam scoffed and turned to the mirror again. “My point is that I’ve spent a really long time forgetting about my gender, putting it on the back burner, even when I was transferred to the VR flight training. The AM’s supposed to be a— how should I put it... an ‘un-sexy’ organization, if you know what I mean.”

“Un-sexy...” Chenine mulled the word. “Androgynous, you mean?”

“No, no, no: nothing like that. I mean gender-neutral. That’s it.”

“Of course...”

“Anyway, it’s supposed to be ‘gender-neutral’: it’s impossible to tell if a soldier in a full-on *Goedkeuring*-class flight suit is male or female, for instance.” She tugged at the uncomfortable suit again. “I find it strange that I’m suddenly in a place like this, wearing a suit like this: something that *heightens* the attributes of my sex instead of concealing them. When I wear a military uniform it makes me think of myself as a ‘soldier’: it reinforces the idea that that’s the type of person I am. But this...” she absently trained a finger over the glass mirror above the sink before shutting the cabinet. “This makes me think of myself as ‘female’ above anything else. You know what I mean, Chovert?”

Chenine was already moving for the barracks door.

“I wouldn’t know, Captain Rayne: I’m not the type of person that needs to be reminded of my own gender.”

Samantha crossed her arms as she watched the girl leave their barracks.

“But you take every possible opportunity to remind everyone around you, don’t you?” She whispered.

VI.

The room was filthy: a testament to sloth and the forces of entropy. Eddie felt a pool of water collecting around his shoes.

“Damn it, Schneider: this door doesn’t even close, does it?” He kicked the basement’s rusty door open, exposing a gritty subterranean alley and concrete stairs leading out to the morose surface streets of Kaiser Proper.

“Three o’clock.” A nerdy little man seated between two dozen mysterious-looking machines poked his head up. “Rains always come at three.”

“A guy could catch a cold in a crap-hole like this.”

The greasy-faced man’s head ticked from one side to the other, unnaturally. “The water doesn’t bother the equipment.” He answered.

“Schneider, did I tell you about that techie I met on my last trip?” Eddie growled.

“No.” The man’s head ticked again as he worked his console. “What about him?”

“Nothing: I’m just having very fond thoughts about that guy at the moment.”

Eddie lit up a cigarette, but Schneider’s beady eyes set upon him instantly.

“That *does* hurt the equipment.” He declared.

“Fine.” Eddie stamped out the cigarette and came up behind the scrawny man. The alley outside darkened under the afternoon rain; the only light to be seen came from the techie’s dim green monitors. The room was so dark that Eddie had a hard time getting over all the cords and wires strewn about the place.

Corporal Dastarke’s golden pass-card jutted out of a data scanner beside Schneider’s console.

“Hmmm. Well, I concur: this is a data card.” The techie declared.

“I could’ve told you that.”

Schneider continued working. “Aaaah: this encryption protocol is nothing like the Basals use, or even the drug cartels in Southland.” His grey lips rose to a grin. “This is Allied Military. Where’d you get it, Velasquez?”

“I traded it for a gum wrapper.” Eddie leaned forward. “What’s on it? Can you, uh—”

“—break it? Oh, no problem. Cracking an AM code is like beating an elderly monk: their security’s pathetic.” His beady eyes met Eddie’s. “Of course, the risks are huge, considering what the AM does to people who go around sodomizing their security systems...”

“In the rare even that this tip pans out, Schneider, I’ll give you enough cash to buy a thousand new doors.”

“Promises, promises.”

After thirty minutes of work, Schneider was able to decrypt the contents of the card.

“An itinerary?”

“Yup, Eddie: it’s a log-in card. It’s how the AM backs-up their retinal scans. The only thing this card shows is a log record: all the places your corporal has been recently.”

Velasquez threw up his hands. “Damnit.” He walked around the basement in frustration. “There’s nothing else on the card? Nothing at all?”

“Nopers.” Schneider shrugged.

Eddie cursed again.

“Maybe you could melt down the gold chip on this baby and sell it.” The techie tried to be helpful. But then Schneider blinked and leaned closer to his screen; his ungainly fish-eyes scanned the read-out. “Well: that’s weird.”

“What?”

“Our friend the corporal’s last entry on this card is a check-in.”

“So?”

“...with no corresponding check-out.”

Velasquez wandered over to the screen and read the date. “Huh: that was just a few days before he was picked-up by Metro Police wandering around the streets of Outer Ultima. So he signed-in at an AM facility and then never signed out?”

“This guy’s card has marks from all over the world: he did a lot of traveling.”

“He was a ‘cherry-popper’: they get around. Where did he go on that date?”

Schneider punched up the date. “He was at AM Marine Base-10, out in the Gulf.”

“Base-10?” Velasquez scratched his chin.

“Does that mean anything to you?”

“Haven’t a clue. Is there a way for you to—”

“—get their number? Way ahead of you.” Schneider motioned to his screen, complete with the number for the base’s duty officer.

“How in the hell—” Eddie flashed the techie a shit-eating grin. “Sometimes you do impress, Schneider.”

“Dial on the console, not your phone.”

“Could they trace us?”

Schneider smiled. “You could pray to God through this thing, and even He wouldn’t know who you are.”

Velasquez was still grinning as he connected to the base.

“Base-10 Command: duty officer Hayle speaking.”

“I need to speak with your Commander, ma’am.”

There was a pause.

“Um, sir: what’s your designation? I’m not reading any valid security clearance...”

Eddie glared at Schneider and waved his hands. The techie nodded and went to work on the console.

“Oh, wait: I’m getting your signal now. You’re... ‘Sumac-level’?”

Eddie slapped Schneider on the shoulder. After a few more adjustments, the woman on the other end corrected herself.

“Oh, wait: I’ve got your authorization. It’s ‘Digitalis’, right?”

“Correct.” Eddie answered.

“Okay, I’ll patch you in. Hold for Commander Faught.”

Schneider scratched his bald head. “What’re you gonna talk to *him* about?”

“I’m not sure, yet, but the conversation’s gonna center on a man named Joseph Dastarke.”

V.

Justin eased himself down the scaffolding: he was unfamiliar with this part of the base. He would’ve have a hard enough time navigating around the floor, let alone high up on the catwalks like he was now.

The Korang fighter bays were far larger than those in the R-Ring. It made sense: these bays had to provide storage and maintenance space for over 20 ships apiece. The R-bays, of course, only housed one ship each.

Justin kicked his legs over the railing of one catwalk and grabbed another. He lost his footing, however, and slipped. Panic sized him, and he quickly snatched a different part of the railing, gripped the support strut with one leg and flipped onto the second platform, landing hard on his side.

“8 out of 10.” Samantha Rayne called over to him. “And that’s ‘cause you didn’t stick the landing.”

“You could have helped me, you know.” Justin flushed, embarrassed that someone was around to witness his inanity.

“Eh, you’re a Raiden pilot.” She leaned over the railing and looked down at the bay floor. “You passed your Moro-Plantar test, and if you genuinely deserved your commission then there’s no way you could’ve fallen, really.”

Justin adopted a sour look. “Ah, I see. How... heartless of you.” He sidled up to the railing beside the Captain.

“What’re you doing up here, Captain?”

“The Korangers are coming back in from Isla Lian.”

“So?”

“So, it’s just good form to be up here when they arrive. It’s a courtesy.”

It is? Justin puckered his lips.

“We may all be different types of soldiers, but we’re all in on the same cause: the least we should do is show a little respectful to each other.” Sam looked over her shoulder. “Where’s the Brass Ring?”

“Chenine’s out in Austria. She’s doing standby, or something like that.”

“Tell me: why do you both keep calling me ‘Captain’?”

“Would you prefer ‘sir’?”

Samantha arched an eyebrow. “Wait a minute: you and Chovert *are* both captains, aren’t you?”

“Well, no. I thought you knew. We’re FLT’s.”

“What? Lieutenants!” Sam took a step back and hissed. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Is that a problem for you?”

“Storm: you’re both *exclusive* Raiden pilots, and you’re not even captains?” She cursed under her breath. “This place just gets screwier and screwier...”

“Define ‘screwy’.” Justin’s tone turned defensive.

“‘Screwy’ as in out of sorts.” She scoffed. “I’m sorry, but it’s very peculiar: a unit with only three members, no SL, and *everyone* an exclusive pilot. Doesn’t that bother you, a little?”

“No: I like being an exclusive pilot. But there are other things around here that do bother me.” He muttered.

Samantha snorted through her nose and shook her head.

“Listen: I don’t know what to tell you about the operations here at Base-10, Captain—”

“You call me ‘Sam’ or I’ll bust your kneecaps, you got it? I don’t care what rank you are: that order stands.”

Justin swallowed self-consciously, then continued: “Sam: I can’t defend how things work here, but the fact is that things *do* work, at least superficially. It’s just kinda different. Maybe you should think about adapting—”

“—because change, as they say, is supposed to be good, right?” She crossed her arms with a scowl.

Justin, Justin, Justin... are you actually lecturing someone else on the need to ‘adapt’ to circumstances? That made about as much sense as a hobo giving a lecture on fiscal responsibility.

“I don’t know.” Justin shook his head. “But if we all just keep going on like we are then I don’t think we’ll do too good in the long run.”

“You’re saying that we can’t function as a unit?”

Justin shrugged. “Maybe. But we’ll never work as a *squadron*, will we?”

Sam hunched over the railing, resting her chin on her arms. “Point taken.” She shot him a defensive glance. “*Maybe*, that is.” She looked back down at the pilots

walking across the bay floor. “So, why are you up here? Were you looking for me just to tell me all that?”

“No: Aryl’s got a job for us. We’re going to NESAs.” He struck out across the catwalk. “Chenine’s going to meet-up with us en route.” Justin looked over his shoulder and smiled. “You know: tracking you down isn’t easy; hopefully the doctor will hook you up with your integral canalphones, soon.”

Sam stopped and blinked. “Integral... canalphones? What’re you talking about?”

He registered Samantha’s surprise, bit his lip, then turned away and walked off at a faster pace. “Uh: nothing. Never mind. Forget about it, ‘Sam’.”

“Woah!” The woman ran after him. “What canalphones?” She broke into a sprint. “What canalphones are you talking about, Storm!?”

VI.

Thunder sounded on the horizon.

The last of the *Chaste Gazer*’s photonic cannon barrels came off the Raiden and hit the metal bay floor with a loud clank. Chenine stood, hands folded neatly in front of her, watching the clouds above the Northern Limestones darken until she could barely see the jagged mountain peaks on the other side.

Behind her a tech was busy rolling away two of her Raiden’s control rods. He shoved them into a hermetically-sealed container, along with the *Gazer*’s force orb.

“Pilot.” The outpost’s quartermaster approached Chenine, his voice trim and stern. “You’re cleared for a South-by-Southeast entry to the Ridge at 0318 hours.” He handed the girl a data pad. “Any deviation from this flight plan will result in interception. Any anomalous power readings we pick-up from your vessel will result in interception. Is that clear?”

Chenine scanned the flight plan, then pocketed the data pad and set her hands back over her crotch. She watched a lightning storm form on the tree line of the black forest below them.

“Crystal clear.” She replied.

Two hours later the now-impotent *Chaste Gazer* thundered over a hellish black landscape. Countless Schwarzwald trees hung, limp and oily: a blight upon the cold, hard earth beneath the Ridge. Chenine could see a mess of beady red dots glowing from inside the knolls of those diseased trees: they were the eyes of the thousands of mad ravens that called this harsh, brittle land home.

Minutes later Chenine brought her Raiden into a hover along the outer rim of the Asteroidea Complex: the massive base of the great bastion at Spindlespire Ridge. She brought her vessel down low, expecting docking clearance along the outer mooring ring. Much to her surprise, however, a cold voice filled her ears with very different orders.

“This is docking control to vessel R-H-CRTS: make your way to port DS-87-B. Expect immediate clearance to land.”

“Port ‘DS’?” Chenine tilted her head: she saw no such docking station on the schematic they’d given her. She asked about it.

“Hold, please.”

Chenine waited a few seconds. Her schematics changed right before her eyes. Specifically something was added to it: a crude rendition of the outer frame of the 600-story monolith rising from the center of the bastion.

“Distelspitze Tower?”

“It’ll be the second port on the 87th floor. Now proceed, please.” The voice on the other end cut out: apparently he was done holding Chenine’s hand.

The *Gazer* rose through a misty soup of rain and fog, all the while advancing up the side of the oversized tower. Ever so often Chenine noticed a spiny protrusion in the black tower’s side which pointed ominously at the Raiden and followed its trajectory with patient, dedicated attention.

Those are ‘Car-Gars’, she recognized. They were special cannons: weapons loaded with charged rail-gun rounds.

Just a single shot from one of those would be enough to scatter parts of this ship over half the black forest...

A man was there to meet her on the 87th floor: Chenine dismounted from her Raiden and struggled through the gale-force weather. Out of nowhere a short, slim man with a fat, toad-like face came up beside her and placed his jacket over her shoulders.

“Come.” He demanded.

She stepped into a narrow, high-velocity elevator with the black-eyed man. He stood, stiff and uncomfortable, regarding Chenine with little less than hostile irritation.

“You are FLT Chenine Chovert, correct?” The man droned.

“Yes, sir.”

“My name is Senegal Kröterohr: I am a secretary, Lieutenant, and as such have no military rank. Your formal address is unnecessary.”

“I see.” Chenine decided that this toad-faced man was not the person to ask about her strange summons: as far as she knew she was retrieving a package from the Ridge, but things now appeared very different.

The elevator stopped at floor 558. Never before in her life had Chenine been in such a tall structure, and given that she was a resident of the Great City, that was saying something.

Just how many floors are there in this citadel?

More than six-hundred, but less than seven: she didn’t know, exactly. No one knew for sure, except the tower’s administrators: the SJC (whoever they were).

Kröterohr lead Chenine down a completely empty hallway. The corridor was Spartan and utilitarian, but the further they went along it the more lush and cushy the surroundings became: the floor was suddenly girded in elegant Berber carpet, large windows gazed out at the depressing skyline of the Ridge (the ground far below then obscured by fog), and plush lounge chairs sat at regular intervals, complete with mahogany end-tables bearing crystal ashtrays.

He stopped the girl at the entrance to one small room and retrieved his jacket from her shoulders: this part of the tower was very warm, anyway.

“Some advice.” Kröterohr whispered into one of her ears, “many military programs have been de-funded— killed, if you like— because their peoples’ mouths are bigger than their brains. Just keep that in mind, Miss Chovert: I’m sure that your RL would approve of such advice.” He stepped back and motioned for her to enter the room.

Hesitant, Chenine stepped into the confines of a dark parlor. Her guide snapped the gold-trimmed doors shut behind her, and for a moment the girl struggled around the room as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. This parlor was almost Victorian in influence, filled with comforts like fine felt sofas, a gas-light fireplace (which was not working) and a large coffee table in the center. There was some kind of logo etched into the center of the table, but Chenine couldn't make it out.

Lightning flashed outside, illuminating the parlor, and revealing a body reclining in one of the wing-backed chairs. The Ketoni girl jumped with surprise, but restrained her impulse to scream.

She was, however, startled to feel a hand on her shoulder and she took a quick swing at the person behind her.

"Tch! This is not a self-defense class, Lieutenant." A burly man sneered at Chenine. He held her attacking fist quite easily in his palm.

Chenine gasped, then took a step back: the man before her was clad in a complicated black dress suit, complete with a thin purple cape trailing behind him. She didn't need to look at the pips on his collar to discern his rank.

"Apologies, sir." In a very rare display of respect, Chenine actually snapped to attention, clicking her boot heels before the full-General.

"Call-up computer: lights on at one-half." A raspy voice behind her ordered. Chenine turned to see the body in the wing-back chair, and she was even more startled.

"And you have my apologies, Lieutenant, for the miscommunication: you weren't expected for another half-hour." The man was old, perhaps in his mid 60's. His wrinkled face was drawn long, like a horse, and his shallow nose and long lips gave him the appearance of an archaic fish, like the kind Chenine had often seen in those old nautical textbooks she was so fond of.

First you compare a man to a toad, then another to a fish? Get your head out of your rear and put it where it needs to be, you dumb pop-tart!

"General: sir." She repeated the elaborate snap-to attention for this man, as well.

"Do you know who I am, Miss Chovert?"

She nodded. "You are Senior General Reidemeister: the chairman of the Allied Commanders."

"And I'm Alanzo Schern, the Allied Military's General in charge of emerging technologies." This relatively younger man motioned to one of the wing-back chairs, which Chenine hesitantly took a seat in. "That also means that I have—in theory—complete purview over operations like the Raiden-Hybrid program."

"I see."

The younger General sat beside the elder man and took up a coffee cup from the table. Chenine now recognized the logo on the table as that of the Allied Commanders: a drop of rain suspended in a glowing cloud, the water pulsing with apparent electrical energy.

The men insisted that Chenine join them in their coffee. There was no other answer to this questions but 'yes', so she accepted. Senegal Kröterohr reappeared and directed a waitperson into the parlor, carrying a china cup and saucer for the girl. The toad-faced man eyed Chenine with even more subtle hostility.

The girl's eyes moved between the two stone-faced men: whatever they wanted from her, they were going to frame the issue as a pleasant little chat.

Though it has all the gravity of a public execution...

It was good coffee, though: rich, complex and wholly smooth, like glass. In the back of her head Chenine toyed with the notion that this was Jamaican Blue Mountain: the stuff that java-heads like Lieutenant Hayle referred to with quasi-religious reverence as ‘JBM’, though that seemed unlikely. Even a general would have trouble scrounging up such precious stuff, and serving it at table with a lowly Lieutenant would be out of the question.

When the Generals finished laying out a pretentious red-carpet for the girl the other shoe dropped.

“Now, Miss Chovert— and you don’t mind us calling you that, do you?”

“No, sir.”

The younger general, Schern, held up a data pad. “You are a commissioned flight officer in the R-Type sector of service, yes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“This despite *never* having gone through basic— let alone advanced— pilot’s training or certification classes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you were, in fact, the very first candidate placed into the highly experimental R-H program, true?”

“Correct, sir.”

“One wonders what your RL was thinking...” Schern’s voice trailed off. Chenine didn’t know if this question was rhetorical or not. Just to be safe, though, she didn’t attempt to answer.

Old General Reidemeister crossed his legs and rested his bony chin in one hand; his eyes never left the young girl’s frame. “And, Miss Chovert: what do *you* believe was the reason for your ascendancy to such an experimental program?”

The girl shrugged. “Aryl Wraith was in need of a guinea-pig.”

“And you consider yourself such?”

“I suppose so. A mandatory round of Moro-Plantar tests was given to all ‘nonessential’ personnel at Base-10 shortly after I was sent out there. It was kept quiet from everyone else: obviously they were looking for suitable ‘candidates’. Of everyone tested, I was the only person to pass.”

Schern lit a cigar and exhaled the smoke. “‘Nonessential’ personnel?”

Just then old Reidemeister accidentally dropped something; it landed on the table near Chenine. It was some kind of bracelet, silver, with a strange emblem on the clasp.

“Ah, forgive me...” The old man clicked his tongue as he retrieved the object.

“Anyway: if we’re to take your claim at face value, then why did you allow Subcommander Sv—” the old man paused, then continued, “why did you allow the RL of Base-10 to commission you if you did, in fact, know that he was merely using you?”

Chenine looked down at her feet, then pulled her coffee saucer closer to her waist.

“I’m not unintelligent. I knew that I was being used— and that I was looked upon as expendable flesh for their experiment— but I didn’t really care.” She returned the men’s gaze. “In any event: I *am* a Typer now, for better or for worse.”

“And quite an accomplished one, despite possessing little to no formal training.” General Schern thumbed through her record. “Lieutenant, how do you explain your rather passable combat record?”

“The link, sir, it—”

“The link translates *learned* responses between a pilot and their ship. It’s like driving a car by remote control, Miss Chovert, and if one doesn’t know how to steer a vehicle when they’re behind the wheel, then they’d find using the remote control even more difficult. So, I ask you again: how can you do the things you do?”

Chenine didn’t know what the generals were looking for in an answer, but she didn’t have one for them, anyway. They didn’t press her on the point, though, and soon their questions turned to another venue:

“What of the recent experience of your colleague: FLT Justin Storm?” Schern asked.

“What about it?”

“Do you believe his story: his wild tale about a ‘humanoid Bydo’ running amok out at Mars?”

Chenine played with her coffee spoon for a few seconds.

“Miss Chovert?”

“I believe him.”

Reidemeister took his hand from his chin, surprised. “Do you, really?”

“I believe that *he* believes what he’s saying, at least.”

“Why?”

The girl puckered her lips. She did not provide an answer.

Old Reidemeister leaned forward, his withered hands clasped patiently under his face.

“Lieutenant: earlier General Schern said that he maintains ‘theoretical’ control over your project, do you remember that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, as it turns out there are other... let’s call them ‘concerns’ that are interested in your program. These concerns have the effect of, well, making our oversight somewhat difficult.”

“They muddy the waters.” Schern finished.

Another round of lightning sounded in the infinite distance outside.

‘Concerns’ muddying the Allied Commander’s waters? Someone defying their will? Who even has the ability to do such a thing?

“The Superior Joint Command?” Chenine mumbled, mostly to herself.

“*Other* concerns.” General Schern insisted. “They prevent the whole picture from becoming clear to us. And I must say: your Squadron’s picture is quite dirty, indeed.”

The older general tapped Schern’s knee, curtailing his vitriol.

“Lieutenant, I want you to think long and hard before answering me: tell us what you know about the Raiden-Hybrids. What *are* they? What is their purpose?”

Chenine perched her lips once again. “To annihilate the Bydo Empire—”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“But I’m sure that’s the answer, sir.”

Schern glared at Chenine, his face stern: “Then we’re looking for the answers *behind* the answers, Miss Chovert, and you’d best reconsider that attitude of yours. Is that understood?”

VII.

Reidemeister took a sip from his coffee cup as he and Schern watched the elevator carrying the *Chaste Gazer's* pilot descend through the misty sky beneath them.

"Was it really wise to let her go?" Schern scowled.

"Nothing she told us puts my concerns about the program at ease, but what would you have us do: detain one of the pilots when we're right under *their* noses?"

"And our operation?" Schern pressed. "What about that?"

Reidemeister considered the mere child in the elevator. In one hand he bobbed the coffee saucer that Chenine used; in the other hand he held a small data-pad. "The girl knows nothing about this so-called 'Antipathy' organization: her skin conductance didn't change at all when I showed her the bracelet." He looked back at Schern. "What about the owner of this trinket?" He held up the bracelet bearing a heart-and-smoldering-teardrop logo.

The younger general shook his head. "He won't be talking to his friends about our investigation. Not now, and not ever."

Reidemeister scratched his chin. "Poor mister 'Peyton Manning'." He shook his head. "First they pull a corpse out of their test ship: that *Rubicon* vessel. We've got a dead operative from their little clubhouse on our hands, and now the base's CO Ronald Faught tells us that some security-hacking investigator in the Great City is trying to link an insane corporal's mental infirmity with Base-10."

"That's a lot of bodies piling up around this program..."

Reidemeister watched Chenine's elevator disappear from his sight.

"Three." He sighed. "And my rule of thumb is that three is simply one too many."

There was a noise in the next room. The two men turned and saw Senegal Kröterohr setting out plates and silverware.

"Leave us alone for the moment, Kröterohr." The older man requested.

"Sir, I'm just arranging the place settings for—"

"Scat!" Schern snapped. "Just what part of that don't you understand?"

The man scrambled away from the table like a cockroach retreating from the light. Schern closed the door behind him.

Reidemeister crossed his arms, then made a decision.

"Order the operation. Round up as many of them as you can manage before that little 'clubhouse' catches on."

"Including the girl?"

"Especially her." The old general scowled. "I expect your methods to be infinitely gentle, Alonzo: casualties are not an option." He returned to his wing-back chair, sat down and rubbed his eyes.

The younger man nodded and made for the door, but then paused.

"What about your boy? Are you going to have a problem dealing with him?"

Reidemeister glared at Schern. "He despises me, Alonzo. My relationship with him is of less significance than the one I have with my shoe-horn. It is not a factor."

"Of course." Schern held up his hands, apologetic.

VIII.

The *Platinum Heart* and the *Platonic Love* thundered across the pre-dawn sea. Two hours into their flight they were joined by an opal-colored crane: the *Chaste Gazer*.

“Welcome back to the flock, Chenine.” Justin welcomed the girl.

“Shall I do the roll-out, then?” After a few seconds of silence she began:

“I saw a vul—”

“Mind if I take the roll-out, Chovert?” Samantha broke in.

Chenine grunted: she had no objections, or at least she didn’t think that it was worth it airing them if she did.

Samantha began: “It’s 0545 hours on the eighteenth of August. This is Samantha Rayne of Raiden unit R-H-ERS: we’ve been dispatched to Nippon-European Space Agency for a routine cargo transfer. Due to the volatile nature of the package they requested a Raiden escort. Travel time is an estimated five hours with no delays anticipated.”

Samantha smirked and looked over at the *Platonic Love*, wobbling through the air on her starboard.

“Who dares, wins.” She finished with a playful lilt in her voice.

After a moment Storm hailed her. He snickered through her cockpit speakers.

“So, then: change *is* good, isn’t that right, Sam?”

“You tell me, Storm, ‘cause you’ll be doing a fair amount of it as well.”

“That’s an order?”

“No,” she smiled, “that’s a fact.”

A few hours later the trio stood on the outer strut of NESA’s shore-side facility. Chenine took the opportunity to lean against some heavy machinery and doze, while Justin and Samantha watched the sun rise over the shoreline.

“Even purple seawater can be kinda pretty, sometimes.” Justin noted.

Sam turned her head away from the blinding glare of the water.

“Mm-hmm. And I guess that even a pair of ‘unorthodox’ of pilots can be useful in their own right...” she looked at Chenine, then at Justin. “...or at least salvageable, anyway.”

“Oh, thank you, Captain.”

“Don’t you dare ‘captain’ me: remember what I said about that, Storm!”

The dockmaster approached the trio, shielding his face from the ungodly morning light.

“Good morning, all. And who are you?”

Samantha turned and faced the man:

“We’re the *Tears’ Shower Squadron*,” she answered.

