



Terminal Desire

I.

“Did you feel the wi-i-i-nd as it blew all around you? Did you feel the lo-o-o-ove that was in the air? Wake up, wake up...

...wa-a-ake up—”

Three loud chimes sounded in Justin’s head; they jabbed at his brain like an ice pick.

“Lieutenant Storm?”

“Mmm.” Justin groaned. He moved his forearm away from his eyes. The Typer lay sprawled on a bunk in the dilapidated seventeenth-floor barracks.

“This is Storm.” He muttered into his molar implants.

“Duty officer Ramirez, here.”

“Yes, sir?”

“You wanted to be notified when the Subcommander left for docking bay R-C?”

“Yes, I did.” He sat up.

“Well: Sven Wraith left Ops about 10 minutes ago.”

“Why the heck didn’t you call me *then*... uh— sir.” He blushed at his overreaction.

“Because keeping a nosy pilot like you in the loop isn’t a priority.”

Static burst across Justin’s canalphones as the duty-officer cut the line.

“You rude jerk.” He growled at the dead air.

Justin flipped off the bunk and raced to his locker. He threw off his shirt and khakis and slipped into his jet-black flight suit: he was on standby today, and he’d never be allowed down on the mooring floors without the suit.

After all, if the shit hits the fan somewhere while I’m down there it’d be pretty poor showmanship for me to have to run all the way back up here and change...

But what were the odds of that happening today? Practically zero. Less than zero, even. Hell: the Galilean Mass was only in the grave for a month now, and the Bydo were

creatures of habit: it would take weeks, if not months, for another one of those dreaded Masses to launch itself out of that black hell in Dimension 26 and grace the doorstep of humanity.

Justin drew the zipper of his *Liefde* suit up his hairless chest: there'd certainly be no combat today, but something very special was about to happen down in the launch bays. It was something Justin had never seen before, at least from the outside: the terminal activation of a Raiden-Hybrid unit.

It'd be a neat event all by itself, but Justin had an ulterior motive for attending: he wanted to see this event firsthand in the hopes of gleaning information. His suspicions about the R-H program had not deteriorated over time: if anything they were growing.

And I'm not gonna find out anything just sitting around here on my ass. On the contrary: he'd done quite enough of that over the past three months.

Justin cinched-up his flight boots. Ten seconds later he was tromping down the corridor.

II.

Chenine's throat undulated as she slurped-down the contents of the water bottle. Her lips sucked at the bottle cap with lustful greed. She lowered her head and heaved a content sigh.

"Thank you." She capped the bottle and slid it across the table.

"No problem." Scott Tabris grabbed the plastic bottle and flipped the cap off again.

"You're not going to drink from it again, are you?" The girl tilted her head.

"Why not?"

"I had a cold recently, you know. And I was just around Captain Rayne and the other pilot while they had theirs."

Scott smiled and held the bottle up to his eyes. "So, you're saying that you have the power to hurt me?"

"Yes, I do."

Tabris sighed and set the bottle on the table. "I agree with you wholeheartedly on that statement."

The pair sat in the middle of the cafeteria. The place was crowded and very noisy. Tabris found Chenine at a table, fresh off her flight duty and sucking down her third pint of 'hydration fluid' from the synthetics plant. That stuff was fine for keeping a person alive, but it was a terrible thirst quencher, and this pilot's thirst was well-nigh insatiable.

"I don't understand why, but I crave the water."

"Don't we all?" Scott ruminated on the fact that his fresh water supply for the day was shot: he'd have to make do with that disgusting hydration fluid.

"More than that, though: I only spent five hours up in the air on a routine patrol of Patagonia. I haven't exercised or exerted myself at all, but when I came back down to the base I felt, well..."

"Bone dry." Scott nodded.

"Mmm." Her pale blue eyes were drawn to Scott's breast pocket.

Tabris followed that gaze: a foil-wrapped energy bar peeked out of his pocket. He always made a point of keeping energy bars on his person: it was a very good thing to have when going into the tenth hour of a fifteen-hour Ops shift.

“Are you hungry, too?”

“No, never mind.”

“You are hungry, though, aren’t you?”

“About as much as I am thirsty,” she admitted. Chenine shook her white head to and fro. “Forget it: I’m coming off-duty anyway. I can eat something when I get home.” She stood to leave, but Scott’s arm blocked her path: he held the energy bar in his hand.

“Take it.”

“No.” She refused. “I don’t need your charity.”

“I know:” Scott stared her in the eyes, “but why don’t you eat it before you go?” Chenine looked at him, then the tempting bar.

“Fine.” She sat down.

III.

“Oh, God: I never knew that plain old air could smell this good!” Liesel drew a breath of absolute content as she and Jen stepped off the bullet train. Elysia Station was something right out of a fantasy book: the retro terminal had all the technical amenities of a train stop in Nash Ultima, but thirty feet beyond its confines in every direction lay a sloping plain of fine grassland. Small pink-budded flowers dotted the picturesque field.

Jen smiled. “That’s the one benefit I get from working out at that rusty little hellhole: those constant sea breezes, just like here. My lungs have never been fresher in my life.”

“We’ll put those to use later.” Liesel flashed Jen a naughty grin and embraced her with one strong arm as they tromped down the station stairs. The pair passed the quaint signpost: it was the last vestige of cold, hard technology before the beautiful grasslands opened up before them. They passed through a wood-slat gate and emerged on a sunny gravel path.

Liesel Wright lacked the gothic vibe that Jen Drake so adored. The girl was in many ways Jen’s polar opposite: tall, muscular, ridiculously athletic and dressed in a conventional long pleated skirt and white top. Jen was clad in her perennial favorites: a black miniskirt, dark fishnets and a pink-and-gray top with a massive pewter medallion chained about her neck. She wore her spiky pink hairdo proudly, while Liesel sported a sun visor bearing the logo of her favorite rugby team: the Esquel ‘*Meteoritos*’.

“Think they’re already waiting for us?”

Liesel nodded. “We are kinda late: I bet they’ve already bought all the tickets.” The pair continued down the path with the small group of fellow travelers that came off the rail line with them.

Neither woman really understood how their relationship could work, but the fact was it did, and rather well. The only explanation Jen could provide is the trite old phrase about ‘opposites attracting’. Admittedly, it is a good descriptor, considering how the two met. Back at university, during Jen’s second year, she was hard at work on her sophomore research project. The poor teen was so stressed that the only break-time she could really count on each day were her thrice-daily smoke breaks, and even then she

barely had time to do these: Jen was to the point that she couldn't spare the time to hustle down to the student lounge. She had to literally lean out her window if she wanted to enjoy her tobacco.

So, during one crisp autumn day a few weeks before Cataclysm Eve Jen was particularly stressed and up to two packs of smokes a day, unfiltered. As she leaned out her second floor window that evening she had no idea that a certain lady jock named Liesel Wright was getting ready to pull a prank on one of her rugby teammates. Wright's target lived up on the third floor, and the prank involved a rope and some wicked rappelling skills on the coed's part. She planned on scaling the building and giving her teammate the scare of her life. It was a daring stunt, one that could only be accomplished by the strong muscles that bulged in Liesel's arms, the spunky courage that raged in her brain, and the liter of 'Elsie's Finest' whisky that coursed through her bloodstream.

Liesel tossed the rope up six times, and came up empty on each attempt. Finally, on the seventh, she felt the rope go taut as she tugged it. The girl was confident that she'd hooked the third floor window latch, so she instantly threw her entire weight on the cord.

In point of fact that rope did *not* catch a third-floor window latch: it instead managed to catch a second-floor sophomore right around her shoulders. In one of the most hilarious (if horrific) events in Jen Drake's life, the young techie nerd fell from her window and, screaming like a falling tomahawk missile, plummeted right down onto the unaware junior girl.

The rest, as they would say, is blessed history.

And, ironically, that was probably the only time in our relationship that I ended up on 'top'...

"It's been such a long time since the gang's been together," Jen mused, "seems like a lifetime ago when I was drafted. I wonder if I'll still fit in with them." She looked down towards the sparkling purple shoreline and the fairground's booths, little more than tiny dots below them.

"You don't think the Allied Military's turned you into a different person, do you?"

"No," she shook her head, "it's not that, but I still feel... I dunno: 'untouchable' in a way."

Liesel gently turned Jen's check to one side with her fist: a playful mock punch.

"Jen, can you do me a huge favor?"

"Yeah?"

"Please stop being such a pussy."

Jen smiled, thinly at first, then both women burst out laughing.

IV.

The elevator doors hissed open.

"Oh!" Justin took a step back: Laura Hayle stood in the center of the compartment. She looked him over, up and down, with neither fire nor ice in her gaze: the most overriding emotion she bore was indifference.

Justin swallowed self-consciously. He gaped at the Lieutenant wordlessly for some time. Laura finally broke the silence:

"Are you getting on or not?" She didn't make eye-contact.

“Uh...” Justin took another step back: he looked like a timid mongoose at the entrance to a cobra’s den.

“Well?” She demanded.

“Yes, ma’am.” He stepped inside. The Lieutenant gave him a wide berth.

The elevator rattled and shook as it descended. The two occupants stood as silent and as still as statues.

Justin stood facing forward, like Laura, but kept his eyes way off to one side. The Lieutenant cast several sidelong glances at the Typer.

“You’re going to see the *Heart’s* activation, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“They invited you to watch?”

“Not exactly.”

“You’re gonna crash the party, then?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Mmm.” The silence persisted a moment, then Laura continued:

“Congratulations on your Golden Kite, by the way.”

Now it was Justin’s turn to grunt noncommittally.

“You’re proud of it, aren’t you?”

“It’s just a piece of metal.”

“Now you’re being arrogant.” She accused.

“No, ma’am.”

“Then you think that you’re above such ‘trivial’ accommodation, don’t you, pilot?”

“No, I don’t, ma’am.”

“Then you think you deserved something even *better*, maybe?”

“No, ma’am.”

She nodded. “I see. I’ve heard from a lot of veterans about guys who shrug-off their awards like that: they say that it’s usually because of some self-righteous, delusional feeling of superiority—”

All of a sudden Justin shot Laura a bitterly cold stare. He clenched his teeth like a steel trap, his eyes bored straight into the Lieutenant’s like razor-sharp spikes. This overly-aggressive stance caught Laura completely off guard: the Lieutenant was now much less sure of herself.

When Justin finally spoke his voice was deep and primal, like an animal’s growl:

“Get off my fucking back, ‘ma’am’.”

That voice didn’t sound natural, somehow: the tone was ominous and very menacing. Then there were his eyes.

Christ, his eyes! Aren’t they glowing somehow? Yellow fire...

Just as quickly as he flashed that demonic look Justin turned his head away: he appeared shamed by the outburst, but also relieved. His face instantly looked as it did before. The Lieutenant had to assume that the brief distortion was a trick of the light.

But what a trick...

There was silence again. Laura breathed harder than normal. When she calmed down she was much more contrite:

“I— I’m sorry, Justin.”

The doors opened. The main hub of the docking ring— bustling with fleet pilots and techs— flooded the cold elevator compartment.

“No, Lieutenant: I am.” He stepped out and faced her. “That was wrong of me, I know: it was insubordination.”

“And what I’ve been doing to you all this time is abuse: it hasn’t been fair for you.”

“‘Fairness’ is God’s territory. The best thing we mortals can hope for is ‘decency’.”

“Then I haven’t been decent to you, and I’m sorry about that.” She crossed her arms defensively and smiled. “But if you ever call me ‘ma’am’ again I’ll toss you headfirst out into the Gulf. You got it?”

Justin reciprocated the smile. “Sure thing, ‘Cola-Nut’.”

“Now you’re just trying to torque me off.” The smile widened. She squinted at his breast pocket. “What do you have, there?”

“Huh?” Justin looked at his pocket. He appeared surprised to see the small scrap of white paper poking out of it. The pilot extracted it and smoothed it out.

“I didn’t have anything in here before...” his voice trailed off as he read the note. Justin’s eyebrows arched.

“What is it?”

He crushed the paper in his hand and tossed it to the ground.

“Nothing.” He growled. He shook his head and took off down the hall. “Goodbye, Lieutenant.”

The elevator doors snapped shut.

He’s not ready to accept my apology yet, she reasoned. I can’t blame him: I certainly wouldn’t let ‘bygones be bygones’ right away, either. After all, when all’s said and done, I’ve been some kind of bitch, indeed...

Laura shifted her weight: she felt one of her shoes land on something crunchy: it was the balled-up note. It must have bounced into the lift when Justin threw it on the ground.

Curious, the Lieutenant picked it up and unfolded it. Two words were scrawled onto the page in clumsy, hasty handwriting:

lament **A**ntipathy

She perched her lips.

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

V.

“Make sure the backup clamps are up and in position: is that understood?” Sam Roont growled into the microphone. His voice echoed across bay R-C.

“Yes, sir.” A technician answered. He was perched atop one of the *Platinum Heart’s* massive A-wings, girded in a hazmat suit. The tech’s voice sounded tinny and weak through the control room speakers.

Roont turned his attention to another group of techs milling around on the ground.

“Where are we with those Keratinocyte shields?”

“They’ll be up in five minutes, sir.”

“Make it *three*.” He snapped.

A gust of smoke curled up from behind the doctor; it collected on the glass shield of the control room, momentarily obscuring Roont’s view of the well-tethered Raiden below him.

“Must you smoke in here, and right *now*, of all times?”

Sven Wraith leaned against a table. He scoffed, clamped his cigar firmly between his lips, then he exhaled again.

“Must you be such a ‘worrywart’, Samuel?”

“One of us has to be, Goddamnit!”

“Tch!” Wraith stuck the cigar back in his mouth.

The control room’s speakers crackled: “Dr. Roont: the pilot is prepped and ready. She’s awaiting her summons.”

“Bring her in,” Roont replied, “but keep her on the standby platform until—”

“—put her in the cockpit immediately.” Wraith interjected.

Roont killed the audio feed. “Damn it, Wraith: you’re not taking any of this seriously!”

“And you’re taking it *too* seriously. We’ve activated a grand total of *three* Hybrids by now: I think we can do this one without all the paranoid fanfare, don’t you?”

The Bydo doctor knocked his fist against the glass pane. “This isn’t your garden-variety initiation! True: the *Gazer* and the *Love* awakened without a hitch, but this ship is completely different.”

“Not completely.”

“Those other two Raidens were 20-percent Bydo flesh by volume: the *Heart* is a *Core*, Wraith!” Roont wagged his finger at the RL as he shouted. “It’s an honest-to-goodness, pre-critical-mass *Core*.”

“Stunted, though.”

“Tch! I don’t care what your friend Serafino Grafsteen has to say: we still don’t know if all those fancy Gouden Preek safeguards will keep this thing in check. Do you have any idea how powerful those things can get?”

“Watch yourself, Samuel: you should remember that I’m a veteran of the skies. I know the risks.”

“But *you* won’t have to deal with all the complications, should they arise.”

Wraith shook his head: “No: only the consequences.”

The men watched as Samantha Rayne appeared on the upper scaffolding above the *Heart*. Four techs flanked her, girded in hazmat gear. The captain’s exposed Link Prongs glistened along her back like shards of silver.

“Well, fortunately for you this activation is not your call.” Wraith muttered.

“Why is that?”

The RL stamped out his cigar on the glass pane: he stared at the doctor with cold eyes. “Because if you delayed its progress like I think you want to, you might just find yourself on the receiving end of a visit from a certain eight-foot-tall golem.”

Roont snarled at this threat.

“To hell with the whole damned thing.” He tossed his stylus pen on the table. “I serve at the pleasure of your precious Committee, after all.” He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and shoved it into his mouth. The doctor chewed it nervously.

“Subcommander, sir.” A gruff voice sounded through their speakers.

“Go ahead.”

“This is your perimeter guard, here: we’ve got a subject requesting access to the observation box, but his security clearance is ‘Belladonna’.”

“Tch! We’re restricting access to everyone under ‘Digitalis’ level. Out of curiosity: who is it?”

There was a pause. Two voices spoke in the background.

“It’s Flight Lieutenant Justin Storm, sir.” The guard answered.

Roont shot the RL a startled look. He shook his head adamantly.

Wraith clicked his tongue. “Let him pass.” Before Roont could object, Wraith raised a gloved hand to him. “I’m aiming for as much ‘operational transparency’ as possible right now: Storm’s been acting squirrely ever since the Ganymede operation.”

“More than normal, you mean.”

“The last thing I want to do is increase the level of suspicion and intrigue in the air.”

Roont shook his head. “I don’t want him in here. For God’s sake Sven: those pictures! Remember the pictures?”

“How could I forget them?” The RL shrugged.

“It’s bad enough that we can’t figure out how the hell the *Platonic Love* released that energy wave against the O.P.I.—”

“Don’t tell me no progress has been made on that at all?”

“All I know for sure is that the energy released was primarily gamma radiation.”

“Gamma radiation?” Wraith rolled the words over his lips.

“Gamma radiation.” Roont growled. “Call it a miniature ‘Gamma Ray Burst’, if you like. During that phenomenon the *Love* released about three times its theoretical discharge limit.”

“Gamma radiation is given off during a dimensional shift...” Wraith scratched his chin.

“But not nearly that amount. My best hypothesis— and I think it’s a fairly good one— is that the *Love*’s fusion reactor overloaded just as it *started* shifting itself out of our dimensional plane.”

“‘Started’ shifting?”

Roont nodded. “Again, this is in theory: if an object of a certain mass begins a shift, and then somehow *stops* itself from going through with it, all the energy that would have been used to propel it through the trans-dimensional barrier would accumulate around the object, but it’d never get spent—”

“—and so there’d be nothing for it to do but radiate out from the source in dramatic fashion.” Wraith flicked some ash off his cigar. “So, pray tell: how does an object *stop* itself from going through with a shift?”

“We don’t know.” Roont smiled, ironically. “Humans don’t know.”

“Nobody knows, then?”

“Only the Bydo have demonstrated that mastery of shifting: apparently it’s an innate ability for them.” The doctor scratched his clean-cut chin. “That little maneuver may have saved Mister AGP’s life at the time, but it was actually a very crude and unrefined method of attack: like beating someone to death with the flat end of a katana. In other words it was— dare I say—childish.” He looked up at Wraith. “By the way:

how'd you manage to keep everything so hush-hush? How many people saw the *thing* they pulled out of the cockpit after the battle?"

"Plenty. But every surgeon who operated on Justin Storm has been 'reassigned' to a humanitarian medical center in the middle of the Dead Lands. The position is somewhat indefinite, so they won't be telling stories anytime soon."

"The power of the Committee at work, huh?"

Wrath scowled. "I'm more interested in how the R-H was able to extend its transubstantiation out to Storm's flesh in the first place."

"Well, obviously the effects were temporary. We can only thank our lucky stars the Karat Spheres held up. They kept it from totally corrupting that Typer's stupid ass."

The two men watched through the rear door as Justin Storm rounded a corner. The pilot strode down the dark corridor, clad in his midnight-black flight suit. He had all the semblance of a shade.

"And he certainly doesn't remember it," Wraith noted, "at least not the majority of it. Either that, or from *his* perspective he was never corrupted in the first place."

"Sure: who can remember little things like that? It's such a mundane event—having one's body transformed into a hellish nightmare of spiny flesh and bloody, exposed bone— it happens every day! Why *would* he remember?"

"I don't need the sarcasm, Samuel."

"And the *light*, Wraith, the light! My God! His eyes weren't just altered like the rest of the ship: there was that fire in them, it was the light of—"

"Stop acting like a little girl." Wraith snapped. "It saved his life, anyway. I seriously doubt that his body could have survived that physical trauma on its own. In any event, tell me what steps you've taken to ensure that it doesn't happen again."

"Short of boiling the damn R-H down in Purity solution, you mean? I did the only thing I could: I 'tightened' the Karat Spheres. Think of it as a choke collar: it'll never be able to keep the R-H fully in check— it can still alter the hafnium-carbide shell as it sees fit— but as long as our nasty little bird is wearing its 'collar' it can't rewrite Mister AGP's genome."

"And what was his estimated Impingement Factor at the time of the incident?"

"Can't say: the recorder malfunctioned."

"You couldn't get any data at all?"

Roont chewed clean through the cigarette in his mouth. He immediately went for another. "Nothing useful. The number it gave me didn't make any sense."

"What was it?"

Roont shook his head. "The flight recorder *claims* that his Impingement Factor crested at 4.0."

Sven Wraith's brow seldom arched in surprise, but it did now. He worked out some very simple math in his head.

"*Eighty*-percent? Eighty-percent of the ship was altered." He whistled. "Eighty-percent..."

"Like I said: a malfunction on the reader's part."

"Perhaps..."

The control room door squeaked on its hinges.

"Aryl, sir." Justin saluted reverently as soon as he entered the dark room.

“At ease, pilot.” Wraith gestured with indifference. He pointed to a far corner of the room. “Stand over there, if you really must, and touch *nothing*.”

“Sir.” Justin again saluted and quietly slinked into the corner.

A noise like a car driving on its rims sounded from the bay below them: the *Platinum Heart* rose off the ground along with the entire maintenance platform.

Roont put his ear to a headset in their booth. He turned to Wraith:

“They’re ready.”

VI.

“C’mon!” Mark spun the rubber ball on his finger. “Nothin’ but net!”

Jen came on the scene just in time to see Lucas, her old labmate, sitting in a flimsy chair atop a massive tank of water. Mark let the ball fly, straight and sure, right at the bull’s-eye beside the tank.

“Oh-no-oooah!” Lucas’s chair flipped over, dumping him unceremoniously into the drink.

“Nothing but *wet*!” Mattie clapped Mark on the back. The pair laughed like hyenas.

“I can’t leave any of you alone for a second, can I?” Jen smirked. The girl chomped down on a giant stick of cotton candy; she had two, and handed one of them to Liesel. “How the hell did you talk Lucas into getting up on the dunk tank?”

“How? Six cans of suds: that’s how.” Mark snickered. “And that’s more of a ‘drunk tank’, right now.”

Lucas emerged from the cold water. His long gray hair dripped water over his eyes.

“You guys *suck*!”

Later, Jen and Liesel broke away from the rest of the group. They wanted to tour the games of skill on the midway.

“Look at that baby doll up there.” Jen pointed at a big plushy hanging from a hook above the ring toss. It was a good half-meter tall: one of the top prizes in the booth.

“Ooh.” Liesel squinted at it. “Wow. That’s gotta be a mistake, right?”

Jen assumed the doll was supposed to depict a smiling baby with its mouth open, cooing in mid-giggle. But, through the fault of either the machine that churned it out or the hands that stitched it, this baby doll had a very different appearance: one of the patchwork seams ran right down the middle of its face, making its nose rise up like a pig’s. The jagged line ran all along the face, producing an unnatural flare down the middle of the doll’s lips. This defect went beyond a simple ‘hair-lip’ disfigurement: it looked like the doll’s face was frozen in an eternal, vicious sneer. Add to that a pair of mismatched eyes (blue and green) and a hooked, crooked ear on one side and there were all the ingredients of a nightmare.

“Gross.” Both girls muttered at the same time.

“But I think it’s also kinda neat.” Liesel commented.

Jen shook her head. “Come on, Lees: I’m supposed to be the morbid one.”

“It’s got this ‘innocence corrupted’ thing going on, doesn’t it?”

Jen smirked. “You mean like modern art, or something? A sad commentary on the hedonism that surrounds us? Well, I don’t care about that, ‘cause it creeps me out.”

“Ah, screw it: I’m feeling pretty hedonistic, aren’t you?”

The pair continued down the fairway. Eventually they came upon a hole in the dense forest of booths: the sandy shoreline lay meters away from them. Purple seawater shimmered in the distance, down beyond the beach.

“God, it’s such a beautiful day!” Liesel pulled Jen close to her.

“Mmmm.” Jen inhaled the breeze off the seawater. Her eyes were drawn across the bay: a thin suspension bridge ran above the water. It was easily the length of two rugby fields and spanned the entire bay, after which it met up with a rocky, low-lying island. That little piece of land, with its algae-riddled shoreline and moody slopes, was dominated by a giant network of ugly gray buildings, one of which stood at least twenty stories tall.

Some kind of hangar, maybe?

“That’s Asphodeline Island.” She guessed.

“What’s out there?”

Jen took her eyes off the monstrosity. “Something inconsequential.” She slid her finger up Liesel’s shoulder and teased one of her dark red locks. “What do you think the meaning of life is, Lees?”

“Oh: a quick, easy question for me.” She took a moment to answer. “The meaning of life is to find people that’re special to you.”

“Special?”

“Yeah: ‘kin’, I guess, or whatever. And to protect them at all costs.”

“Is that all?”

“Well, as near as I can figure, yeah.”

“What about looking out for ‘Number One’? Shouldn’t some personal gratification fit in there, too?”

Liesel thought about that. “Looking out for your family *is* what’s most gratifying, don’t you think? Look at it this way: what’s the one thing above *everything* that most wild animals try to avoid?”

“Getting themselves killed?”

“Being alone.” Liesel shook her head. “Come on, Jen: you’re the one with the biology minor. Isn’t that the ultimate desire of ‘life’: to seek out *other* life and to be close to something like itself?”

Now it was Jen’s turn to shake her head: “Not necessarily. It all depends on the organism’s survival strategy: what ‘type’ of organism it is.”

“Now you’re getting over my head. Look, why are you asking about all this now, anyway?”

Jen closed her eyes: she remembered her talk with Scott Tabris up on the struts of Base-10.

“Someone I know thinks I’m being selfish by not doing more in the AM than I am. He thinks that I should be ‘protecting my kin’ in the long run. Maybe he’s right about that.”

“You’re not going to re-enlist after your service contract is up, are you?”

“No.” Jen shook her head. “Those guys, they’re obsessed with killing. That, and death in general.”

“Can’t blame ‘em, though.”

“No, but I’m not that type of person: my ‘survival strategy’ is entirely different from those pistol-toting, psycho nuts over in the Allied Military.”

They stood there a few minutes before Liesel broke the silence. She grabbed Jen by the hand and pulled her back towards the midway.

“C’mon.”

“Where’re we going?”

“To win you a plushy.” She grinned innocently. “That’s all.”

“Oh, c’mon: you don’t mean *that* one?”

“Hey: if you wanna choose your own plushy then you should either develop a good throwing arm or hook up with someone who’s much more of a tool than I am.”

“I’m not liable to do either.” Jen admitted.

Liesel put one finger over Jen’s black lips. She smiled sweetly.

“Then, with all due respect, Jen: please shut up, okay?”

VII.

“Pull the locks.” Roont’s voice echoed across the bay.

And let there be light...

Three massive metal spikes lay embedded in the center of the *Heart*, sticking into the top of the Raiden like skewers. At Roont’s command these rods retracted, very slowly, until they emerged from the ship’s silver skin. A great green light blazed from the three gaping holes in the ship.

“Set all the seals on the reactor: close down the sarcophagus!”

Ten minutes later the Raiden’s skin was whole again, and the fusion reactor beneath it was operational.

“What’s your status, pilot?” Wraith demanded through the line.

“The internal lightning just activated.” Samantha Rayne declared. “Power to the consoles is nominal... but main systems are still not operational.”

“Good. Now, Miss Rayne, just like we rehearsed, what does that monitor behind your chair say?”

The sounds of Samantha squirming around in her seat filled the control room. Then she was back on the line:

“It says ‘N/A’. The screen’s flashing red.”

“Right, that’s normal. Now, check your primary status monitor: what is your devotion to the link right now?”

“It says is ‘ambient’.”

Ambient, Justin thought. That was the message the ship gave when link-devotion was in the gutter, or even dead zero. It was a message he very seldom had to deal with.

As a matter of fact, I’ve never had to deal with it.

Sven Wraith looked back at Dr. Roont. Their faces were illuminated by random flashes and sparks from the prostrate Raiden beyond the glass. Roont returned the Aryl’s gaze and nodded.

“Pilot:” Wraith ordered in a calm and clear voice, “I want you to ease yourself into the link now. Increase your concentration until devotion reaches thirty-percent. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Aryl.”

Justin pressed his face against the glass. He couldn't see through the Raiden's opaque cockpit canopy. Justin had a notion that forming a link would be pretty difficult for the Captain, owing to her rather 'forceful' personality.

From what I can tell, I think she lacks that oh-so-important 'iron skin' one needs...

Of course it wasn't fair to compare Captain Rayne's experience in the link with his: Justin was a 'Perfect Fifth', after all, and if there was one thing he could do extremely well in a Raiden, it was link.

"Good luck, all the same." He muttered through the glass.

Several consoles lit up in the control room; the harsh light bounced off Roont's spectacles. He frowned.

"What is it?" Wraith asked.

"It's nothing. Probably nothing."

"Define 'nothing'."

"A power surge." Roont explained. "Nothing unusual in itself, but the signal is somewhat persistent."

"Any patter to it? Is there any specific path it's following through the base?"

"No." He shook his head, but then a few seconds later he cursed and muttered "yes."

Wraith leaned over the console; Justin couldn't read the monitor from where he was.

The Bydo doctor pointed at the console: "There, and there."

"Interesting."

"I'd say that's grounds for a full shut-down." Roont declared.

"No: we expected a little minor probing. Just make sure it doesn't intensify, or organize..."

"But what about the other Rai—"

"You've got your orders, doctor."

Roont glared at the Aryl with something approaching hatred.

"Just the same: I'm cutting those lines, immediately."

"As you wish, doctor."

VIII.

The *Platonic Love* sat in bay R-B, alone in the darkness. It was shielded by a white tarp and held aloft by the large, human-like mecha-arm.

Sparks suddenly illuminated the dark bay: they ran along one wall, down an ugly power conduit. The sparks drifted across the length of the bay like the fuse on a stick of dynamite until they reached a bundle of diagnostic cables: these were attached to the *Love's* exterior control panel. The sparks crackled and simmered the whole length of the cables, then reached the connection between the Raiden and the cords.

Immediately the ball of electricity diminished, and then disappeared entirely.

The *Platonic Love* hummed twice, very softly, beneath its white tarp. The Raiden's metal frame reverberated with a strange, ethereal tone; it sounded like a vibrating tuning fork. Almost as soon as it began, it stopped.

Darkness returned to the empty bay.

Everything was as before.

IX.

Sparks crackled through bay R-A.

Like an electric signal cavorting across a nerve sparks danced from conduit to console, and then to diagnostic cables. The disturbance disappeared as it touched the external control panel of the *Chaste Gazer*.

The Raiden hummed beneath its white tarp: one long, low tone, weak and soft as a whisper. It sounded like a fractured tuning fork. Almost as soon as it began, it stopped. Then everything was as before.

X.

Samantha held her eyes tightly shut. A drop of sweat rolled down her nose as she tried to focus her mind on the link.

It's a little tougher than advertised...

She panted through gritted teeth. Sam knew the ship's systems were coming to life even as she struggled in her chair. She was feeling new things: the scaly armor of her Raiden, the smell of oil and electricity in the bay outside, even the distant echoes of the techs as they called out to each other across the landings. She was *aware* of the Raiden—its dimensions and its status—just as she was aware of her own arms and legs.

Eventually things 'leveled out': her efforts were considerably lessened, but the Raiden remained in the same state of operation.

"The link's been calibrated." Dr. Roont spoke through the *Heart's* speaker system.

"Roger." Samantha heaved a sigh: all this effort was nothing she couldn't handle, but she'd prefer not to spend all day at it. It was actually quite frustrating. Sam was no stranger to extreme physical exertion: from her basic training to her stint with the commandos, she'd put her body through the wringer over the past few years. But this—breaking into a sweat, feeling your muscles cramp into stony knots and panting like a dog, all while just sitting in a chair—this was something completely different.

For some reason the link hammered her with the suffocating sensation of a weight on her lap: that was the most uncomfortable feeling, but it was still bearable. She rolled her head back against the headrest and opened her blemished copper eyes. The sweat on her face blinded Sam for a few seconds. She let the liquid roll down her face. Her blurred vision gradually refocused.

Samantha bit her tongue. She blinked, and then started in her chair. Forgetting all semblance of professionalism the pilot screamed in surprise, at the top of her lungs:

"Unatoka wapi?!"

Inches from Samantha's face, sitting cross-legged in her lap, was a child—a girl—with crossed arms. The Viridian-eyed female smiled at Samantha with a look of smug confidence. The child's hair was short-cropped and dark, marred with a dozen striking white streaks. She wore no clothes, and her body was rather ill-defined.

Like a Barbie doll...

But it was more than that: the child's body shimmered and danced: it was translucent like a gossamer leaf. The apparition's head was the only well-formed thing on it.

Sam ripped her mind back of the link as fast as she could.

A hallucination: it must be a hallucination!

The child's body shimmered in and out of phase as Samantha pulled back on her devotion. The phantom girl's smile intensified: that grin was unsettling. Sam didn't know how to categorize it. It could've been a sneer of malevolence, or a smirk of approval, she just couldn't tell. Slowly, the child extended her naked arms to either side and raised her head. Her eyes lolled in their sockets. She looked like she was staring *beyond* the airframe itself.

What in the hell?

When the child looked back at Sam, face to face, her eyes glowed with a fierce yellow luster, like kindling in a fire. Then the child reached out with her hands, far above her head.

Lightning exploded from her fingertips. It radiated in every direction. To Samantha it looked like the entire cockpit had been turned into a massive Van DeGraaff generator: the multicolored lightning escaped the cockpit in a trillion invisible waves.

Those waves burst forth from the vessel at a speed greater than the speed of light, or any other phenomenon known to mankind.

XI.

Ron Faught stared out the window in Ops: the sun shone over the water. Today, he decided, was a damn good day.

Something of which we have far too few. He teased the white curls of his salt-and-pepper moustache.

"Do you have any plans for today, Ramirez?"

"Maybe, sir: if this weather holds up I might try a little parasailing out in Triton's Bay."

Faught guffawed. "Sounds complicated, and needlessly dangerous."

"That it is, sir."

"Pity about my hip, then, or I'd just as soon join you." He chuckled. "Ah: getting old is no picnic."

"And no mean feat either, sir, considering your adventurous service record."

Ramirez looked up: "that is, if you don't mind me bringing it up."

"Oh I suppose I do mind, but what can I say? However, I'd just as soon not end up being the 'wise old man' in the base that everyone comes to for cookies and a story."

"You're not there yet, sir."

"*Yet.*" Faught threw back his white uniform cape in disgust. "I'm more disturbed by that comment than anything." The Commander's wrinkled face melted to a smile. He noticed the duty officer squinting at his console.

"What is it, Ramirez?"

"This signal I'm getting: it looks like..."

Before he could continue, a loud tone blared all across Command Ops.

"We've got an Active-System Scan, Commander."

“Call the fleet to arms, Lieutenant.” Faught ordered. He instantly began issuing orders to all his staff: all around the room techs scrambled into their ‘primary alert’ positions.

“Source, please, and strength of signal.” Faught barked.

Ramirez fumbled with his console. “It’s... oh, wow! It’s strong: holy crap is it strong!”

“Give me *specifics*, Mister Ramirez, or nothing at all.” The Commander warned.

“Sorry, sir. But I can’t analyze it.”

“Why not?”

“The strength is too great. The AS field is overwhelming our scanners.”

“Then just give me a source, Lieutenant.” Faught’s face was grim: if a scan were powerful enough to damage their sensors it meant that the target was quite close.

The damn thing could even be inside the Belt.

And then there was the question of how another Mass could possibly appear so soon after the death of its predecessor.

That should be impossible...

“Sir, the source...” Ramirez’s eyes flicked across the monitor. “Wait: that doesn’t make any sense...”

“What are the coordinates of the source, Lieutenant?” Faught growled with impatience. “Damn it: I won’t ask you nicely next time!”

“Zero-mark-zero.” The duty officer shook his head. He looked up at the Commander; his face was pale: “It’s us, sir: *we’re* the source.”

XII.

“Devotion rising.” Roont declared. “8... 10... fifteen-percent...”

Sven Wraith manned a second monitor, his arms crossed over his black uniform. “Impingement’s been detected.”

“Value?”

“Point-oh-three.”

“Fine.” Roont nodded.

So far, so good... Roont cast several worried glances at Mister AGP. The pilot stood, docile, in the opposite corner of the room like a juvenile crow. It made Roont uneasy, working with that Typer in the room. The doctor felt like he was trying to play water-polo in a pool with a sleeping shark.

A siren blared overhead. The computer’s voice droned:

“Impingement Factor of unit R-H-ERS has reached critical threshold: the Raiden’s IF value is steady at one-point-zero. Propagation initiated.”

Roont flipped the intercom and called down to Samantha Rayne:

“The link’s been calibrated.”

“Roger.” Samantha answered.

The Bydo doctor leaned back in his chair and sighed. He removed his glasses and wiped a mess of sweat off the lenses.

“Nothing but net.” He muttered. “Who’d have thought, huh?”

Sven Wraith’s lips flared into a sneer. He stood at the console, vindicated and proud, with his nose upturned like a pig’s. Roont noted the RL’s arrogance.

Pride is a sin, Sven: don't you know that?

Wraith might not be surprised by the success here today, but it was certainly enough to shock the hell out of Roont.

That pleasant shock didn't last a minute. Within moments, the monitor in front of Sven Wraith flashed with new numbers.

"Doctor: tell Rayne to back-off on the link."

Roont checked his numbers: "What're you talking about? Her devotion's dropped five points."

"But Impingement's risen to 1.15."

"That's impossible." Roont shoved the RL aside: it was something he'd never do as a matter of course, but circumstances dictated his immediate attention.

"Shit!" He cried. The doctor's fingers blazed across the console. "1.20... 1.30... 1.40..."

"Shut it down: now."

"I just tried, goddamnit! The system's not responding."

"What's the devotion?"

Roont shook his head: "Dropping like a rock."

"Then how—"

"We've got 'paradoxical motion'. Impingement is rising *independent* of mental devotion."

"That's impossible." Wraith threw the remnants of his cigar on the floor.

"That's what *I* just said, you ass!" Roont's eyes widened into marbles: the power output of the *Platinum Heart* was nose-diving.

"R-H-ERS just killed its latent impulse. Oh, hell! Autistic-Withdrawal is rising! Three seconds to absolute AW."

The Raiden was sucking its power reserves dry: 'closing in' on itself. After it accumulated all the power it could possible pull together the Raiden was sure to do something very nasty with it.

"Damn it!" Wraith cursed. "Stop it, now!"

Roont ignored the RL and grabbed his microphone:

"Lower the Keratinocyte shields! Initiate level-2 quarantine immediately. Do it now: move, move, *move!*"

Red lights blazed to life all around the bay. Four gigantic slabs of green metal descended around the Raiden from every direction: massive sheets of raw keratinocyte. But then, before that rusty sarcophagus had a chance to seal itself around the Raiden, something happened.

'It' happened.

The release was sudden, and extremely violent. Roont didn't have time to analyze the power spike before the monitor in front of him exploded: he fell backwards, bearing a thousand tiny shards of plastic in his face. At the same time his skin knotted-up with gooseflesh.

He could feel it.

Christ in heaven: I can actually feel it...

Wraith, ever the stoic type, barely moved when his computer monitor blew itself apart, but then his head rose in surprise.

Evidently he could feel 'it' too.

The RL exhaled, slowly and unevenly.

“What in the name of—”

That was as far as he got: instantly a blood-chilling scream flooded the control room. Roont would have guessed the scream was inhuman if he didn't see its source firsthand:

Justin Storm's body convulsed in a back-breaking spasm: his elbows remained cemented to his sides, as if bound, but his forearms and palms writhed out on either side of his body. His legs buckled, he rose up on his toes, and then his spine thrust backward farther than Roont though was humanly possible.

Is that decorticate posturing?

He'd seen such nightmarish spasms from people with brain damage, but never to this extreme: Justin's disturbing pose reminded him of a picture he'd seen in an antique medical textbook. What was it that poor wretch was suffering from, again?

Tetanus, Roont remembered. *It was advanced Tetanus.*

Storm screamed again even louder. Suddenly, with no warning, his back shuddered twice, very rapidly, and with flesh-shredding force his silver Link Prongs exploded, bloody and brilliant, from under his skin.

Justin slumped to his knees. His face was frozen in a look of agony.

His cries drowned down with a dry gurgle, as if he'd literally cried his lungs out of his chest. The pilot's jaw shuddered uncontrollably. Justin looked at his Aryl with pathetic, bulging eyes:

“Help... m-muh- m—...”

The Typer fell to one side, as limp as a sack of flour.

Sven Wraith rushed to his side. He rolled Storm over and pressed two fingers over his sweat-caked neck, digging them into Justin's carotid groove.

Dr. Roont gaped at this scene in a daze. He could barely hear Wraith screaming at him:

“Get the god-damned medics in here, *now!*”

XIII.

“So, you don't think it would work, then?”

“If you have to ask me that question, then no: it wouldn't work.” Chenine shook her head.

“And if I didn't ask?” Tabris speculated.

The silver-haired girl smiled at him for the first time that day. She stuck the rest of the energy bar in her mouth; Chenine chewed the gummy food like a heifer cow would chew her cud.

That's an unflattering comparison. Scott rebuked himself: just because he was being shot down by this pale-skinned beauty— and without mercy, too— that was no excuse for any bitterness on his part.

Although I am out a bottle of pure spring water, and a power bar...

In Scott's view, some compensation was due to him. Sadly, though, that was not in the cards.

Chenine shrugged. “Perhaps it would work if you did more *telling* than you did *asking*.”

“Telling?”

“But I don’t think you’re that type of person, J.G. Tabris.” She stood up.

“You mean *your* type? Maybe I’m not, I guess.” He bowed his head and sighed.

“But Lord knows I’d be willing to change that for someone like you.”

Then, out of nowhere and defying all expectations, Chenine bent down and planted her soft, supple lips right on Scott’s cheek. The kiss was transient, like a spark of static electricity, but, for Tabris, the aftershocks lingered far longer than that.

“*Je vous remercie,*” the girl whispered. Chenine turned her back on him and sauntered towards the cafeteria exit.

Scott touched his flushed cheek. He gaped with wonder, like a man who’d just been miraculously cured of a facial sore. His brain bobbed on a sea of disbelief. It was sweet, delirious disbelief!

The young man’s skin suddenly prickled with gooseflesh: he could still feel the electricity in the air.

That was really something!

Scott grinned like a dopey little schoolboy.

A horrified, tortured scream yanked him back to reality. Scott swiveled around just in time to see Chenine falling to the floor, limp, in the middle of the cafeteria. Her head slammed into the side of a table as she fell. A geyser of dark red blood immediately erupted from the concussion.

Base personnel quickly crowded around the girl. The mob gaped in disbelief while Tabris forced his way past them. He reached Chenine and tried to roll her onto her back, only to discover, with surprise, that her Link Prongs were exposed and fully erect.

Blood oozed from under the girl’s gossamer hair like a stain bleeding through a rug. Scott checked her pulse, then he turned toward the dumbstruck crowd:

“A defibrillator! I need a defibrillator! Somebody get me an AED, for God’s sake!”

XIV.

“That’s gotta be the worst thing I’ve ever seen.” Mattie held the deformed doll up in the light. She traced the doll’s unsightly seam down its face with two fingers.

“Well, I think it’s pretty damn spiffy-looking: like ‘Chucky’ run through a blender, don’t you think?”

“Thank you, my dear Lucas, for your very warm support.” Liesel stood behind the group. The low sun set her red locks afire with color. She smiled with satisfaction and pitched her arm forward in a dramatic arc. “I always knew I should have stuck with softball: I’m a natural!”

“A natural at winning very ‘unnatural’ things.” Jen muttered as Mattie handed her the freakish doll. “What the hell am I gonna do with this thing, Lees?”

“We could dress it up in emo clothing and call it ‘Jen’!” Mark teased.

“To hell with you all.”

Laughing hysterically, Liesel wrapped her arm around the girl as the group headed up the grassland. They walked toward Elysia Station (quite slowly, too: no one in the group was exactly sober at that time).

A massive peal of thunder exploded in the sky. Seconds later a strong wind hit the grasslands, traveling from beyond the purple seawater along the coast.

“Yeee-eee!” Mattie shivered and gripped her shoulders. “*That* sure made my skin crawl!”

“Lyin’ bastards at the weather bureau!” Lucas shielded his head and picked up his pace. “They said there wouldn’t be any bad weather rolling in from the Western Wastes today!”

Jen looked behind her, across the water.

“This isn’t coming from the Wastes...”

“Where, then?” Liesel blinked.

By now the steady stream of people migrating out of the fairgrounds had stopped: everyone felt this weird phenomenon, but no one could agree on what it was.

The people along the flower-lined slopes gradually stopped chattering: there was another noise in the air. It was a hollow rumbling. The grass and flowers at their feet shook at regular intervals as small tremors sized the landscape.

“What the hell is this?” Mattie cried.

Slowly, dreadfully, Jen’s eyes were drawn across the water to that lonely atoll: Asphodaline Island. The setting sun cast a beautiful silver lining across the ugly gray buildings that loomed there.

Without any warning the ceiling of the 20-story ‘hangar’ exploded in a shower of iron rivets and concrete. The blast was violent enough to send debris hurtling down on the seaward side of the midway.

A large cloud of dust rose over the imploding building: there was a shadow—a very *big* shadow—lumbering through the haze.

Jen’s knees quivered. She grabbed Liesel’s muscular arms like a child tugging at her parent.

“We have to go, we have to go, we have to go! Now!”

“What the hell is that, Jen?”

“*Lees*: We have to go, *now*!”

Two seconds later everyone covered their ears. Many people fell to their knees as a painful wail blared from across the bay. It rose into a powerful crescendo. The otherworldly shriek was loud enough to burst several eardrums in the crowd: many of the fairgoers cried out with the pain.

And, mixed in with that sound, there was another noise. It sounded like the hollow boom of a gigantic bird’s wings.

No, not exactly that: it sounded like the boom of fleshy, leather wings.

XV.

Chenine opened her eyes. She sat up, blinking.

The lights overhead were very bright. Three narrow medical beds lay in this room: one of them cradled her gown-clad body.

The infirmary. But why? She held her head in her hands.

“Looking for answers? You’re not gonna find them in your lap, you know.” She turned to one side: the pilot of the *Platonic Love* sat on the side of a bed. He was bare-chested, the scorched ‘x’ on his solar plexus clearly visible. He wore a pair of khaki

pants. One of his legs was scrunched up on the bed with him; the other dangled off, weaving to and fro absently. “But maybe I can help.”

“Why am I—”

“—here? ‘cause you had a really bad meal, today. That’s why.”

“What are you talking about. What meal?”

Justin smirked: “Let’s see: you started with a tasty little appetizer of spinal shock, followed by an ‘atonic’ seizure salad and then, the *pièce de résistance*: a sumptuous ‘myocardial infarction’ for dessert.”

“Myocardial... infarction?”

Justin thumped his naked chest. “You had a heart attack, Chenine. And a massive one, too. That’s after your spinal nerves went ape-shit crazy and sent your rubbery body down to the floor.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I know: it all sounds impossible, especially the heart attack...”

She reclined on her back. “No, it’s not. Even infants can have heart attacks, as long as the conditions are right for it. How bad was mine?”

“Massive enough to stop it cold.” His eyes narrowed. “And by that I mean *dead* cold.”

Chenine peeked under her gown: three small puncture wounds decorated her chest, just beneath her left breast. “Why are you here?”

“Because the same thing happened to me, too.” He described the events in docking bay R-C as the *Platinum Heart* completed its terminal activation. “As far as I can remember the clock read 1550 hours before I had my ‘stroke’ of bad luck. What about you?”

“I was in the mess hall with JG. Tabris. I was about to clock myself out...” she looked up at him, “I was rushing to get it done before 1600 hours.”

“So: just about the same time.” Justin nodded knowingly. “Do you believe in coincidences, Chenine?”

“To a point.”

“To *this* point?”

“No.”

Justin sighed and nodded. Silence crept into the air between them. Chenine lay supine in the bed, Justin kicked his foot back and forth.

“Chenine: I want to ask you a question. It might sound weird, but please bear with me.”

She noted the seriousness in his emerald eyes. It was identical to the gaze Scott Tabris had given her earlier.

Oh, no: this can’t possibly be happening twice in one day... and not from him, of all people...

“Go ahead.”

“Have you ‘seen’ things?”

“Seen things? Yes. Many times.”

“In your Raiden.” He growled slowly.

“Through the link? You mean hallucinations? Definitely not as much as you, I bet.”

Justin shook his head: “I’m talking about anything, no matter how trivial: sights, sounds, smells even. Or maybe a person?”

When he realized that Chenine didn’t mean to answer him, Justin laid all his cards on the table.

“Children, Chenine: what about children?”

The blood froze in the Ketoni girl’s veins. As it turned out, Justin was holding a royal flush.

“What?”

“*Chil-dren*: a child, a kid. Have you ever had visions of one?”

“No.”

“Never? Not *once* while you were flying the *Gazer*—”

“Never.” She wrapped her hands over her shoulders. “Not even once.”

Justin sighed again and ran a hand through his spiky hair. “Fine: never mind.” He rose off the bed.

“Where are you going?”

“To finish my standby shift.”

“After all this?”

“The doctor checked me: she says that I’m in perfect health, and I haven’t died for a whole hour.” He spread his hands and smiled.

“Then I should be fine, too.” Chenine rose off the bed, instantly got dizzy, and then slumped back down.

“No: *you’ve* got a concussion.” He smiled congenially. “And that means you’ve got 24 hours of medical observation ahead of you. Have fun.” He grabbed his shirt from a chair beside his bed and buttoned it up. “Oh— uh, they put all your clothes back up in the barracks. I guess the doctor thought you’d be less likely to go AWOL if you didn’t have any ‘cover’.”

The girl scowled. She watched him ramble to the door.

“You still haven’t replaced your pendant, I see.”

“I haven’t got around to it, yet.”

“Is it because you believe *El Shaddai* isn’t really out there to protect you?”

“Of course He isn’t. God doesn’t bother with trivial pursuits like us: He only watches over babies and fools, Chenine. The rest of us are on our own.”

Chenine thought about their new squadmate. “Captain Rayne: what’s her condition?” She asked this more out of curiosity than concern.

“Rayne’s fine: apparently she told the Aryl that nothing unusual happened during the whole process. It was ‘routine’, at least on her end.”

She nodded. “What do you think happened?”

Justin curled his tongue. “I don’t know, but something’s wrong.”

The girl shrugged. “There are many things ‘wrong’ with our program.”

“Why haven’t you voiced those concerns before?”

“Because I don’t care.” It was the easiest and, coincidentally, the frankest response she could give him.

“This is nothing like before, though. It’s worse. Something’s *very* wrong, now.” He considered the girl. “What do you think? Do you agree with me?”

Chenine nodded, but with no glimmer of interest in her eyes. “Yes: I guess I have to.”

“You don’t *have* to.”

“The evidence says I do.”

Justin crossed his hairless arms. “What’re you: a scientist?”

Chenine faced the other direction. She curled her hands over her chest.

“Tell me, Chenine: are you afraid? Are you afraid of the R-H’s?”

“No.”

“Then I think you might be a fool.” Justin shook his head and walked through the door. “The only blessing we’ve had today is that no one got seriously hurt. Not *this* time, anyway.” He flashed her one last foreboding look before disappearing from her sight.

XVI.

Jen cried in pain as Liesel thrust her body down into the dirt.

“*Mulpf!*” She gagged as powdered soil met her lips and clogged her lungs.

Fire raged through Elysia Fairground, setting the place alight like a Roman candle. Bodies were accumulating all around the devastated booths and attractions. A Ferris wheel lay overturned. Several limbs, both adult and child-size, peeked out from beneath the wreckage. Some were still attached to their lifeless bodies, while others lay on the open ground, amputated clean off.

Above this carnage, like a European dragon dancing over some mythical village, a massive shadow loomed. It bore ten-meter loomed ten-stories tall: a tower of disgusting Bydo tech. Empty, viscous slits lay where its eyes should be; a demonic yellow fire burned behind them.

Jen struggled to lift her head. She and Liesel lay behind the cover of a fair booth. Jen could barely see through the stall’s broken wood slats.

She saw Mattie on the other side: the girl stared at Jen from the middle of the midway. She was lying on her stomach, her soft eyes frosty and glazed over, bearing a horrible nothingness behind them. Blood pooled all around her. A piece of soft pink cord poked out beneath Mattie’s body, covered in blood and dirt.

It was her intestines.

More screams met her ears: these were familiar screams. Jen turned her head just in time to see Mark and Lucas running for their lives from the terrible O.P.I. They darted into a booth, immediately followed by the bat-demon. It landed on the structure with its powerful rear claws.

The booth imploded on itself, and then pieces of it burst out in all directions beneath the massive weight of the snarling beast. Nails, boards, bone and blood radiated from the wreckage.

Jen, still gaping in shock, vomited right into the dirt. She cried and struggled to get up at the same time.

“Get off me, Liesel: you’re breaking my back!”

As the fire raged and people fled, the gigantic demon turned on its clumsy axis and unfurled its enormous leather wings once again.

Coming this way? It’s coming this way! Christ!

The monster roared, kicking up enough wind to pepper Jen’s face with dust and vomit. She watched, terrified, as the incarnation opened its mouth, coughed, then threw a giant column of condensed fire straight toward the stall.

Jen Drake screamed.

But then a new shockwave hit her: a big red ship thundered between the demon and the girls' hiding place. The pillar of fire landed on the craft and parted harmlessly around its frame. Immediately the ship let loose with its own column of bright white light: the cannon fire hit wide right of the demon, tore through its wing like scissors through paper, and instantly set the monster's right arm and chest afire.

Jen could barely read the call-letters on the Raiden's side: R-S-VNS.

"A Striker! Liesel, it's a Striker! They've called in the cavalry: we're gonna be okay! And— and so will Mattie, an' Lucas, an' Mark! Of course they will! We're all okay! All of us are!"

Hysterical, she rolled out from under Liesel's body and flipped over to face her beloved:

Liesel Wright's sun visor lay in the dirt, below which her neck and the rest of her body rested, motionless. Between the visor and the neck, however, there was nothing but empty ground and blood.

"L-Liesel?" Jen grabbed her lover's shoulder. She shook her back and forth.

"Liesel: get up..."

Her eyes misted over. Jen's gaze was drawn to a spot ten feet away: the creepy doll was there. It lay on its side, grinning like a demented cat. Beside that rested another object: it was an object the size of a human head.

It was an object with playful, luxurious locks of red hair.

Her heart skipped in her chest: all the noises around her— the fire, the explosions, the incarnation's screeching— vanished from her mind. Jen Drake's throat knotted up once, twice, then three times before she was finally able to scream.

Hers was a scream more blood-chilling and terrifying than anything the Bydo have been able to produce, or are ever likely to. She screamed erratically and hard, longer than anyone could count, thrashing in the crimson dirt: a small, pitiable dot in a sea of soil-laden blood. The sun finally set behind the horizon.

It was going to be a beautiful twilight.

