



## Terra Incognita

### I.

The highest departments of Allied Military intelligence began investigating the Ceresland massacre, as well as the defoliation of large swathes of the Midnight Forest. None of this, however, was of concern to the *Tears' Shower Squadron*. As a matter of fact, owing to circumstances, Sven Wraith put his pilots on leave rotation: three days apiece, one person at a time, as soon as they returned to base.

Chenine went first, and by the time she slunk back in after the third day— like a housecat walking through the door after an inexplicable absence— the black suits in the Military Investigative Branch started barking up the Base-10 tree: they were looking for official statements from the women, as well as a prolonged ‘chat’ with Justin. Given his claim of a previous encounter with the ‘Entity’ (no one was willing to refer to it as ‘Antithesis’ yet) Justin Storm was their new man of the hour.

Wraith, however, was sensitive to his pilot’s need for privacy, and on top of that he didn’t want Justin anywhere near the MIB anyway, so he used a few personal connections to get the black suits away from his pilot, albeit temporarily. Justin couldn’t quite say *how* his Aryl fended off the MIB, but Wraith always had the bargaining chip of shame: the black suits had a soured history with both Justin and the *TSS*, and they certainly didn’t want the embarrassing details of Justin and Chenine’s false-imprisonment made public.

“‘False-imprisonment’? I’d call what happened to you ‘kidnapping’, Justin.” Laura Hayle’s peppery voice sang out through his canalphones.

“No: only women and children get kidnapped, Lieutenant. Men are ‘falsely-imprisoned’.”

“Sexist bastard.” Another voice grumbled.

Justin’s face ticked up with a reflexive, joyless smile. “Ah: didn’t know you were there, Jen.”

The *Platonic Love* rocketed out over the sea. Justin pushed his engines to the breaking point, and a massive tail of blue fire followed in his wake as he brought his Raiden down low across the moody banks of the Plutonian Shore. He flew low enough to kick up a train of dust and off-color rocks along the beach and, crucially, he was low enough to develop communication problems.

This was intentional; to say that he wasn’t in the mood for conversation would be a gross understatement.

After Chenine returned to base Justin took his much-needed vacation in stride: he shut himself up inside his apartment for two days straight, emerging only once to use the swimming pool on the roof. He couldn’t count on any meaningful exercise, though. The cold, fluid embrace of the water reminded him too much of his encounter at Deimos; it brought flashbacks to Justin of the strange chrysalis he was held in during his torture at the hands of that ‘Antithesis’ creature.

On the third day of his vacation— as he sat in his darkened kitchen curled up on a stool with bloodshot eyes and frayed nerves— he decided to cut his ‘R ‘n R’ time short: Justin made a call to Wraith and tried to pass off his skittishness for link-withdrawal (this was at least partially true). He was allowed to come in that afternoon and granted access to his Raiden: that vessel he both loved and despised.

Like it or not, Justin was as dependant on the *Platonic Love* for his own mental stability as the ship’s flesh was dependant upon him for survival. He wasn’t forthcoming with the base doctor or his support team on just how deep this codependency ran, but he figured that people should be smart enough to guess. The fact that he redlined his link-devotion at the 75% mark in less than thirty seconds during the squad’s recent VSEPRS devotional-qualifiers should tell people something. Scott Tabris might have put it best: Justin’s prowess with his Pragma-link was ‘scary’.

He sighed and brushed his sweaty forehead against the cold crystal canopy: Justin’s body was overheating, but it was damn hard for him to tell. The feel of his Raiden’s fuselage cutting through the cold Dead Lands sky was much more noticeable to him now than the temperature tantrum his little human body was throwing. This was another example of the extreme power the link had over him: the VSEPRS— ‘Variations in Sensation to Elicit Pilot-Link Repulsion Symptoms’— worked under just such a setup: he, Sam and Chenine would operate their Raidens in the Zephyr Chamber beneath Base-10 while the wind tunnel’s turbines shot out either blisteringly hot air or an arctic gale. At the same time their cockpits were saturated with the opposite phenomenon: the cabin air conditioning would either be shut off or cranked up to full-power, and with that odd dichotomy— their bodies suffering one temperature extreme and their R-Types another— the pilots would be forced to raise their link devotion as high as possible. The catch, of course, is that the primitive part of the human brain can’t handle such a dichotomy under very high devotional numbers. Therefore these sessions— the ‘Vespers’— weren’t easy, not by a long shot: Samantha struggled to pass half her tests. Chenine could keep her stats at the minimal acceptable level most of the time.

*It’s all a matter of conflicting interests: the body’s need to respond to that kind of temperature abuse is opposite that of their Raiden’s. The only choices are to either focus*

*attention on oneself— draw brain power away from the link in order to bring one's hypothalamus back to reality— or ignore one's own body in favor of maintaining the effects of that blessed little Pragma-link.*

Predictably, the latter course of action is somewhat suicidal.

Due to power consumption issues involved in the Zephyr Chamber, Justin's support crew never tested him long enough to see if he'd ever cut out on his link.

And, predictably, he never did.

*Would that I had the same prowess in our mock-dogfights...*

On that score he currently sat at a laughable 0 and 3 against Samantha.

Today he'd taken the ship out for a 'routine' stress-test, supposedly nice and easy, but in truth Justin was beating the hell out of the *Love*. He was flying much too fast, and pushing the ship far too hard. The vessel protested in due course: the overheating engines were a burning stitch in Justin's kidneys; the wobbling ailerons off to either side of the cockpit were a jarring pain in his shoulder blades, and the harried torus reactor in the bowels of the ship struck him as a dull, throbbing pain in his chest.

"Don't be a baby, now..." This admonition was for himself as much as the ship.

Within ten minutes the *Platonic Love* was buzzing the desolate slopes of the Southern Dead-Lands. The off-colored rocks stacked up as far as the eye could see in strange, lonely formations set against a hazy ochre sky. They pointed up at the cold heavens like the fingers of gaunt giants protruding from the diseased land they'd been buried in long ago. A black, rocky crag jutted out in the distance, and above that another finger pointed. But this finger was different: too perfect to be a chance formation, but too ruined and diseased-looking not to be sinister as hell.

*The Dead-Land's Lighthouse...*

Back in its heyday it was a beacon of safety, a guiding light to warn seaborne vessels of the approaching cliff face, which would have been little more than a starless blanket on the water: mysterious, invisible, and lethal. Was the lighthouse a comfort? Sure it was, but the sea that it serviced— and indeed the *world* it was created for— had long since disappeared.

These days a meager cliff face was the least of mankind's worries. They had an enemy which, though ultimately faceless, was nonetheless quite real, quite visible, and quite understandable. The Bydo Empire could be seen, it could be heard, it could be scientifically understood, and— most importantly— it could be killed, if only by snippets at a time.

But the bulk of Justin Storm's worries *were* analogous to a black, unseen cliff face. His enemy was bathed in shadows, nebulous and unquantifiable: a blanket swamping even the stars. What was 'Antithesis', exactly? Justin said so very little in his official reports, but he'd thought so much about his encounter since then. What happened at Deimos? Justin's easy answer— the one he told himself— was that something had been stolen from him: a drill that was not a drill bored into him and ripped out something special, or at least copied it.

*Something 'special', Justin?*

There was that voice that told him otherwise, however: something wasn't really stolen from him, but *given to* that strange creature in the darkness. That special thing—

*How 'special' can one man's own hatred for his species be, Justin?*

—that thing wasn't gleaned from him in a protracted fight, but rather surrendered to the creature: given willingly and even enthusiastically, despite the torture Justin endured in the process. The entity that emerged from the shadows of the *Quarantania* was not born from a theft, or even from an accident. Justin surrendered his very truth to the thing, his hatred and his resentment toward the world at large: cold-eyed Commanders, frigid, sneering Scotsmen and stone-hearted pilots, the military he worked for, the civilians he lived amongst, everything and everyone.

This was Justin's overriding thesis, the message foremost on his mind: all the glorified primates of the Blue Marble deserved whatever destruction came. That was the truth he surrendered to the entity.

*A gift given without a hint of love, but only a sense of obligation... and hatred...*

The creature called 'Antithesis' was not born from an accident: he was born from a wish.

"That's not true," Justin snarled to himself. "The Bydo don't *need* any impetus to hate humans: that's their whole friggin' day job, for God's sake."

*But of course your Deimos Demon doesn't seem to keep regular Bydo hours, does he, Justin? Could he be 'moonlighting', maybe? Could he be eking out a living using that delicious start-up money you so generously provided?*

He could deny it all he wanted, but these self-reassuring platitudes were less and less a comfort. Whatever Antithesis was—a psychotic Bydo core, some kind of monster drawn in from the Burning Heaven Lands or even a combination thereof—one thing was certain: if he really was still alive, he was most assuredly going to make himself known.

*After all: he couldn't let that little crime-scene out at the research station be his claim to fame, right? He seems the kind of guy that thinks 'big', don't you think?*

"I don't know." Justin answered his own question, his voice burning with irritation and foam curling around his blistery, chapped lips. "I don't know because I don't know him, and I don't want to, either." He wagged his head. "Goddamnit, Justin: 'he' isn't even a real 'he'!"

*Would you prefer 'it'?*

"No..."

*Or, how about 'she'?*

"Not that, either..."

He hung his head. His conversation with Jen and the Lieutenant was irritating, but this back-and-forth with himself was outright infuriating. Justin had neither the energy nor the desire to trade barbs with his own brain, but there was only one other kind of conversation he could possibly engage in at the moment, so he pursued that instead: Justin dug his mind even deeper into the link, worming into the electrical innards of the *Platonic Love* until every ache and pain in his body evaporated like rainwater on a hot asphalt road. Justin sighed, turned his head to one side and let the sweat fall off his face.

Two cold hands crawled up his shoulders, frosty and sharp like jagged ice picks on his skin.

"Huh? Oh, I didn't think I was in it enough for you to come around, little guy..." His voice was a raspy whisper. "Do me a favor and show me the Tree, Quint."

Those ice-cold hands dug deeper.

"I really like that Tree, you know. It's so soothing..."

His skin prickled with gooseflesh— a merciful coolness— but then the sensation went beyond that: a numbness rose in his blades, soon replaced by a powerful burning sensation, like frostbite.

“Hey, Quint?”

He turned his head:

“Quint?”

Then he yelped.

The face staring down at him was neither callow nor innocent-looking. On the contrary, it was awkward and hideous: a mess of cruelty wrapped up in rubbery grey skin. Dead black eyes glared down at Justin with an absolute, soul-piercing gaze. The face was blocky and artificial, bearing two lines down either side of a sharp, chiseled jawbone— dimples running from eyes to chin— like streaks of crocodile tears.

It grabbed his shoulders even tighter, and then it laughed.

It laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

Justin didn't get the joke: he passed out immediately.

## II.

“What's doing it, then?”

“Subcutaneous injections. Well, I mean micro-drills: incisions into the outer—”

“With karat brine?”

“No: that had no effect. We upped the therapy to shots of concentrated slurry. We started at 9-karat's strength. The response you see now is from a 14-karat solution.”

Something was crawling on his flesh: along his arm, along one leg. It felt like a thousand scurrying termites meandering all along his limbs, then his trunk. His neck quivered, oozed, like a stain seeping into a carpet.

That doesn't even make any sense!

Was it his *flesh* that was crawling?

“How interesting. 14-karat is half of absolute purity, is it not? My, my: that's far stronger than a typical therapeutic dose, isn't it?”

That voice— the one asking all the questions— was so soft, and yet so commanding at the same time. There was warmth to it, a smattering of feigned urgency bobbing above an undertow of insincerity. It couldn't be categorized at the drop of a hat, but if he had to pick one word to describe it, he would've said ‘grandfatherly.’

The termites were now crawling around his head, up through his nostrils.

“Well, this is a bloody nightmare of a case. Not the ‘typical’ scenario at all, wouldn't you agree, Mister...”

“...Pyle. Call me Mister Pyle.”

The termites trickled over his eyes, his hair, and back along the nape of his neck. His darkness turned into a fog, and the fog cleared into patches of gray.

A white-gloved hand hovered over his body. One of the voices spoke again:

“Here... and here... all along there. Scar tissue? I think it is: that's skin-grade collagen. For the love of man: there's a month's worth of healing tissue all down the line!”

“A month of healing in an hour's time.”

“Not quite. Only on the trunk, and the forehead here...”

A touch, and blinding pain.

The grandfatherly voice: “Ah, but to leave the rest of the body so broken and torn! So what, pray tell, makes those wounds so special? What do we think, lady and gentlemen? What says the trauma surgeon?”

A pause.

Another voice: “These areas of scarring: the wounds that made them— or the wounds that *would* have made them— represent catastrophic injury, and the shearing runs all the way down into the vital organs. I’ve never seen scar tissue like this, before. Never.”

“The composition is really that alien to you?”

“No, it’s not that.”

A pause.

“You see, in my opinion at least, these wounds were not survivable.”

Yet another voice: “That’s a fancy way of saying that he should be dead, Mister Pyle.”

A Pause.

“And *she* is still waiting out there, I see. I thought we had the nurses remove her.”

The grandfatherly voice: “Oh, loyalty to squadmates is everything, don’t you know: let the poor child wait...”

Bright patches of light gave way to jumbled images. He saw the darkness beyond all the light, a field of brilliant white stars: the sleek metal outline of a window. There was a body standing in front of the starfield, black in the shadows with a strange metal cane resting between his feet. The man’s hair was an extraordinary shade of gray.

“It’s quite brilliant, isn’t it: the power of the human body to survive? And the power of a human *being* to survive, well, that’s more extraordinary still.”

“You call this... this *thing* a ‘being’?”

“Indeed. Although a few hours ago it was more of a ‘doing’, wasn’t it? That Ferryman would certain agree, wouldn’t it?” A chuckle. The grey-haired man laughed alone. He continued talking once he was finished snickering:

“It’s remarkable how the purest things can be so easily corrupted...”

A brush: a gloved hand across his naked sternum.

“...a compromise in *form* to continue with proper function.”

The speaker’s face lay shrouded in shadow: only a wrinkly chin and pearl-white smile penetrated the haze. The man leered down at him with a Cheshire cat grin:

“The human body is a work of art, you see, but the human *being* is a work of God. Any number of things can kill a body, but what about the being? Give the body a fighting chance at defending itself and you’ve got a most worthy adversary: here is a most challenging figure. But if you give the *being* a chance to defend itself, well...”

“‘Well’ what, Mister Pyle?”

Another brush: the gloved hand over his sternum. That pearl-white smile widened:

“In the ‘being’, well: *here* be dragons...”

### III.

The smell of bitter lemons on coffee grounds roused him from sleep.

*Ugh: what a scent.*

It was scent that made no sense.

*Nonsense.*

But, in a way, it did make its own sense.

*In a sense...*

Justin shook his head and cleared the cobwebs:

*“In-cense.”*

*“That makes *much* more sense...”*

His voice was dry, crackly, and his throat ached even with the few words he'd spoken. Justin sat up, got to his haunches and rubbed his forehead. He was in a dry pit of quarried rock bricks stacked one atop another; the rock shell rose about three feet before it was replaced by a tight wood thatching that arced far overhead, culminating in a vaulted roof nearly invisible beneath a haze of smoke. A large fire burned in a crude hearth in the middle of this structure, casting eerie shadows all about the place.

From across the fire, on the other side of the room, a pair of black eyes sparkled.

*“Where am I?”*

An ancient voice responded, dry as burned sandpaper:

*“Hoozdo.”*

Justin sank back on his rear and slowly pushed himself up against the far stone wall of the hut: if anything, the added distance would give him a slight tactical advantage should he need to do anything ‘drastic’ in the very near future.

*Although that stuff is really more Sam’s thing...*

This motion made him take note of his clothing: a tight, itchy top with long-sleeves and dun-colored fabric mesh, possibly cambric, along with similar long-legged pants, although these were clearly hewn of horsehide leather. He scratched at the stiff bottom garment.

*“Mustang? Poor mustang...”*

An incredibly long, almost alien hand rose up on the other side of the fire; it pointed at Justin with oversized, frail fingers:

*“Nitin.”*

He stared at the old man, then at his own legs:

*“Is that right? I could’ve sworn it was *tanning*...”*

A drop cloth behind the ancient man parted and a second person entered the hut. He immediately cast a pot of strange colored water over the fire; it erupted into green flames, scattering smoke, heat, and even more of that musty incense smell all over the place. The firelight subsided, allowing Justin to see more of his surroundings.

This second person, a man far younger than the corpse across from him— and likely even younger than Justin himself— bowed before the wrinkled corpse and pointed back out the tent flap:

*“Náltzááh.”*

The old man nodded twice: once to the youth, and a second time in Justin’s direction. The younger man took note of the pilot, now awake and alert. He flicked his own gaunt fingers beneath his chin, mimicking a vocalization:

*“English?”* He asked.

Justin nodded.

“That is lucky, at least.” The youth smiled. His eyes were small and black as coals, similar to the elder man, and his skin was an odd thing: it was creamy, smooth like milk and bore no disfigurements or even moles, but the color was unique, almost grey and almost violet. It was, in fact, a muted shade of purple.

Justin took this observation and synthesized it with others: stark eyes, long limbs and leathery, horse-drawn faces. He knew who these people were, now.

“Dead-Landers...” he mumbled.

The elder turned to the youth and said something with the inflection of a question; the young man answered with parted lips and a sneer in Justin’s direction, but the elder parted his own ancient lips and cooed soothingly, moving one alien hand back and forth in a gesture of calmness.

Justin wondered whatever could be the matter.

*Well: didn’t you just call them...*

He drew a sharp breath:

“*Teraspera!* Oh, God: that’s what we call you! I’m sorry!”

The youth crossed his arms, still scowling, and the ancient man looked back across the fire at Justin with his oak-root face.

He took a lip in his teeth. Justin didn’t know how to get out of this diplomatic hole—and being forced to do so just after waking up seemed terribly unfair— so he got to his knees and bowed his head. He stared down at the sand floor for a good ten seconds, then raised his head and looked at the elder, then the youth: neither spoke. Evidently he had to break the ice.

“How was that for an apology, huh?” He looked at the youth with a sheepish grin.

“Not so good: you just pledged your loyalty to the tribe, and your hand in marriage to his daughter’s firstborn child.”

Justin clucked his tongue: “It was something in the translation, I think...”

“That matters not to custom.”

“What, then: his granddaughter?”

“If he had one.”

“He doesn’t?”

The young man shook his head.

“So, then...”

“You *would* be off the hook.”

“Would?”

He scowled with faded ivory teeth: “You *would* be off the hook, if not for me.”

Justin’s face scrunched while he thought about this, then his eyes widened.

After that he noticed a cruel grin spreading across the younger man’s face.

“I didn’t pledge anything like that, did I?”

“You are still alive, so, no: I think not.”

Justin smiled, nervous.

The ancient man got to his feet with the help of a gnarled bone cane:

“*Ashiiké t’óó diigis...*”

He gestured at the youth, said something else and then bowed at Justin, moving his hand in some ritualistic sign (a benediction, Justin thought):

“*Hosh,*” the man said. Then he fumbled through the tent flap.

“I take it I *did* apologize, then?”



“You did. And he accepted it.”

Justin got to his feet; the wisteria-skinned young man did not uncross his arms.

“But you didn’t, did you? Because I *am* sorry—”

The youth waved a hand: “*Shinóól’íí*. Elder Cahua’s judgment is binding for his people; his acceptance echoes within me.”

“Not too loudly, though...”

The Terasperan extended a hand across the fire; his massive fingers were closed and the palm faced Justin.

“Nazco,” he said.

Justin nodded, awkward. “Yeah... and what does that mean?”

“My name.”

The pilot clucked his tongue.

“Ah,” he made the same gesture. “Uh, Justin.”

The youth moved his hand forward; Justin reciprocated, until they barely touched. Fortunately for him, Nazco then withdrew his hand. The pilot smiled:

“Uh, well, Nazco: I wonder if you could answer two things for me?”

“Mmm?”

He motioned to his body: “What the hell is going on here, and where in God’s name is my ship?”

Then, for the very first time, the youth laughed.

#### IV.

Jagged gray dunes lurched about in all directions. The blasted desert rock rusted away beneath a sickly ochre sky. Black-bodied scorpions meandered over the landscape, basking in the highlands, while the dark sandy basins hid pockets of bland foliage. The scent of rotted apples permeated the air. It was noon, vaguely, but without any clear view of the sun this whole land seemed to be trapped in an atrophied, eternal twilight. A flock of indescribable birds soared in the distance, their translucent wings flapping in disquieting harmony; curious, shimmering eyes gaze out of small holes in the rocky lowlands. Nothing deserved to live in this devilish purgatory, but Mother Nature had a sick sense of stubbornness, and everywhere there was at least a small sign of some creature’s wan presence, persisting in the blasted hardscrabble land.

But nowhere, one might say, was there a true sign of *life*.

Until now: presently the pale hills of the Dead-Lands echoed with the remnants of a very loud curse word.

Justin kicked the side of his ship, the half that stuck out of the ground. The *Platonic Love* lay buried in the side of a sloping dune, shimmering on the rocks like a dull iron igloo.

Another bombastic curse word exploded across the desert land.

“Link-shock...” he rammed one fist against the hull. “Unbelievable.”

Nazco stood on top of the dune; he motioned to the other side:

“We found you there, inside another piece.”

“The cockpit!” Justin groaned. “It’s modular, not part of the half-car shell.

Damnit!”

The two took a brief walk over the dune and ran into the battered outer casing of the pilot's cabin. The canopy maw was wedged open and gashed along the rim; the crystal canopy bore several small dents, plus spider-webbing from impact.

"They needed to force open the mouth; we could not break through the glass." Nazco said.

"Yeah, few things can. Jeez: what a mess..." Justin crawled through the opening.

"All that white water was there from before."

"Mmm: I don't mean that. That was my collision-foam." He poked his head out: "It, uh, sprays into the cabin and solidifies, cushioning the pilot during impact." He demonstrated, rather unconvincingly, with two hands. "It's, well, kinda like a—"

"Pillow." Nazco crossed his arms.

"Yeah. It's a crash-survivability feature the R 'n D people started toying with a few years ago; at first they could never get the brass to listen to their proposals, not over all the laughter, anyway..." He disappeared back into the cabin. "But now even vintage R-Types are lining up to get retrofitted with it: pilots swear by the stuff."

Nazco wedged his own body up inside the cockpit: "Can such crashes really be so common?"

Justin made a noise somewhere between a grunt and a snarl.

"You'd be surprised. Anyway, a Raiden can survive most kinds of impact events with ease;" he thumped his chest, "*we* can't, so we can use all the help we can get." He motioned to the cockpit chair: "Have a seat, if you want."

Justin spent the next ten minutes rooting through his storage compartment. When he was finished he assembled several small boxes on top of the dune. Nazco sat in the pilot's chair during this time, brushing his gaunt hands over the main console.

"Your machine is destroyed, then?"

"No." He shook his head. Justin fumbled with an oblong tube, and eventually managed to crack open the casing and extend a large, fat antenna out of the device. He set it on tripod legs atop his supply boxes. "Matter of fact, could you put your finger on the console for me: the middle part where there's nothing but black space?"

Nazco perched his lips, dubious, but he complied with the request. The whites of his eyes soon bulged:

"*Naa'na'*! My— my skin—"

Justin waved his hands: "That's normal, Nazco: don't worry."

The Terasperan did not appear convinced.

"It's just, uh..." Justin moved his hands around in another equally pointless gesture, "it's just a *power*, pulsing through the metal—"

"Electric conductance, you mean."

"Yeah: that's it." He got to his knees and toyed with the oversized antenna until a small red light on the tip blinked on and off rapidly.

Nazco lifted his hands from the display: "It all glows orange..."

"It doesn't like you." Justin smiled. He was nearly finished setting up the broadcast array. "The computer usually starts up on its own, right after the electricity gets flowing, but security's a factor: the thing is conditioned to respond to just one person's presence."

"It is taught recognize you, you mean?"

Justin tapped the outer casing of his antenna; the device emitted a low, droning hum. “Uh, yeah: the rhythm of my heart, the contours of my eyes, the way I sit in the chair...”

The Terasperan crossed his arms again:

“Biometrics, you mean.”

“Mmm.” Justin’s attention was divided, but he soon realized what he was doing. He stepped towards the shattered cockpit and looked up at the Terasperan:

“Nazco, I apologize. I’m very sorry. I won’t do that again.”

There may have been resentment in the horse-faced man’s black eyes, but there was no malice: he nodded and uncrossed his arms.

“Do you want to sit here, then?”

Justin shook his head: “Most of the avionics up there are fried; I doubt that the personnel-recognition hardware’s operable. Doesn’t matter, though: the front section also activates by codeword. That won’t turn on the fusion reactor, but...” Justin stretched, popping his vertebrae as he looked across the dune at the main fuselage of his ship. “But that doesn’t really matter now, I guess.”

Nazco squinted at the console, examining every curious detail. “What are these ‘code-words’, then?”

“Anything and everything. Our brass makes pilots pick one as an added safeguard, and most high-level ground crew technicians have one too, if they need to play around with the ships on a regular basis. Some people are even given a skeleton-key codeword that affects every ship on a base. Our Quartermaster’s codeword is ‘Sandleford’ but that uses voice-recognition, too. Mine doesn’t.”

“What is your codeword, then?”

Justin hunkered down and adjusted the angle of his antenna:

“Slowhand.”

The Terasperan’s face drooped. He blinked in confusion.

“Slow... hand?”

Random lights flared all through the cockpit; most of the casings that held them were shattered, so the flashes were unusually bright and erratic. It was more akin to the ambience of a dance floor, and it spooked Nazco enough to send the youth out of the pilot’s chair and back onto the dune with Justin.

“Thank you, kindly.” Justin’s antenna casing flared to life with its own array of lights. The large red bulb at its tip soon flickered like a candle on the wick. He sat on an emergency supply crate and cleared his throat:

“To any and all Allied Military personnel who may be listening, this is Flight Lieutenant Justin Storm, personal access code 12-15-22-5, security clearance Belladonna, hailing from AM Aquatic Base-10, pilot of the R-Type vessel *Platonic Love*, daughter of *Cross the Rubicon*, third vessel in the Raiden-Hybrid lineage, the last in maneuverability but the first in *durability*, thank you very much...”

He looked over at Nazco with a wry grin, but the Terasperan’s face was expressionless. The Typer coughed uncomfortably and continued:

“Anyway, to any and all AM personnel: my wings are clipped. I say again: my wings’re clipped. My Raiden’s about 75-percent intact, give or take. It’s nothing a few dozen hours of blood and sweat down in the development center can’t fix, though. As for myself: I’m sitting at 100-percent fitness—”

Justin sat up; another massive crack erupted from his back.

“Or at least 90-percent, anyway.” His brow twitched; he looked over at Nazco and covered the antenna speaker with one hand:

“Nazco: was anything else discovered in this area? Anything at all?”

The youth stretched one purple-colored hand westward: “Yes, glass covers the desert, like snowfall. All along the ground, for perhaps half a mile, there is a sea of glittering shards all across the lowlands.”

“What color is the stuff?”

“Black, like the night sky without a moon.”

Justin’s lips ticked up with a nascent smile; he uncovered the antenna speaker. “The Antibydo injector on my control rods performed adequately: Force Orb R-HB-II has been destroyed. I say again: my Force Orb has been successfully scrubbed. No need to bring out the cavalry on this one, just a few flatbeds, and maybe some seltzer water for my headache...”

He pushed the antenna away and stared up at his decapitated cockpit canopy with a forlorn sigh. Nazco ventured to speak once it was clear that the pilot was finished:

“And now they will come for you?”

He kicked the stack of crates: “Yeah, if they could hear any of that message, which they can’t.” Justin motioned to the sooty wilderness all around them: “I can’t kick out long-range communications through a messed-up soup like this. It’s this god-damned wasteland: this fucking nightma—”

Nazco crossed his arms again.

“No, no, no: I’m sorry. I’m just pissed.”

“Pissed?” He perched his pallid lips.

“Upset. At myself. My Aryl’s gonna kill me, when he can get his hands on me, anyway.”

“How will your people look for you?”

Justin motioned to the blinking antenna. “They already are. They’ve got enough telemetric data to pinpoint this crash site to within a few hundred miles or so, and when they finally get within range of my broadcast this transmitter will start looping my message. But I did pick up a large ball-lightning storm on my scanners forming west of here, and if it moves into the area it might delay the search party by a day or so, but not more than that. Once they get within earshot of me the transmitter will guide them to the wreck, and the implants in my body will guide them to me. Not that they’ll need those, of course: I’ll go ahead and set up a little base camp here on this dune.”

“No, I do not think so.”

Justin blinked and looked over at Nazco, trying to gauge the gaunt Terasperan’s meaning:

“Uh, I have all the supplies I need for a few days’ holiday: tent, sleeping bag, thermal generator and some Joule-Jewel rations. Hell, all I need now is some smores and a book of ghost stories and I’ll be all set.”

The Terasperan’s nose twitched: “‘...smores’? Some kind of... nutrition?”

Justin laughed. It was the first time he’d done so all day: “It’s food, but I wouldn’t call it ‘nutrition’. It’s kind of a New England thing, Nazco. Something for little kids, or at most teenagers.”

“Humph. I see. In that case you can make some back at the settlement, if you wish: you will not be staying up here alone. Besides, you will want that curious suit of yours back, no?”

“But I’m—”

“You are the responsibility of Elder Cahua. The moment we took you under our care we were obliged to shelter you until you are safely reunited with your people.”

Justin got to his haunches and sighed: “That another one of your customs?”

“Not at all.”

“What, then, curiosity?”

“In a fashion.”

“About what? Myself?”

The young Terasperan smiled: “No: about these ‘smores’ you speak of...”

## V.

Nazco was only fifteen years old.

That was a shock to Justin, whose diplomacy and knowledge of foreign cultures were rudimentary, at best, but at the same time he couldn’t be blamed for the misunderstanding. The kid nearly towered over him for one thing, and although most of his stature was a combination of overly lanky legs and a thin, giraffeish neck Nazco still bore the countenance and emotional maturity of an adult. Justin’s first inclination was to assume that all Dead-Landers, like cattle, were bred to grow up and mature faster than jackrabbits on erectile dysfunction medication, but he shelved this vulgar idea: that kind of ugly thought was more Jen’s thing than it was his. In all honesty Nazco was probably even smarter than Justin; his mastery of foreign languages was impressive, anyway.

*He and Chenine would probably get along much better than he and I are.*

In the end, though, that was a pointless observation.

To clarify, Justin wouldn’t every claim that these ‘traditionalists’ (whom he’d just as soon call ‘regressors’) didn’t creep the hell out of him or put him on his guard; they most certainly did. But Justin was just barely open-minded enough to give peace a chance. In any event, he didn’t really have much choice but to go along with things. And the first thing he ‘went along’ with was Nazco, following the Terasperan 10 kilometers back through the desert wasteland all the way up to the limestone shelf plateau where his village lay.

“We washed this for you,” he said. The youth handed Justin’s black flight suit over to him, folded and clean, once they were back at the oblong thatched hut he’d woken up in that morning. The youth did not spare Justin’s feelings: “This garment was unbelievably filthy, Justin.”

The pilot blushed: “Yeah, well, they kinda get that way; it’s hot in the cockpit. I can’t really smell my own funk when I’m piddling around with my ship, anyway.”

Nazco cocked his head: “Piddling...?”

*Ah: he and Chenine would get along just grand...*

Justin unfolded the garment and shrugged: “I can see how I’d have frozen my ass off in this thing. It’d be like walking around in a refrigerator wearing a hospital gown; this place is pretty cold for a ‘desert’, you know. Anyway, this suit’s not really designed to insulate pilots from the cold; it defends us from other things...” He waved his hands

over his cambric shirt and mustang leathers: “Coincidentally, when would you like these back?”

“They are yours.”

Justin arched a brow. “But, the craftsmanship: these are very expensive—”

“No, they are not: to us they are ordinary. My record for tanning is five in a day.”

“What, the pants? Nazco: *you* make these?”

The Terasperan shrugged: “I did, until I was old enough to engage in more prestigious work.”

All in all, for a Dead-Lander, this kid was quite skillful in making Justin feel terribly inadequate as a human being.

*Tch! He's better at it than the Aryl.*

Justin was taken to see old Cahua again, this time in the ancient man’s residence at the village center. The Terasperan settlement was constructed like a giant wheel on the limestone shelf with all agricultural and craft production nestled near the center, along with a large stone mason meeting hall, and on the outskirts of all this was a crèche for children too young to tend to regular chores. The children playing within it were small, not yet attaining that extraordinary growth spurt seen in juvenile Dead-Landers. Although healthy, they appeared lankier and scrappier than children in the Great City, especially compared to the oversized adults all around them. Their ages were apparent from the colors on their skin: the very youngest bore tanned brown skin with pale milky blemishes blossoming over their large wrinkled brows and necks. Older kids were already growing into that pale purple hue they would carry into adulthood.

Delicately sewn gravel paths radiated out from the village center like a series of xeriscaped spokes, curling through rows of small hut dwellings and ending on the village outskirts, where small stone fortifications and carved rock watchtowers provided adequate defense against the harsh desert wastes beneath the shelf.

In reality, the setup of the village was not that different from Base-10’s.

*With the exception of the crèche, of course...*

The ancient Terasperan smiled with grey teeth as Justin and Nazco entered his dwelling:

“*Hosh.*” He nodded to Justin.

Nazco smiled very faintly at this.

Cahua seemed pleased to hear that Justin’s Raiden was not significantly damaged, if only out of polite respect.

“Any other type of ship would be severely damaged,” Nazco translated for Justin, “but the ship I pilot is unique. The outside is nothing but artifice: a disposable protective case, not unlike a hermit crab’s shell—”

Nazo glared at Justin after he translated this last bit:

“It would be wise to avoid comparisons to water life.”

The pilot took a lip in his teeth: “Ah, yeah: you’re pretty far from the nearest ocean, aren’t you? Sorry, but I’ve worked at Base-10 so long that I’ve kinda got water on the brain.”

“*Nahóltáá’ laanaa...*” Cahua wagged his wrinkled head to and fro.

Nazco translated what he said next:

“It would seem, then, that your vessel is most similar to a body.”

Justin crossed his arms and looked to one side: “or an anagram thereof, yeah.”

“He means that it shares the human trait of substance concealing style.” Nazco said. “The crude shell of a body encompasses the real, central being.”

“Central being?”

“Essence, if you like.”

Justin shook his head, but then his mind glommed onto a distant memory: Pipkin running her tiny fingers up and down his palm while he sat in a dreamy daze outside Base-10’s infirmary:

“Essence, huh? Is that anything like a ‘deep inner truth’?”

Nazco paused, and he did not translate these words. Instead he shook his head and stared at Justin with his glittering black eyes:

“You seem to have a knack,” he said, “for offending people, don’t you?”

## VI.

He spent an awkward night with a Terasperan family who lived near the village center, occupying one of the larger dwellings big enough to boast a series of leather-insulated dividers that turned the simple hut into a set of smaller, self-contained rooms. They must have been an important family, he reasoned, but Justin couldn’t say for sure because none of them spoke a lick of English or any other language he could get by in. Nazco left him not long after his meeting with the elder, and it wasn’t until the next morning, when Justin rose before the sickly gray dawn, that he would encounter the youth again.

Early morning in the Dead-Lands was a blisteringly cold and crummy thing. The air was mired with a sooty film and the whole wasteland lay shrouded in an elegiac fog as sunlight struggled to find a way in. The Terasperans seemed to have little love for it either, and while their large drip-nets outside dutifully collected morning dew on silky frames—dangling in the soft wind like oversized dreamcatchers—the whole village slept in.

Justin didn’t blame them, but he was used to rising before dawn to make his normal standby shifts, and besides that he wanted to go collect something for his hosts. He helped himself to a few spoonfuls of water from a drip-net’s collection tank and then soldiered off out the village and down the shelf to this *Love’s* carcass.

Nazco met him halfway back:

“What is all this?” The youth motioned to Justin’s emergency supply box, squeaking up the rocky path on oiled treads.

“Payment, for services rendered. It’s nutritious and delicious.”

“What: civilized food for the savages? No one would accept that: it is an insult. And if the elder knew of your low opinion of our cuisine he would—”

“—respect me less? That seems unlikely.”

The Terasperan crossed his arms: “Actually Cahua respects you a great deal: you are a warrior, after all.”

“How does he know that? No one around here should be able to tell that my ship’s an instrument of war, especially in its current condition.”

“Not your vessel: your body. It was Cahua himself—along with our medicine man—who prepared to bandage your wounds when you were brought to him, although you didn’t actually have any wounds. He is respectful of your privacy, but the way he

talks about you and the way he addresses you lead me to believe that underneath your clothing you are little more than a collection of scars.”

Justin stared down at his moccasins: “That’s an exaggeration.”

“By much?”

“My body has some mileage on it, but I don’t think I’ve voided the warranty. Not yet, anyway.”

Nazco didn’t understand this at all, so he went back to complaining about Justin’s condescending ‘gift’.

“It isn’t food, Nazco.” The pilot struggled to push the box up the sloping limestone shelf.

“What, then?”

“Medicine, first aid kits, a Jesty self-directed vaccination set: that kind of thing.”

One of Nazco’s silver brows twitched:

“I see. Still, though: we do not need this kind of—”

“I’m glad you don’t need it, because this isn’t for you.”

“Then who is it for?”

“The crèche, of course. Your kiddies could do with a little 22<sup>nd</sup> century medical checkup.”

Nazco opened his mouth.

“And don’t you argue with me, mule. You won’t take gifts from me, and you won’t say that I’m in your debt for all the services rendered, that’s fine. You’re all adults and you’re free to do that, but don’t tell me that this hardscrabble wasteland isn’t hard on a kid’s body, even if they’re descended from Terasperan stock. Nazco, I don’t really like this holier-than-thou vibe I get from you all, but if I can put up with a bunch of Scottish flyboys, I guess that I can just about stomach you Terasperans as well.”

“I am honored, I think...” The youth walked closer to the pilot. “So you detest ‘self-righteous’ adults, do you?”

“Yeah: myself included.”

“Not a very logical sentiment.”

“Eh, you know what they say: ‘the human heart is malevolent above all things’.”

“We do not say that.”

“Then you might wanna write it down somewhere, or commit it to memory...”

“You find *me* ‘self-righteous’?”

“Yeah, but you aren’t an adult.” Justin smirked mercilessly as the Terasperan’s face twitched. “Not by Allied Military standards, anyway.”

“That is well: *you* would not be an adult by my people’s standards, either.”

Justin’s smile widened: “That makes us both children, I guess.”

“*Ashiiké t’óó diigis.*” Nazco betrayed a smile.

“Bless you.”

“And you.” The Terasperan set his back against the supply cart and helped Justin push it up the rocky way as the midmorning sun struggled through the cloudy haze.

## VII.

Justin ran to the *Love* and back after lunch: a little exercise to keep him in shape with an added purpose. He returned empty handed, though: the antenna array had yet to



encounter any Allied Military signal. Still stranded and restless, he decided to pitch in around the village, somewhere he might be needed.

As it turned out, he was taken on to help repair a broken chaparral pen. The enclosure housed nearly a dozen little cuckoos in a carved-out portion of limestone: three of the pen's walls were ten-foot tall sheets of stone, and the other was an oversized wooden fence and gate apparatus. The men of the work crew, who averaged at least seven feet in height and bore biceps of iron, tolerated Justin's presence enough to allow him to 'help'. Most of this was in guiding the massive petrified wood stalks back into the fence grooves, but he lifted a few of them himself in a very good attempt at giving himself a fatal hernia.

Needless to say, break times were blessings.

He passed this time by staring at the rock walls of the paddock: crude line figures were carved into the stone in deep, deliberate strokes. There were dozens of little images all around the wall, and three massive ones took up the central area: what looked like a huge, curious bird with massive tail plumes, offset by a spider monkey and what he could only guess was an actual eight-legged spider. All along the wall there were smaller cuts and scratches, but these did not form pictures. It took Justin a minute to figure out what they represented.

*Mountain ranges, borderlands and... a river? Cartography? I think that's a map.*

His curiosity was tempered by the backbreaking work, however. He was quite relieved when Nazco wandered by with Elder Cahua's posse. Justin was sitting on top of a log, panting hard. He motioned to the paddock:

"You keep roadrunners, Nazco? Do you guys actually eat those things?"

"No: they are kept to control pests. Each month a plague of tarantula hawks swarm and assemble on the highlands. They make the dunes impassable, and often wander up the shelf." He reached into the pen and stroked the nape of one chaparral's fluffy neck: "So each month these little beasts feast like kings..."

"And you feed 'em the rest of the time?"

"Of course."

Ancient Cahua mumbled some words to the youth and Nazco translated:

"Elder Cahua does not think you should be stooping to such a task. As a guest, it is we who should serve you."

"Horse shit." Justin arched a brow: "Uh, don't translate that, please..."

"I was not planning to."

"If you wanna 'serve' me, though, you could clue me in to this artwork." He motioned to the rock wall. "What is all that? I get the feeling that I've seen things like this before, but I can't say where..."

Cahua's pearl-black eyes sparkled as soon as Justin motioned to the carvings:

"*Táá' Novanjo*," he wheezed.

"They represent supernatural beings: ancestors from the beginning-times. The carvings are a sign of reverence, and of devotion."

"Devotion? They're your gods, you mean?"

Nazco debated this phrasing. "You say they are. It is more complicated than that."

He looked back at the wall:

"Teh—novanjo..."

"Just 'Novanjo'."

Cahua said some more to Justin, then tottered off with the rest of his posse.

“What was that all about?”

“He wants you to come to his dwelling this evening.”

“Why?”

“You wanted to know about the drawings; I suppose that he will tell you.”

“I hope it won’t be a one-on-one conversation...”

“I will translate.”

Justin smiled: “Ah: I forget that you’re his grandson. So does that mean your full name is ‘Nazco Cahua’, or something like that?”

The Terasperan grit his teeth:

“This is the second time you have used information from the Dead Lands’

Mythos. It is most annoying.”

“But isn’t that book—”

“—fanciful tripe, written by an outsider for outsiders. It is fiction masquerading as fact.”

Justin brushed his moccasins over the gray dirt path. “Well, *I* haven’t actually read any of it. A girl at my base kinda leafs through it as a hobby.”

“Your military collects insensitive people, then. Warriors cannot be scholars, I suppose...”

“She’s only a kindergartner; I don’t think she means any disrespect.”

“...kinder...gardener?”

Justin explained. Afterwards Nazco perched his lips, his veil of indignation slipping down to reveal surprise: “That is not a typical book for a child so young, is it?”

“Nah, but the kid in question comes from good genetic stock, I guess.”

“In any event, we do not have distinct last names: we are all of the village and the Earth, and that is the only identification we need.” He looked at Justin: “but you do?”

“I don’t know whether they’re *necessary* or not— some people would say yes, and some people no— but yeah: my last name is Storm.”

The Terasperan blinked in confusion. He held one hand over his head and brought it down, wiggling his pale thin fingers as he did so.

“Yeah, just like that.”

“Curious...”

“Well, my family’s original name was Skoptzy. That was back in what my grandfather calls the ‘old country’, although he never lived there. My ancestors moved out of a melancholy little place called Primorsky Krai, bound for the New World, and then across that continent to New England. It’s a really long story. But anyway, over time the name was changed to ‘Schorn’, and I guess that sounded too Jewish or something, because my part of the original Skoptzy clan became ‘Storm’ once they hit the Atlantic Ocean.”

“And just what is in all these names that make them so important?”

Justin lay down on the petrified log and lit up a cigarette:

“They’re supposed to make you feel like you belong to something.”

“And they do?”

He stuck the cigarette between his lips and shrugged:

“They certainly make you feel different.”

“That’s a benefit?”

The Typer exhaled a lungful of smoke through his nose:  
 “For me, that’s never really been a problem.”

### VIII.

Cahua’s tent smelled of that same pungent incense from before, although there was much more of it in the air that evening when Justin heeded the elder’s summons. They ate a light dinner, sitting across from each other with a half-dozen other Terasperans crowded around the steaming fire pit, including Nazco. Another bitter Dead-Lands’ night curled around the land outside, blanketing the dunes with a heavy, oppressive stillness. There was no wind outside.

After dinner Cahua adjourned to a large outdoor patio behind his hut, bidding Nazco and Justin to join him. They were hemmed in by a wall of colorful drip nets, though these translucent sheets did nothing against the rising cold. Nazco dutifully lit a giant hearth in the center of the patio, added skins and animal fat to the mix and soon produced a mighty flame. Cahua sat on a disheveled bunch of pillows before the rear entrance of the hut. Nazco took the three-o’clock position and Justin, recognizing a pattern, sat opposite the elder. He and Nazco were seated on the hard stone ground, making Justin thankful once again for the tough leather pants he’d been given.

*Sitting on this limestone floor in my Liefde suit would be like wiping myself with sandpaper...*

Cahua spread his hands in that gesture resembling a benediction:

“*Hosh.*”

Nazco translated the rest:

“You have much curiosity about the rock carvings near the edge of the village?”

He nodded.

“You know of the book of lies, also?”

“You mean the Dead-Lands’ Mythos?”

Cahua nodded. “Our people, the ones you call ‘Teraspera’, are hewn of two strong fibers. It was long ago that our founders left the deep southland of the other continent on a migration ordained by the stars: it was fate, in the form of a divined calendar date from long ago, that drove us. It was happenstance, in the form of love and war, that saw us stop here and lay with the people of this place who shared our... outlooks.”

“You mean a worldview?” Justin asked.

Cahua smiled. “Just so. Migration is a strange thing, is it not? To leave one’s place— to almost cede one’s identity— is a hard thing. I am told that you know of this dilemma?”

“I’ve been around.” Justin said. “I lived in the same place for most of my childhood, but I’ve also crossed what’s left of the planet a few times. I’ve found that one place is like another, in some fundamental ways.”

“You have no loyalty to your precious New England Territories?”

“A ‘place’ doesn’t deserve loyalty, or disloyalty.”

“Only people do, then?” Cahua nodded. “You are like a nomad, I see.”

“In a way. Is that a problem?”

“The author of what you call the ‘Dead-Land Mythos’ had neither loyalty for places nor for people. He took our hospitality for what he could, and then us for all we

were worth. We are an open people, you see, but after that disreputable writer's chicanery it took years for us to remember how to trust. Even now we have had only one other outsider in our ranks for any long period of time: a man of healing who lives on one of the distant outskirt dunes, sent to us by your military organization."

"I haven't met him." Justin said.

"He met you, but only when you were less than conscious. My point is that a 'nomadic' individual is so unlikely to ever understand that truth behind all truths: the nature of the essence that ebbs and flows like water from all life."

*I'm gonna lose all my 'polite interest' if he starts recommending lightsaber training for me...*

"It is only those who are willing to wade into the water and linger there, feeling not the ripple and churn of each individual wave, but the totality of that body of water itself. These are the ones that develop true understanding."

"I thought that ocean-related metaphors were out..."

Cahua laughed politely after Nazco translated this.

*"Ashiiké t'óó diigis."* He said.

Cahua lit up a long ornamental pipe, passed it to Justin by way of Nazco and lit a second one for himself. Justin nodded appreciatively, but upon smelling a familiar weed smoldering inside the pipe he set it by his side:

"I mean absolutely no disrespect," he said. "The chemicals: they, uh, linger in the bloodstream, and the body fat. I have no objections, but I would... well, get into trouble when—"

"—you are tested, flesh and blood, for traces of it by your military." Nazco finished the statement for Justin, verified that it was correct and then translated for Cahua.

The ancient man set his own pipe down and bowed in turn:

"My extraordinary apologies."

Justin felt a little crummy about denying the old man his smoking session, so he fished around in his pockets for that small bundle of cigarettes he'd started toting around. He wasn't a smoker by rule, but rules were always made to be broken, and recently Justin found himself cutting his lungs on light-blended *Yurtta Sulhs*, a mild variety of Turkish Standards. This was Chenine's brand of choice—although she sucked down the ultra-potent *Cihanda Sulhs*, which are akin to wrapping one's lips around the fuel exhaust port of a Korang fighter. Every variety in the Turkish Standards brand was tough to stomach, but it was the only logical starting point for Justin.

*I'm so very like a lemming, aren't I?*

He offered a cigarette to Cahua, who accepted it graciously. Justin motioned to Nazco while eyeing the elder, another one in his hand. Cahua nodded, and Justin handed it over to the youth as well. All three lit up and, once the closed patio was steamy with tendrils of smoke, Cahua continued:

"Do you know of the story of the man of veins?"

Justin blinked.

"It is told in the book you call 'Mythos'."

"Ah: yeah! I remember that." He scratched his head. "Something about an alchemist, or someone, who tapped into the power of his 'duality line'." Justin motioned

to his own palm, very vaguely, because he had no idea where this line actually was. “He exposed a ‘deep inner truth’, or something like that, and turned into a dragon, right?”

Nazco’s purple brow wrinkled with irritation as he translated. Cahua’s response, however, was measured:

“It is this story, so heavily corrupted, that draws directly from the legend of the *Novanjo*.”

“You mean those carvings, right?”

“In the Mythos the story was butchered: it was twisted from its true meaning, so it had quite the opposite meaning, in fact. The ‘truth’ it revealed was pessimistic, but the story on which it is based is supremely optimistic. Triumphant, even.”

“What are the ‘Novanjo’?”

Cahua raised his hands to either side of his body, preparing for a grand oration. His voice was strong and clear, antithetical to his frailty; this spiel was obviously second nature to him:

“Eons ago, when the world was in its infancy and the stars did not shine in the sky, there was not a domain of man or a ledger of his history. A menagerie of curious animals dominated the planet: powerful, intelligent and peaceable—”

“The *Novanjo*, naturally?”

Cahua’s eyes ticked in their sockets as if he’d been stabbed; Nazco hissed at Justin.

“Sorry...”

“These were creatures of a different mold. When man was born into this world he gazed up at the sun, marveled at the moon and doted on each and every twinkling star in the sky. But these mighty beasts had no desire for the unreachable or to understand the unfathomable: if they saw the sun it was in a rainbow hovering over a waterfall, and if they saw the moon it was in the quivering reflection of a pool at midnight. Man has always looked up and out, strived for the infinite horizons, but these great creatures—the *Tó-Tl'éhonaá'éi*— forever looked down and in.”

“When man arrived and grew into adolescence he quickly grew strong beyond his years: he scarred the planet, ripping open the supple teats of the Earth even as he suckled of her very blood. The wounds were deep, and the *Tó-Tl'éhonaá'éi* took note, even as they isolated themselves from the ravages of the upstart newcomers. When isolation grew impossible, conflict became inevitable, and thus the world fell into a malaise: a great dying.”

“War, you mean?”

“And the ravages thereof. The *Tó-Tl'éhonaá'éi* exacted bloody revenge, indeed, but they grew weak and their power faded until they were the stuff of legend. The former rulers of the planet were exiles in their own kingdom: they became the woolly monsters in the uncharted mountains, the venomous sea serpents at the edge of the map—”

“*Terrors incognita*.”

“Yes, if you like.”

Justin sent a train of smoke quivering from his lips: “So, these guys are a bunch of shape-shifting demons? Your monsters sound a lot like the Bydo Empire.”

“That is not so: this was eons before the black stars appeared in our sky.” Cahua continued: “But the reign of man would be short-lived. A great judgment was coming down from the misty choir in the land beyond all lands: there is more to this world than

the heavens and the Earth, and in that hazy region— where true power lies— something stirred. Every death on our world was a blemish, and every wound a mark on our record, so the time was right to extinguish the roiling powder keg that was the Earth.”

“Now, it came to pass that an aged warrior in the far, far southlands embarked on a journey across the great snow-capped mountains. He was unique in a most wondrously strange way, and because of it his sleep was troubled of late: he could actually *sense* the discord rising amongst the misty choir itself, and he was drawn to the portal between heaven and Earth: the peak of peaks where the misty chorus’ songs still echoed.”

“Along the way he was stalked and wounded by a potent demon, one of the original *Tó-Tl'éhonaa'éí*. The winged creature was a shadow of its former self for all its years of isolation and of atrophy, as well as birthing: it kept a small brood secure in a winding mountain cave, safe from harm for the long time they needed to mature. Now the man, during this frenzied pursuit, found this place and extinguished the yearlings with a rock.”

Justin was reclining on his elbows, but at these words he squirmed a bit.

“And the creature’s rage was incomprehensible: it caught the man at the cave’s distant exit, where the final road to the mountain peak lay in an eternal snowstorm. The hunted one sent rocks tumbling down on the creature from above and then descended onto it with a spear, gutting the creature from belly to parts below. With its thrashing wings the *Tó-Tl'éhonaa'éí* hit the man and inflicted terrible injuries, slitting apart his body with blind rage. He was flayed apart, and even denatured.”

Justin sat up: “Denatured? I don’t understand that...”

Nazco brought one hand down between his crossed legs, fingers arranged as scissors; he brought them together in a quick, merciless ‘snipping’ motion.

This time Justin squirmed a great deal.

“They collapsed in the snow, one beside the other, and lay dying in one another’s grip: the creature’s claws in the man’s shin and the man’s spear driven through the monster’s thigh. They lay there in a circle, like a pair of serpents eating each other’s tails, until it came to pass that thunder sounded from above and weird light swirled at the mountain summit: the time of the *Anjo* was at hand.”

“‘Anjo’? But you said—”

“The *Anjo* descended from the misty choir and emerged where the land meets the sky: they were sent to deliver judgment to the squabbling children beneath them. Only then, staring into the radiant light of this beautiful erasure, did the man understand his folly: the folly of his people, and the folly of the entire planet.”

Justin pulled the cigarette from his mouth: the cynic in him could already anticipate this revelation: “The folly being that the differences between them weren’t so vast after all, right? Opposites can somehow attract?”

“The folly is that they failed to realize that they were *not* opposites. Man ventured forth ever bold and yes, destructive too: bombastic as a noonday sun. The *Tó-Tl'éhonaa'éí*, on the other hand, were reticent: they shied away from the excesses of man with all the stealth and softness of a waning moon.”

Cahua leaned forward and stared at Justin:

“Can the sun not share the same sky as the moon? I have seen it, thus it must be so. And does the moon not shine by the sun’s own light, alone? I know this, too. Where are the ‘opposites’, then? Each of these things, sun and moon, are borne of the same

light! This light urges fruitfulness, and it urges survival, no matter the mechanism. Just so: the race of men and the *Tó-Tl'éhonaa'éí* did shine with this exact same light!”

“But at different wavelengths.” Justin nodded. “And those two on the mountain just squashed each others’ ability to be ‘fruitful’ and survive, hadn’t they?”

“Too often a vital lesson is learned too late.”

“Or not at all.” Justin nodded.

“But,” Cahua said, “the shadow of oblivion can bring forth great light indeed. With his last ounce of strength the man removed his spear from the thigh of the *Tó-Tl'éhonaa'éí* and slit the great vein of his own hand from finger to wrist.”

Justin smiled: “The good old ‘dool-lily’ line.”

“With this— the line between his essence and the outside world— so willingly severed he bled all over the body of the *Tó-Tl'éhonaa'éí*. And it was then, with the last throes of life, that he imparted his spirit to the creature.”

Justin stubbed out his cigarette and lit another in the fire. “Spirit? So we’re talking about a soul here? That’s bad news for the creature, I’d say.”

“Because, as you might say: a ‘human heart is malevolent above all things’?”

Justin looked over at Nazco: the youth shrugged innocently.

“I’ve been known to say that.”

“This creature was now strong enough to live, and to flee, and in these times the *Anjo* began their bloody work of extermination, and sterilization. Man was scattered in fear; the *Tl'éhonaa'éí*, already weakened, dwindled to numbers too low for recovery. Survival for any creature was nigh impossible, and doubly so for the broken, injured body of a *Tl'éhonaa'éí* powered by the radiance of a human essence. This creature abhorred the idea of that power within it, disgusting and reviled, but its will to live kept its wings beating, and it was ever on the run from the end times falling all around it.”

“Well, that’s pretty ‘nomadic’, isn’t it?”

“The beast was nomadic in its style, but certainly not in substance. When man and *Tl'éhonaa'éí* were first exposed to one another they found only discord and repulsion. Did they see each other’s true nature? Did they understand, truly *understand* their opponent. I say to you again: the chaotic ripples of a stone sent into a pond do not reflect the true nature of that water. Tell me: what judge, when viewed so narrowly, is not a criminal? And what sinner, examined in only the briefest, finest detail, may not be called a saint? The nature of a being cannot be determined though a single glance from a microscope. What land is not strange to a foreign nomad’s eyes before settlement breeds familiarity? To understand is to *linger*, and to recognize absolute *truth* is to wade deeper into those nebulous waters.”

“So it is said that the *Anjo* came for this odd creature’s head, but by now there was the greatest of changes within it: no longer was it the remains of two fractured children of Earth, but a single, unified being. In this great unity— body, brain and essence— the being had superseded any limits placed on Earth’s other creatures. Even the misty choir’s minions themselves— the dreaded *Anjo*— were dwarfed by this being as a blade of grass is beneath a willow. The *Anjo* were creatures of infinite power, thrust by the misty choir into a world of constraints. But *this* creature, this creature was truly the finite made infinite.”

Justin nodded. “Greater even than the *Anjo*: ‘*Nov-anjo*’.”

“And with this power the rebellion could truly begin. Over time there were others who came to realize this truth, though so few could see it through a thick fog of fear and panic. The war of the heavens began far above the Earth and moved back into even the far realms of the hazy lands themselves. For a terrible price the choir’s minions were eradicated: wiped clean from this place by the wrath of the *Novanjo*. Such a forceful reckoning sent shivers through the misty choir in their hazy lands. This union, you see, was truly baffling. Finally the choir made its decision: equally impressed and disturbed by the willingness of Earth’s children to cooperate, it spared the Earth from destruction, but with one caveat: the *Novanjo* would be eradicated. So, with fire and thunder they fell to earth, struck by the choir’s almighty light; the place they came to rest in is a mourning desert even to this day and the land forever scarred with the shapes of their bodies.”

Justin tossed his cigarette in the fire:

“Were they really killed because the choir was afraid of them, or because they got to see heaven?”

“Either way: it is now the task for us to await their return; they are the bringers of peace.”

A rumble echoed across the desert; it started as an eerie hum, but soon grew violent. Seconds later a massive shape descended from the clouds directly above the trio: a gunmetal sheet of iron bearing three large retrorockets.

“Flatbed transport ship.” Justin squinted up at the approaching craft. “That was awfully quick of ‘em...”

He was prepared to say a formal goodbye to Nazco and the elder, with all the thanks and fawning necessary for such gracious hospitality, but an unlikely person soon chimed into his canalphones and cut things short:

“Jen? Is that you?”

“The Commander put me on your recovery team, Justin: you picked the worst possible time to go belly-up. We’ve got the klaxons sounding from heaven to hell: it’s an Active-System Scan, and it’s huge.”

Justin’s brow furrowed:

“How ‘huge’?”

“*Massive*, Justin.”

He and Nazco stood at the city outskirts, waiting for the transport to land. Justin chuckled:

“Pity that the Bydo Empire’s not much into ‘understanding’, eh?”

“It might be,” Nazco said, “that it is all a matter of who will take the first step.”

“Oh, I can do that.” He smiled, his green eyes glinting. “After all: one small step for man is one giant butcher knife in the chest of Bydo-kind.”

Cahua’s fairytale rattled around in his mind even as he boarded the transport ship: whether an ‘essence’, or a human heart, was a wellspring of ultimate good or evil wasn’t something he was qualified to answer.

*Although, through observation, one would have to lean towards the latter, wouldn’t they?*

That was an obvious rationale.

*But, then again, ripples in a pond—*

“Are irrelevant.” Justin shook his head, abandoning this debate. For the time being it would be a very good thing for him to remember that he was a soldier, not a



philosopher, and that there were bigger fish to fry than some theoretical points of philosophy. Honestly, that was an understatement.

Twelve days later the Allied Military engaged the 'Slingshot Mass'.

