



"This, too, was myself. It seemed natural and human. In my eyes it bore a livelier image of the spirit, it seemed more express and single, than the imperfect and divided countenance I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine."

Robert Louis Stevenson

The Obsidian Wings

I.

Her eyes burned with frost. Her silver hair glowed in the darkness; the smile was unwholesome.

"...that's *all* just abstract nonsense, really..."

Justin bit his lip.

The man's scarred cheek twitches with annoyance. His eyes blaze like black coals without warmth. The precious Golden Kite slides across a beautiful oak desk.

"...take it, you *idiot*..."

Justin clenched his fists.

She teased her brunette locks and leered, her eyes smoldering like cold sapphires.

"...and you think you deserve something *better*?..."

Step, and then another step...

"You?" She tosses her hair back and gives him a shove.

"You?" He takes up his black cane and jabs at Justin's chest.

She cups his chin, her head cutely cocked to one side.

"...you...?" The hair shimmers like a moon pool.

The smile is unwholesome.

"*You*?"

And then: a shove of his own.

"Get off my fucking *back*!"

Three sides, three cold eyes, three stares, three assailants...

Three cold bodies converging on him.

"Get the hell away from me!"

Arms extended: head raised. Back cracks open, then arms, then legs, then chest, then groin...

Shield... shield...
Spines: many spines...
Snarl.
A roar.

He gasped.
Justin struggled out of bed; he flailed around in smoldering sheets. He sat up, arms on his knees, panting.

“Damn it...”

What time was it? It was hard to say: utter blackness curled around the corners of his bedroom window shades. Justin rubbed his temples and flicked sweat out of his damp hair.

That makes three times this week.

It was unusual, not that he was having nightmares per se, but that he was *remembering* them, and sometimes— like tonight, for instance— he was actually forced awake by them.

Familiar faces, familiar places, but why?

Who cares?

“Fuck them all.” He growled.

Justin reached over to his nightstand to check the time. With his luck he’d have another good 15-minutes of sleep before having to get up for his shift. His arm felt heavy as he reached for the clock. Justin read the display, blinked, and then he read it again:

“-- : -- : --”

Well, that can't be right...

His arm still felt heavy: *very* heavy, in fact.

“What the hell...” he rotated his shoulder, wincing all the while.

Then all the blood froze in Justin’s veins. It wasn’t because he heard anything in the darkness, but rather because he *didn’t* hear something. He couldn’t hear the pitter-patter of little feet: his impudent hedgehogs.

The room was quiet: deathly quiet.

“Sigs... Cars?” Justin’s voice cracked with unease. “Guys?” A lump rose in his throat. “Guys... are you there?”

Then there was a noise in the darkness, but it wasn’t the pitter-patter of little feet. It was much bigger than that.

Clomp... clomp... clomp...

Justin curled his legs up and pulled his sheets up to his neck.

The front of his bed sagged as if a very large weight rested upon it.

Too large to be a bit of undigested beef, I'd say...

Yellow eyes glowed in the darkness: an arm suddenly shot out in front of Justin’s face. It held something round and heavy.

Justin nearly swallowed his tongue when he saw it.

The dead girl’s eyes ruffled around in their orbits like wax paper in the wind. Without warning they locked onto Justin. The disembodied head’s pale lips parted:

“Traitor.” She accused.

“What?” Justin questioned the severed head. “Me?”

“Traitor.” She declared with just as much certainty.

“But why?” Justin’s eyebrows narrowed into razors.

The yellow-eyed entity in the shadows emerged. It held the severed head with a long, black arm riddled with thorny spikes.

A long, heavy arm...

The body was horrible: metallically organic, or organically metallic, depending on how you looked at it. It was rubbery, but strong as steel. It was black all over, but shining with the outline of some terrible fire burning within. The eyes bled yellow flames through hollow, dead slits.

But as for the rest of the face, that was familiar.

It was *very* familiar.

The girl’s head twisted around in the air even as the terrible demon held it aloft by the bangs. Her waxy eyes glared at the devil and, with a satisfied sneer, repeated:

“Traitor.”

Justin brought his arms up over his naked chest, desperate to comfort himself with the embrace of his own warm limbs. All that greeted his skin, however, was the stabbing pain of massive thorny spines.

He shrieked at the top of his lungs...

“Gah-*auh!*”

Justin flipped out of bed, landed hard on the floor and rolled twice on his bedside carpet. His naked body crashed into the wall.

Sigs and Cars squealed in protest from their cages across the room.

“D-damn.” He rasped as he grasped his chest with two warm human hands.

“Goddamnit...”

II.

“’n what’d he say to tha’, eh?”

Kelso, the old bearded Scotsman, leaned forward across the table, his lips parted in a grin:

“*Bu toigh leam bracaist a ghabhail!*” He cackled as he spoke.

The whole table burst into laughter. Everyone except for Justin, that was. Connor Trent leaned over to him, snickering, and helpfully translated: “No, but I would like some breakfast!”

Justin politely smiled at the joke. He didn’t find it nearly as funny as the ‘Salt-o-Scots’ seated all around him, perhaps because something was lost in translation, or else his sense of humor was just different from that of the fire-blooded pilots around him.

Another one in the group— a big, muscular ox of a Raiden pilot— motioned to Justin with his mug. “Oi, Trent! Your *fear boireann* there: he do-int say much ah’ consequence, do ‘ee?”

Justin looked up in response to his mention, but didn’t answer the challenge. He kept silent, both from his natural timidity and his inability to decipher the Scotsman’s heavily-accented words. But he didn’t really need to worry about it: Connor answered for him:

“If ‘e had somethin’ to say, he’ll say it, ya’ pissier!” Trent hit Justin square on the shoulders, hard enough to jostle him like a piñata. “You jus’ watch your own tongue, boy-o!” He followed up on this threat by wagging a closed fist before the offender’s face.

“Thank you, Connor.” Justin mumbled after the half-drunken pilots lost themselves in another humorous, ribald tale.

“Ne’er ya’ mention.” The red-headed Scot dismissed Justin’s gratitude with a long draught of ale from his mug.

Justin sighed and looked out the barroom window. Large verdant fields met his eyes, along with a forest of lush trees spanning miles in all directions. Far out on the horizon a raised mound of earth stood, blemished with sooty building complexes and quaint little spires all around it.

Nothing but mold on a rock...

This was the modest borough of New Stirling. It was actually quite large, but not a super-city— an ‘Ultima’, like the Nash back home— and at this point in his life Justin was used to thinking of buildings 200-stories tall, or bigger, when he thought about a ‘city’. Anything smaller was ‘quaint’, at least by his point of reference.

Far closer than New Stirling a sweeping upturn dominated the landscape: it was a hill called ‘Abbey Craig’, as Justin understood. At its peak rested a dilapidated brick tower. The grand tower lay broken clean in two. It rested in quiet dignity like a sacred ruin: a relic of humanity’s pre-2069 grandeur. Looming over that ivy-covered ruin, however, was a monument to *post*-’69 militarism: the high-tech fortress of Base-Sruighlea. It was the defensive hub of the Scottish Crown Territories, and the home of a Raiden unit called the *Salt-o-Scots*.

At this moment the bawdy squadron was a good five miles away from the base, holed-up in the rustic-looking ‘Fangs ‘o the Schiltron’ pub. Evidently this was the squadron’s favorite watering hole.

Justin excused himself from the group with the pretense of freshening his pint. That was partially true: he was trying to load himself up with enough alcohol to make this whole ordeal bearable. Mostly, though, he was just desperate to escape from the group.

He slunk to the bar and wormed into a seat near the wall: it was as close to a corner as he could manage, and he immediately felt better. Sitting hunched up against the wall, clad in his black *Liefde*-class flightsuit, he was as invisible as a shade. The knots in Justin’s stomach began sorting themselves out in short order.

It’s not that I don’t appreciate what he’s trying to do for me, but still...

A slender, freckle-faced woman pressed through the bar-area. She waded through a sea of her fellow bartenders, all of them busy moving to and fro with foamy mugs and empty glasses. The woman made it to his corner; she leaned across the wood-trimmed bar and barked at Justin:

“*De tha thu ag iarraidh?*”

“Uh... uh: huh?” Justin blinked and arched an eyebrow.

“Ya deaf and dumb?” She jostled his shoulder.

“Uh, no: but I’m not Scottish, either.” The pilot rubbed his shoulder blade.

“Beg pardon.” She ‘apologized’ with infinite curtness.

“I’ll have a glass of Gambrinus’—”

Someone three seats down from Justin bawled:

“*Leth-phinnt leann!*”

“One moment.” The woman quickly turned from Justin to attend to a rather inebriated Scot halfway down the bar.

“No problem.” Justin grumbled to the thin air.

Connor could talk about ‘Scottish Nationalism’ and ‘Gaelic Pride’ all he wanted: the fact was that if the Shinar Conference hadn’t revoked English as the official language of aviation Connor’s precious Scots-Gaelic language would be dead and buried.

As it should be, too

But of course that stupid council feared that the Bydo could eventually make an effort to understand the radio communication between pilots and their bases on the ground.

As if those unthinking bastards are even capable of that...

And so, in a comedic little turn of events, the good folks on the Shinar Council encouraged the then-fledgling Allied Military to dump funds into promoting ‘historical’ and ‘regional’ dialects among the world’s citizens through the schools: Italian children started speaking classical Latin, Central American kiddos began speaking Proto-Mayan.

And in the Scottish Crown Territories? They dusted off that absurd, unpronounceable babble and spoon-fed it to their rug-rats...

Justin sighed and hung his head against the bar wall.

The freckled woman returned a few minutes later.

“Uh, I’ll have a Gambrin—”

“Eh!” She waved her hands. “*Gabhaibh mo leisgeul!* I’ve got a dozen Korangers o’er at the other end, boy. Be waitin’ your turn, then!”

She made off, and got two steps before Connor’s rough hand grabbed her by the back of the apron.

“Ciod?” She barked angrily and spun around. Her face was contorted in anger, but it softened as she faced Connor’s stern mug.

“An’ you’ve got a *Raiden* pilot on this end, ‘m’lady’.” He sneered. “D’ya need a damn AM rank chart to figure out who’s the priority, here?” He slapped Justin shoulder again, and again Justin nearly fell off his stool.

The woman looked at Connor, and then at Justin, skeptical.

“Him?”

“*Him*, ya myopic twit!”

The woman swallowed, blinked, and shuffled away from Connor like a mouse beating a retreat from a lion. She leaned toward Justin and cleared her throat.

“Um, yes: an’ what’ll ya have?”

“Ganbrinus’s D-Lite.” Justin answered as softly as she’d asked: they were both on guard from Connor’s rant.

“Ya’ ca’ not let ‘em treat you with less respect than you deserve.” Connor brushed his red hair back and wagged his finger at Justin.

“And just how little do I deserve, you think?”

The Scot laughed like a harp seal. “Tha’s what I like about you, *Mo Cuideag Beag*: you’re always so damned sun-shiny!”

Justin smiled, shook his head, and then broke into a small laugh of his own: a sour disposition couldn’t survive for long against the likes of Connor Trent. The bombastic pilot seemed to hold the sun itself in his infectious smile.

“What’s in your head, anyway, boy-o? You’re dour today, I mean even compared to normal, aren’t you?”

“It’s nothing. I haven’t been sleeping too well.” Justin shook his head and waved over across the packed pub. “Why’d you invite me up here, Connor? I mean, you’re squad doesn’t really like me: I can tell. I don’t belong—”

“Don’t belong? You belong with your squadmates, boy-o.” Connor’s voice was stern. “This is a genuine meetin’ of the Salt-o-Scots and— if you hadn’t a-forgotten— you’re an honorary Scot, aren’t you?”

“I know, and that’s great, but Connor: Jupiter was, I dunno, it wasn’t something I don’t understand. You’re trying to build-up that accomplishment a lot more than it deserves to be. I mean, I can’t even remember most of the battle—”

Connor brought his fist up to Justin’s chin and clapped it shut: it was something he was prone to do when Justin babbled (which was admittedly quite rare). The move had a special significance between them, after all: Connor did the same thing to Justin the day they first met (albeit at a much-accelerated pace...).

“Jupiter was what it was, that’s all. And the squad doesn’t dislike you, as such: they just don’t trust people who’re as tight-lipped as you’re.”

“And what about you?”

Trent smiled. “Ah, I know I can trust you. Anyone who can touch-up a photo as well as you doctored my D-Day picture can’t be all bad, can they?”

Justin smirked. “Maybe, and maybe not.”

Connor tottered off to the restroom. Seconds later the chastised bartender returned bearing Justin’s pint.

“I am sorry.” She nodded, sullen. “I did no’ recognize your uniform, pilot. Most of our Raiden boys wear greens, you know.”

Justin waved off the apology: he wasn’t in the mood to accept one. He nursed the beer over the course of five minutes. The woman, curious about his uniform (and perhaps his radical departure in personality from the average Raiden pilot) prodded Justin into a conversation.

“So ya’ hail from the Great City, then?”

“Yup.” He licked the beer foam off his lips like a little boy lapping cake batter from his face.

“They used to call tha’ the ‘City of Angels’, did they no’?”

“I think. But back then it wasn’t an Ultima. They called it that long before The Cataclysm, and never after.”

“One can see why, I s’pose. And are ya’ in the Scottish Crown on business, then?”

“No: pleasure.” Justin eyed the bawdy Scots over in their corner booth. The elder pilot, Kelso, returned his look with a disinterested sneer.

“well, *technically* pleasure...”

The freckled bartender motioned towards the panorama window with her head, she eyed the wooded road running between Abbey Craig and New Stirling.

“Are ya’ headed for the Trossachs Preserve?”

“Trossachs? Oh: your woodlands—”

“More’n tha!” She scoffed.

“Sorry, sorry: I know. They say it’s the most beautiful land left on the Blue Marble, right?”

“‘Tis.” She nodded. “My da’ took me there when I was a child. Paradise it is, in a nutshell.”

“Well: not this visit.” Justin motioned towards the bathrooms. “My friend says he put me and my squadmates down on the list for a visit, but it doesn’t look like he’s too hopeful about our chances...”

She scoffed. “Just a day’s visit takes connections up the wazoo, boy-o-mine, and a multi-day pass? Tch! One’d have to be a general, or the like!” She looked to both sides, a mischievous smile on her lips. “But, in case you do get in, jus’ be sure to watch out for the Black Commonwealth o’ the hill.”

Justin perched his lips. “‘Black Commonwealth’? A ‘paradise’ usually doesn’t have such an ominous sounding thing...”

The bartender smirked knowingly. “Down that road, a long way into the woods and amongst the deep lochs, there’s a pinprick o’ a town tha’ sits beside an abandoned slate mine.”

“Charming...”

“‘Tis, but tha’s no’ the point: the town also sits beside Doon Hill. Tha’s where the great Tree ‘o the Worlds stands: the gateway to the Commonwealth of fairies.”

Justin’s perched his lips even more. He looked like a fish.

“Fairies...” he muttered, doing his best to avoid a mocking gesture.

“Oh, aye.” She nodded. “Back in olden times a local preacher discovered the gateway in a mighty oak tree right atop the hill: he descended into the earth amongst the creatures themselves. They were brilliant: lithe-bodied and adorned with beautiful gauze wings. Fragile creatures, them, and none too trusting, but they took the reverend into their confidence.”

“I’m sure that wasn’t too smart, was it?”

“He did betray them. The man wrote of his exploits in their kingdom, and of the gateway. The fairies, fragile though they were, roiled with anger. They cast a spell of false-death over the man—”

“False-death?”

“Aye: he was found dead in his bed one day, and then duly interred in the ground behind his manse, but that night the fairies descended down Doon Hill and took him up and away, deep into the Commonwealth.”

“Where he was never seen again, I’m guessing. What a heartwarming story.” Justin mumbled.

“Tha’s where the story was once thought to end, but there was more: the secret of the Infernal Commonwealth.”

“That sounds nice...”

The woman dutifully cleaned pint glasses with her apron as she spoke. Her tone was more excited now:

“The poor mortal preacher was taken into the chambers of the Fairy Queen *Laich’ eith*, the most beautiful and radiant of the fragile beings. She’d eyes of rubies and wings of brilliant gold-leaf about her. Now that humans were aware of the Commonwealth there was much to discuss with her court, including how to punish the betrayer and how to deal with any further contact with the world of men above them.

Laich'eith decided to solve both problems in one fell swoop: she'd use her magic to remove the poor reverend's spirit and consume it, giving her a personal understanding of the human condition."

"That sounds painful." Justin smiled into his beer.

"Then, as soon as the Queen imbibed of the man's soul there was a great stirring in her innards, and she was changed: altered to her core by the spirit's influence. Her eyes cooled to blue sapphires and her mind was filled with notions unknown to fairy-kind: emotions like love and hatred, feelings of sympathy and of grief all flooded her being, and the insides of those fairies that consumed the soul along with her. But the most striking change was in their wings: those beautiful pieces of fabric cooled also, from thin slivers of glowing gold into rock-hard shards of obsidian."

"Obsidian? You mean volcanic glass?"

She nodded. "And those fairies were made strong: they were no longer delicate beings. Obsidian is a stone sharper than a surgeon's scalpel, y' ken? The Fairy Queen *Laich'eith* and her court were now made powerful, but at a great price: those notions—the corrupting emotions of hatred and avarice they'd gleaned from the man—made them unfit for life in their peaceable kingdom. And their wings—great straightedge razors they were—while powerful, prevented them from either flying or getting close to each other or their fellow unadulterated sisters for fear of slicing one another to ribbons. They were out of place and soon fell into war with the pure fairies of the Commonwealth. The Queen and her minions were driven out by the sheer number of their opposition, cast even further down into the soil where the rocks simmer with heat and the earth bubbles as a black sea of fire."

"The eponymous 'Infernal Kingdom', right?" Justin guessed.

"Aye: and the lesson, they say, is that the human heart is malevolent above all things and, given an infinite sea of purity before it, a man's soul is liable to corrupt even the brightest virgin hearts and build conflict where there was once peace and evil where there was once only blissful nothingness."

"Wow..." Justin bowed his head, mulling that thesis.

The woman's smile returned and she tapped his shoulder. "Eh: the *real* lesson's much less dramatic. The Stägha-Dive Conservation Society promotes the legend as a warning about how easily humans can corrupt the *land* around the Trossachs. They want to warn everyone not to trash the park, be responsible about using the land, that kind of thing."

"And justify their months-long waiting list for access to the Preserve, right?"

"Something like that." The woman grinned, her freckled dancing in the lights of the tavern.

"Boy-o!"

"Oh, no." Justin wagged his head.

Connor trotted up behind him. "Let's go, then: back to the group with ya'."

"I think I might call it a day soon, Connor."

"Oh, c'mon, *Mo Cuideag Beag*: you've got ten more hours on standby!"

"Don't remind me. But remember: I'm gonna be hauling my Raiden home for six of those hours."

The red-headed Scotsman squinted at Justin. "Tell me what ails you, boy-o. Do no' tell me it was something *I* did, was it?"

He flinched inwardly: Justin didn't want Connor to suffer any grief just because he couldn't get along with the other Salt-o-Scots, and the thought the Connor was blaming himself for the whole thing really turned his stomach.

"I've been having a bit of a 'Tommy Westphall' time at work lately."

"How so?"

"You could say that my cup overfloweth: everything's piling up so high that I can hardly tell up from down or fantasy from reality anymore. There's shit hitting the fan with my Raiden: stuff I don't really understand, not yet anyway, but things I *have* to get straightened out. And our new girl: well, she's a pisser of a bitch." Justin smiled: the ale was making him bold, and it brought out his vindictive side. "I feel like there're things going on around me, around my unit, that I'm not aware of." He told Connor about the mysterious notes left in his locker and on his suit pocket.

"Someone pranking you, perhaps?" Trent shrugged.

"It feels like more than that. There're other things, things that have happened recently..." he looked back at Connor: Justin could tell that the bawdy man was eager to return to his squad. "Never mind that, now." He sighed and stared at the hard-eyed pilots across the room. "And I've got... other problems on top of that. Regular ones, for me anyway." He slouched in the barstool and rested his black-clad legs on the rail.

Yes, there were always those 'regular problems', weren't there?

"And will these 'regular problems' sort out for ya' alright?"

Justin lulled his head back. "I'll know by next Sunday, most likely..."

"How so?"

He shook his head.

"Mmmph." Connor snorted like a haughty Clydesdale. He punched Justin's chest, sending a reverberating thump along his sternum. "Get up." He ordered. "Time for all wayward sheep to join the flock, and tha' means you: boy-o."

Sullen, Justin slid off the stool and followed the red-headed Scot.

"Oh, one thing, Connor."

"Wha's tha'?"

"One of your squadmates said something about me, and he used the words '*fear boireann*': what does that mean, anyway?"

Trent cocked his head, obviously trying to conceal a rising smirk.

"Best you don't know, I think."

"You won't tell me?"

"No." He smiled. "But I'll make a deal with you: if he ever calls you that again, I'll knock out his two front teeth. How's tha' sound?"

Justin returned to the bawdy band of brothers and suffered their inebriated antics. He thought no more of the bartender's story, shoving it deep into the back of his mind. It was a rather neat story, he thought. That was prime folklore: very short, easy to tell and to understand.

I'll have to remember that one, maybe try and liven-up our joint standby sessions on base. It'd be better than just sitting around staring at each other like we normally do...

It was little more than an entertaining yarn to him at this point, but ten days later something happened to Justin that would ensure he'd never forget that story.

To his dying day, he would never forget.

III.

After a whole week of boring training exercises and stress-tests— run not to assess their Raidens' performances so much as to relieve a terrible case of cabin fever—the *Tears' Shower Squadron* finally got orders sent down from Allied Command. More specifically, Justin was the lucky pilot to get an assignment: he was loaned out to a Striker squadron for a routine patrol of near-Earth space.

The *Platonic Love* drifted through a midnight field of dust and debris. The radiant egg gleamed under a constant assault of sunlight, a bright beacon in the void of space.

A ruddy red dot hovered before him. It was the size of a dinner plate, crusty and pock-marked: the Red Planet itself. Justin's patrol with the *Dragonslayer Squadron* was routine as rain so far, but the powerful sensors of his Raiden picked-up something as he skimmed past Mars one hour ago. It was enough to pique the pilot's interest.

Justin's canalphones crackled.

"This is the *St. George's Cross* to the *Platonic Love*: what's your current trajectory, Justin?"

"Smack in the middle of Elliptical Orbit IV, sir. I'm about a quarter-million clicks outside Mars's influence and coming up fast on its ass."

"What the hell are you doing in EO IV?" The Squadron Leader must be close, Justin reasoned: their delay in communications was a mere 18 seconds.

"I got a possible hit on something over there."

"Evidence of Active-System Scans? What about dimensional shearing?"

"Negative: I'd have reported that right away." He shook his head to and fro: it was difficult to do in the spacesuit. "But I've got signs of dense metal out there, and a lot of it."

"Hell, Storm, there must be 10,000 tons of scrap metal down on the planet's surface: don't waste your time with it."

"But, SL, the signal didn't originate from the planet's surface: I think whatever's out there is somewhere in the Deimos debris field."

"*Deimos*? How sure are you of that?"

"Pretty sure, sir. My scanners never lie."

The Squadron Leader paused. "Well, that is interesting. We're not really supposed to bother investigating things that don't 'walk and talk' like a Bydo on these patrol missions, but I'd say you can go ahead and check it out. Briefly, mind you."

"So, you can spare me?"

"Yes. I'm taking my team out to the Ceres Orbital in five, and your Aryl was pretty damn adamant that we don't take you out into the Belt with us— that was one of the terms of your loan— so go ahead and double-check that reading of yours. We likely won't be back from the Belt for five, maybe six hours; just make sure you're done pissing around the Red Planet by then, okay?"

"Copy that, SL."

He leaned back in the cockpit, content with the prospect of manning his own little investigation. Justin kicked up the output on the *Love's* Torus Reactor. The Raiden shuddered in protest as its velocity increased. Justin checked his consoles and clocked his

relative speed: he was chasing after the planet, and gaining on it. At the moment he had a 125,000 km/hr advantage.

“Call-up computer: extrapolate a timeframe for arrival in Martian Orbital given current trajectory.”

The tinny computer speakers came to life:

“At current velocity intercept will occur in three hours, sixteen minutes.”

He tapped the faceplate of his suit in annoyance.

Well: the trip would take about three minutes if I skimmed, but I don't think the brass would approve of me wasting an entire 'Gossamer' cell-casing on that kind of a trip.

Incidentally it was quite probable that he'd end up crashing right into Mars if he tried to do something cute like that. Either that, or he'd tear himself up in the Deimos debris field as he dropped out of the trans-dimensional highway.

Well, the *Love* could always keep increasing its velocity: the Raiden's fusion reactor had plenty of energy to spare, but if Justin went any faster he'd have serious 'delta-v' problems once he got to the planet: he'd overheat the god-damned reactor just trying to slow himself down enough to enter orbit.

Equal and opposite reactions, after all...

Despite the fact that Justin only managed to complete half his semester of interplanetary physics at the VR Training Academy he knew that his Raiden couldn't realistically go any faster. Besides, Isaac Newton's ghost was liable to hunt Justin down and bitch slap him if he made a mistake like that.

“Call-up computer: set the alarm, please.” He shook his head in resignation.

“Time?”

“Wake me at ten minutes to intercept.”

IV.

Justin tried to rub the sleep from his eyes once the computer woke him. His mind slowly crawled back to reality as his fingers scratched against the faceplate of his spacesuit.

“My nose itches.” He complained.

His collision alarm sounded:

“Warning: projectiles ahead, matching trajectory. Reactive automatic pilot can compensate, if the operator prefers...”

Justin scoffed. “Hell, no you won't.” He shook his head. “Call-up computer: disengage the auto-pilot. I'll use the link from here on in.” He closed his eyes, reclined in his seat, and— ever so cautiously— sunk his mind into the machinery of the *Platonic Love* as if he were tiptoeing down into a wading pool.

Mars, as it turned out, was a pretty funny thing. It was finally explored in exhaustive detail back in 2058. The findings of those manned survey missions were clear: no little green men in sight. Despite this letdown there were more fossilized bacterial specimens than one could shake a stick at, and to this day scientists are still unsure about all the regions down around the core, where the planet is still warm. If there is anything still wallowing around inside the Red Planet (which, in all honesty, is pretty damned

unlikely), the ecosystem certainly isn't anywhere near the complexity of Europa's messy 'Rock Candy' ocean.

After all: those fossilized Martian germs don't have anything on the Crystalline Entities over in Europa.

Anyway, there was enough evidence of life on the planet that it was designated a 'preserve'. When Earth's Big Three nations started setting up their scientific scanners and unmanned research stations they couldn't just plop them down on the Red Planet, so they used Deimos, instead.

The pathetic little pebble of a moon served humanity's purpose for some time. Then came 2069: the Kuiper Mass appeared in the Solar System and sent an incarnation wave assault to Earth with a brief stopover at Mars. The research equipment on that wobbly little moon was the first human object to encounter Bydo soldiers. The incarnations provided those scanners with some terrific telemetric data, but the incarnations were much less enamored of the equipment. In all fairness the Bydo's very first contact with human technology could be seen as a bit of an overreaction: the incarnations didn't simply destroy the research centers and trash the equipment.

They annihilated the entire moon.

Justin sat up and navigated his Raiden through a hundred-thousand shards of rock and dust. A cloud of debris parted on his starboard, revealing the rusted iron façade of Mars. The planet was about the size of a movie screen at this distance: it would take him another two hours, minimum, if Justin wanted to slip into the lower atmosphere.

He didn't though: his business was in the debris field.

The remains of Deimos circled Mars in a dispersed clump, constantly drifting apart in the night: given another 10,000 years the dust will spread out and create a full-fledged ring.

I don't hope to be out here for that long, however...

It took him a good 30 minutes of dodging moon-dust and debris before his sensors finally honed-in on the reason for his little detour: it was coming from an asteroid, one of the larger chunks of the shattered moon. The information came in, but Justin had a hard time understanding any of it. Anyone that worked in a base's Command Ops would be able to interpret the data in a second, but as a Raiden pilot Justin's knowledge of chemical reactions was rudimentary, at best.

"Okay... we've got a few thousand tons of metal, but what's with this molecular spectrum?" Justin blinked. "Call-up computer: given the chemical composition of the target asteroid, what kind of activity could account for these numbers I'm getting?"

"The spectrum is consistent with runaway oxidation."

"Oxidation? As in..." He shook his head: *that* surely wasn't possible.

Justin brought the *Platonic Love* into a resting orbit a few thousand kilometers out from the signal source: the debris here was dense, from shimmering crystals of ice and dust up to colossal rugby-field sized stones. He wouldn't get a visual on the target until he was right on top of it.

A little guidance might be helpful, here.

Justin made a rough estimate of how far away the *St. George's Cross* would be by now: the Ceres planetoid was smack in the middle of the Belt, so any communication between his Raiden and the SL's would take many minutes, at least. Luckily, though, the

asteroid was somewhat aligned with Mars at the moment, so the distance was not exactly interminable.

“A message broadcast directly to Ceresland would arrive in 21 minutes.” The computer calculated for him.

He groaned. Justin stared down the nose of his Raiden, eyeing the dead black ball sitting atop his control rods. It was darker than even the night sky. “Okay, then, how about this: is there any chance of coaxing the Force Orb into broadcasting an Active-System Scan?”

“With current conditions there is an 83-percent chance of maintaining an open current for 540 seconds, maximum.”

“That’s more time than I need. I like those odds.” His eyes narrowed suspiciously as he watched the black ball gleam in the pale light of Mars. “But, given current conditions, what’s the danger to the ship?”

“Given the ship’s current status there is a 42-percent chance of embryonic gestation if the Force Orb is primed for broadcasting.”

“Hell, no.” He shook his head emphatically. “I don’t like *those* odds at all.” He sighed. “Forget it: just prepare a standard packet-transmission for broadcast towards Ceres, alright?”

Justin recorded a terse message about his sensor’s readings and fired it off in the *Dragonslayers’* general direction; he played solitaire on the main console while waiting for a response. After a ridiculous delay (and three full games, all of which he lost) Justin got one: it was another packet-transmission:

“Okay, Storm, I’ve double-checked your readings, and they do make sense: it’s a wreck, alright, with heat signatures indicating impact during the last seven days. As a matter of fact, Justin, I think you might have just found the *Quarantania*.”

Justin whistled: one of the reasons for the recent step-up in patrols through the inner-Belt region was because of the mysterious disappearance of a medium-size freight vessel. The story of the missing ship made all the papers, but thanks to Justin’s low security-clearance he didn’t even know which ship had gone missing, until now.

The recording continued:

“The *Quarantania* was on a mission to Hansha-Fürste last week. It was only 40 hours out of Earth orbit when a distress call came in: it was garbled, and then there was only static, so no one knows what exactly happened to the ship. Well, until now, I suppose. Two crewmen, the pilots, were presumed deceased, naturally, even though the ship’s life support systems are supposed to keep the vessel habitable for a weeks-long round-trip like its built for. I don’t have to tell you what the payload was, do I?”

Hansha-Fürste: that’s the hermit group that left Earth and dug themselves into the dead shell of the Kuiper Mass. From what I’ve heard those curious hermits do alright by themselves, all in all, but there’s always one little thing that they absolutely, positively need above all else.

It was the *only* thing they had to have, both to stay alive and to power their entire operation: the only thing they could never hope to produce in sufficient quantities or ever live without, the final tie that bound them to the Earth.

“Oxygen.” Justin nodded.

“Anyway, Storm: the ship was carrying god-only-knows how many bricks of ‘rox’ onboard. If the *Quarantania* really did crash in the debris field it’d be a miracle that

those red oxygen bricks didn't ignite: what I'm guessing happened is that the hull split after impact and the inner cargo holds must've stayed in one piece. The bricks probably stayed intact until the ship's regulators ran out of power and couldn't keep them 'on ice' anymore. That means the ship must be bleeding gas into space as those bricks warm and depressurize."

Well, now that's fascinating, SL, but tell me what the hell you want me to do about it, eh?

"If the wreck hasn't exploded by now then it's probably safe. Get over there and verify the identity of that wreckage. If that's really the ship then there'll probably be a shitload of free oxygen swirling around, so enjoy. And, Justin: if it is the *Quarantania*, find out what the hell happened to it, right?"

"Right." Justin answered the prerecorded message. He tightened his seatbelts and kicked the *Love* into gear.

