



The Tommy Westphall Hypothesis

General lunch hour was just beginning in the mess hall. A rowdy band of good-natured pilots and their deckhands were laughing it up in the cafeteria. There were lots of back-slapping and friendly greetings amongst the group.

Justin and Chenine sat at a table near the back of the room. All the window seats in the hall were taken up by the base's fleet pilots, command staff and other iron-clad cliques. Chenine, her right shoulder girded in tight white bandaging, dutifully scratched-out the daily Sudoku puzzle. Justin was occupying himself with a crossword.

He'd shown a lot of remorse about the accident in the docking ring, but Chenine shrugged off any and all apologies Justin tried to make. In any event, the official report from the incident exonerated him from any overt wrongdoing, though he was dressed-down by the investigators for not completely powering down the *Love's* systems.

Justin still adamantly insisted that he *had* cut power to all his *Raiden's* circuits before dismounting, but Chenine appeared to be uninterested in his explanations. Either she took him completely at his word, or she wasn't really interested one way or the other.

The pair weren't engaging each other in conversation; they seldom did whenever they had down time. Justin, for one, adored the fact that he didn't need to chatter or gossip with his white-headed colleague. For her part, Chenine often deflected any attempts by anyone to engage her in small-talk.

There weren't many people on base that actually tried to do that, though. For the most part, the two-person "Tears' Shower Squadron" was hostilely ignored by the regular military groups at Base-10. Judging by the quiet, reflective faces of Justin and Chenine as they sat at their table, absorbed in their own pursuits and thoughts, that was just fine by them.

Laura Hayle moved into the seat across from Chenine with a graceful slide. She set down her can of *PopUp* Cola and folded her arms on the faux-wood table. “How’s it hanging, guys?” she grinned warmly.

“H’lo, lieutenant.” Justin sounded, working his speech around the nub of his pencil, which he was dedicatedly chewing on as he scanned his crossword. “Forgive me if I don’t salute...” he said as he marked another word in the puzzle. Raiden pilots only saluted superior officers who belonged to the Raiden chain of command. Sometimes that little quirk in protocol made Justin uncomfortable, and while his words sounded like a dreary quip, they were in fact an apology. “Hmm... What’s a nine-letter word for ‘extreme flattery’?”

“Dunno, but it probably doesn’t have anything to do with my ex-boyfriend...” Laura smirked wryly and looked over at Chenine. “You’re down to eight lives, now, aren’t you? I meant to visit you in the infirmary, but I guess you were quarantined, or something. How’re you doing lately?”

Chenine looked over at Justin, her eyes probing. They sent a clear message: ‘answer for me’, but Justin just returned that gaze with a wide, sardonic grin.

“Go ahead and tell her, Chenine...” he said whimsically.

The girl sighed and returned Laura’s gaze. “Beddur...” she said, sniffing loudly. “Bud I’be god a cohld...”

Justin snickered openly. “Dr. Roont says it’s an opportunistic infection. Can you believe that? And the cold bug, of all things. I guess all the old viruses just naturally take to young girls, eh?” Chenine glared at him darkly for a moment, then went back to her Sudoku puzzle.

“You hardly ever see that old cold virus popping up anymore, do you?” Laura said. She was obviously trying to avoid snickering at Chenine’s comical, nasally voice. The young pilot’s timber and tone were always so cool and serious, and this was a hilarious departure.

“Adulation.” Chenine managed through her congested sinuses.

“Huh?” Laura asked quizzically.

The lithe girl pointed wordlessly to Justin’s paper.

“Oh,” Justin checked his puzzle. “Yeah, that fits. Very cool.” he scratched the word in.

Laura shook her head, turning back to the silver-haired pilot. “I’m surprised you’re here at all, today. I mean, you’re still all wrapped-up in bandages and everything...”

Chenine shook her head. “I’b nodding buh winow reshing.”

Laura politely bit her lip and turned to Justin with a questioning look.

Justin, still smirking, didn’t look up from his crossword. “She’s ‘nothing but window dressing.’” He helpfully translated. “For some reason Dr. Roont is fussing over keeping her close by, just to make sure nothing else goes wrong with her, I guess. Anyway, the Aryl wants us both here on standby as well, even though Chenine’s still not on active status.”

“Ah, that’s another thing.” Laura snapped a finger. “I wanted to give you guys a head’s up-”

Justin’s canalphones crackled violently. It was Sven Wraith. “Storm, report to Ops. Now.” The Aryl’s scratchy voice reverberated in his brain.

“I think the subcommander’s gonna send you out to the Bydo Labs southern branch.” She leaned in closer, with a conspiratorial grin. “Do you guys wanna know why?”

The pair of pilots looked up at the same time. “To get extra parts for the new arrival.” Both Justin *and* Chenine answered at the same time, Justin in his tired, quiet cadence and Chenine in her unrecognizably stuffed-up voice.

The brunette Lieutenant frowned. “You guys are no fun, you know that?” She pouted. “Seriously, who needs you guys, anyway? Korang pilots are so much more interesting...”

Justin shrugged and folded-up his paper. “What we lack in interest, we make up for in firepower. Anyway, you’re right about the mission.”

She arched an eyebrow. “How could you possibly know? The requisition orders literally crossed my desk ten minutes ago.”

Justin tapped his ear. “A little bird told me.”

Laura could barely make out the foamy insert of one of Justin’s canalphones as he stood in profile. “Don’t you ever take those things out?” She asked.

“It’d be kinda interesting if I did...” Justin smirked. “They’re integrals.” he explained, “These guys’ll only come out through surgery.”

“Woah.” The lieutenant whistled. “Integral communication equipment? You mean you signed the service’s augmentation waiver?”

“Sure,” Justin replied as he smoothed out his khaki pants, “and you know what? It was pretty easy to do, seeing as how it was a prerequisite for joining the R-H program.” He walked off towards the Command Ops elevators.

“Prerequisite?” Laura turned to Chenine with surprise in her eyes.

Chenine looked up from her Sudoku and nodded. She tapped on her own ear, signaling that she, too, was augmented.

The subcommander made his pilots sign away their legal protection from physical and mechanical alteration?

“Hard-core...” Laura mused quietly.

Four hours later, Justin was well on his way to memorizing each and every verse of the song ‘D’ya Ken John Peel’. The drunken Korang pilots at the bar were belting it out with inebriated gusto. They’d been doing so ever since he arrived.

The black-haired pilot was holed-up in a corner booth of the ‘Southern Cross Watering Hole’, an old-fashioned officer’s mess, and the only source of food or drink on the tiny Southland Isles. As it was, the islands were lucky to have this much: only military personnel ever came here, and even then only when they had official business with the local branch of Bydo Labs.

The place was small, and at present held only a dozen people, counting Justin and the bartender. The bawdy pilots at the bar were carousing and having a general bash. Justin, wearing his pitch-black flight suit, with his back against the oak paneling, was playing the part of a chameleon. He was only in here because his parched throat had been screaming for a beverage. Anyway, he had to sit *somewhere* while those secretive pinheads at the Labs loaded-up his ship. They’d made it abundantly clear that Justin was *not* welcome to watch them work.

He was just glad that the drunk Korang pilots didn't pay him any attention. It wouldn't take a lot of inspection for them to tell that he was a Raiden pilot (the fact that he'd come in alone was a good clue, for starters). If they discovered him, one of two things would happen: he'd either be singled out for verbal abuse, or bought a round of drinks. Or maybe both.

Justin shook his head. *Then I'd be singing 'John Peel' until I passed out...*

He sighed casually. The scene at the bar was all too reminiscent of the scene in Base-10's cafeteria this morning. Happy people, it seemed, looked the same the world over. At least, they looked the same when viewed from afar...

The old-time bar doors banged open loudly, momentarily interrupting the singers' wavering, unfocused chorus. The reddest head of hair Justin had ever seen in his life walked into the bar. Beneath the hair, there was a man.

He was a stern-faced pilot, there was a definite sense of wise-guy boyishness to his gait, but his hard face and chiseled jaw spoke for his toughness. His eyes were a dark and somber black. He was clad in an emerald-green flight suit. Justin's keen eyes saw that the suit was embroidered with a small scepter and sword design on the right breast. He figured it was a personalized design.

That little insignia spoke volumes. There was only one kind of pilot that was allowed to have a personalized flight suit issued to them.

Smiling with the radiance of the sun, the man sidled up to the bar. He warmly (and loudly, Justin noted) greeted the bartender by his first name. The two commiserated for a few minutes. Justin could only hear the stocky pilot's part of the conversation, as his deep, lyrical voice tended to carry.

It didn't take the man too long to spot Justin in his corner. He took in the reclusive pilot with a discerning eye.

"I knew I felt a vibe in here!" He called over to Justin. Walking over to his table he added, "I could tell there was some real 'energy' in this room, 'ya ken?"

No... actually I'm Justin... he thought in the back of his head.

"Energy?" He asked innocently.

"A-yeah," the green-suited man replied. "Like there was more than just bleating Korang pilots in here. I can sense another Raiden pilot a mile away." He extended his hand enthusiastically, it almost touched Justin's chin. "Connor Trent: at your service."

Justin reluctantly took the hand, which Connor shook up and down like a checkered flag.

"Uh... Justin Storm, at yours..." he answered awkwardly.

"From a find to a check, from a check to a view, from a view to a kill in the morning!" The pilots at the bar ended their latest round with an uproarious belt of laughter.

"Spirited bunch..." Justin motioned to the group, fumbling for something to say to the brash pilot who'd intruded on his solitude.

Connor took a seat opposite Justin and looked over his shoulder at the group with a wry grin. "Tch. Pay 'em no mind. That's an old hunting song, to be sure." He looked back at Justin. "They're all itching for the 'hunt'; they want to get themselves a piece of that floating evil out at Jupiter. Never you worry: that time's coming. You can be sure of that."

Justin nodded and raised his ginger-ale half-heartedly. "Here's to victory." It seemed the appropriate thing to do.

“Agh!” The Scotsman spat, grabbing hold of Justin’s wrist and preventing him for sipping down the cool, bubbly drink. “If there’s a toast to be made, it’s to be done properly!” He looked over his shoulder: “Endross! Endross, ya’ hear? A scotch and soda for me,” he turned to Justin, “and what’ll you have? And don’t you dare go reaching for any money either, pal: I’m buying and that’s that.”

“Oh, hey, I don’t think so,” Justin replied evasively, “I mean, I can’t. I’m only here for another two hours at most, then it’s back into the ether.”

The red-headed rogue laughed deeply. “Ah, come on. It’s my duty to kin to buy a fellow Raiden pilot a drink. Besides, you’ve got a detox system on your ship, haven’t ‘ya?”

Justin did, of course, but it made him ever so nauseous and sick. He didn’t mention that fact to the bold-eyed man, though. For one thing, it would have made him look weak and pathetic. Connor Trent had the kind of warm and bombastic personality that made people want to like him, even if they’d just met him. And he’d already started winning Justin over.

He could also tell that the man would take deep offense if his offer were further rebuked, so he relented with a sigh.

“I guess I could stand a drink. Thanks.” He said unenthusiastically.

“That’s it, then!” Connor warmly slapped Justin’s shoulder, hard enough to jolt the thin-framed pilot to one side like a blow-up punching clown. “What’ll you have then? Could I recommend something with Scotch, perhaps?” He drawled with a mocking, high-class accent.

“Sorry, I never quite got the hang of Scotch.” Justin apologized. “It’s got a bitter edge for me...”

“Everything’s edge is bitter until you get familiar with it.” Trent observed.

“Trust me, when it comes to Scotch in my system, a toilet bowl is the only thing I’ve ever managed to become familiar with. Let’s go with a Harvey Wallbanger.”

“You heard the man, Endross!” He called to the bartender. Turning back to Justin with bright, enthusiastic eyes, he said: “We’ll toast the war properly!”

Justin softly grunted his ascent.

Well, it’s not so bad... he thought. Might as well have a couple of drinks to pass the time, and just nod and grin enthusiastically while this guy goes on with his motor-mouth.

Just a couple of drinks. What’s the worst that could happen, anyway?

Nine empty glasses later the duo were lounging at a table at the center of the bar. Connor had his black boots up on the tabletop, and Justin lay sprawled in his chair.

“Yeah, see, I’m actually just a delivery-boy t-day,” Connor slurred his words and his thick accent got in the way (it was an accent that Justin found to be wonderfully funny), “My squad needs some spare parts, so who do they send...?” He hiccupped.

“The talented, if under-utilized, Mister Trent!” Justin finished, slurring words himself and more than a little giddy. He found that he was becoming fast friends with the fiery-headed Scotsman (and the liquor certainly helped with that). Part of it was Connor’s tendency to talk way too much, whereas Justin usually talked far too little for his own good. The combination was a good one to have in drunken conversation.

Connor suddenly raised his half-drunk glass forward. Justin, who was getting this ritual down pat, quickly brought his up as well. The mugs clanked together with a crash (and more than a little liquor spilled onto the table in the aftermath).

“To the war!” Connor quipped.

“To the end of the Bydo Empire!” Justin practically yelled, his nose ostentatiously raised in the air. The pair chugged the rest of their mugs’ contents.

Wiping his chin, Justin clumsily motioned to Connor’s flight suit, and the embroidered scepter and sword design. “So, what are you, huh? The *Fightin’ Monarch* or something?” He tittered drunkenly.

“Eh, this?” Connor pointed to his chest. “This, my good New Englander, is the officially designated crest, er, emblem... thing...” he squinted, trying to figure out which word best fit. “Er, never mind: *symbol*, of the almighty ‘Excel-Class’ Raiden: the *Principalities!*” He grinned haughtily. “You know, a sword and scepter, like in all the biblical apocrypha” (he enunciated that word in a delightful staccato: ‘ah-pah-cri-fa’).

Justin had a blank look on his face.

“Come on, the *order*: angels, man, angels! You know: ‘the discerning ‘Principalities’, their swords and scepters bright, beside the old ‘Dominions’, their judgment bold and wise?’”

He bit his lip. “I’ll take your word for it, mate.” (in his drunkenness Justin was trying to adopt Connor’s hypnotic accent, and he was failing miserably).

“Tch!” Connor waved him off. He motioned to the design on Justin’s suit. It was an extremely long and narrow blood-red line, trailing down the black flight suit from the nipple-line of Justin’s suit to his belly-button. “Well, what the hell are you supposed to be, then? *The Thin Red Line?*” He chuckled.

Justin shook his head, a touch of embarrassment creeping into his face. “Not exactly...” he said evasively.

“Well, then, out with it: what’s it supposed to be?”

Justin sighed. “It’s... well, a heart.” He said quietly.

“What, a heart?” Connor bleated loudly, a dopey grin spreading across his face. “You’re kidding! It doesn’t look like one, to me.”

Justin nodded, absently rolling one of his empties around on the table. “Yeah, it’s narrow enough to be two-dimenshoal...” he paused, untwisting his tongue, then tried again: “*two-dimensional*, but that’s what it actually is.”

“Then you’re what: *The Smooching Valentine?*”

Justin looked up, his drunken eyes piercing. “Hey, that actually sounds like a real Raiden name, doesn’t it?”

Connor thought about this (with what little part of his frontal lobes he had to work with) and nodded. “A-yeah... I should write that down...” he said with a mystified gaze.

“Anyway, no, I’m not anything like that. I’m the wonderful, lovely, dazzling *Platonic Love.*” Justin slurred.

“‘Platonic Love’?” Connor chortled. “And I thought my Raiden’s name was bad!”

Justin looked at him, slightly defensive. “But I thought you were all proud and psyched-up about your name... I mean, you sounded like it.”

“Hell, no, boy-o!” Connor shook his head. “Those chumps at the Bydo Labs can make a state-of-the art weapon out of alien-spit and a few plates of steel, but when it

comes to finding names for ‘em, well, let’s just say they couldn’t pick a good one if it crawled out of their asses.”

“I hear that...” Justin replied with a stereotypical ‘drunk-guy’ hiccup.

“Although your suit’s a little interesting; I’ve never seen a black Raiden uniform before, and the skin’s not too shiny, is it?” that was true: while Connor looked like a glowing salamander in his reflective, shiny green suit, Justin’s black uniform was severely muted. “That’s not even a *Goedkeuring*-class suit, is it?”

Justin shook his head. “It’s *Liefde*-class. They’re made to use the Raidens’ latent impulses. It conducts electricity through my-”

“I *know* how they work...” Connor slurred, offended. “You don’t have to explain it to me... but you only see those suits on ships with an SL...”

Justin nodded. “I fly with an on-board Pragma Link.”

This ticked the Scotsman. He laughed openly, his burly, squared shoulders going like pistons. “Ha! You mean to tell me that *you* fly with a Sensations Link?”

Justin nodded.

“Tch!” Connor smirked. “Then I suppose you’ve also had your spinal cord ‘spiked’?” Justin nodded. His spine was, in fact, studded with all those small metallic needles that made a full-fledged Link possible.

Connor continued. “So you’ve been augmented. Then that means you also have to slurp-down some ‘Enhancin’ every so often, to keep all your little ‘parts’ in order?” The black-headed New Englander nodded again. Connor broke out into another laugh.

Justin stared at him wordlessly. He looked a little hurt. “Do you think less of me because of that?”

Trent stopped laughing and shook his head. “I find it funny. But I don’t judge pilots by how they choose to fly. I judge by *performance*, and by actions. A lot of people say pilots who use SL’s are untalented hacks and cop-outs. I say, if you’re an above-average pilot, you’re all right in my book. It’s only below-average pilots I can’t stand.”

“What makes a ‘below-average’ pilot?” Justin asked.

“Oh, they’re easy to identify,” Connor grinned whimsically. “They’ve always got an unequal number of take-offs and landings.”

Both Typers had a good laugh at this. Despite Connor’s tolerant views on his augmentations, Justin sought to change the subject. He felt quite happy to be jawing it up with a ‘fellow’ pilot, and he didn’t want to dwell on their differences.

“So why is it that *you’re* the lucky guy that was sent to pick-up the spare parts from Southland, exactly?”

Connor’s gruff, likable face became more serious. “‘cause I’ve got the biggest cargo bin of the lot of us, and because mine’s one of the few ships in our squad that’s actually at full-strength.”

“Full-strength?” Justin asked. “You’re one of the *only* ones? What the hell happened to your unit?”

Connor’s gaze was distant and dark as he rolled his finger around the rim of his glass, making a haunting, reverberating squeak. “We’ve had our difficulties.” He said simply. He shook his head. “Actually, we had a little situation recently, courtesy of the Galilean Mass” (*gale-e-en moss*, he pronounced it).

“Rough going?”

“From what I remember.” Connor shrugged. He was watching his finger trail over the glass rim.

Justin smirked good-naturedly; he was far too sloshed to be put off by Connor’s sudden change in tone. “You know, I tend to remember *my* combat experiences. Shouldn’t you kinda remember yours?”

Flashes of light and noise echoed through Connor’s head. He was back on the water. He could feel the hot sludge of Bydo innards on his skin and taste the steamy goop between his gums. He felt the blind, uncontrolled hatred pulsing in his body, boiling in his chest as he blew the swan-demon’s head off. The images were jumbled, blurred like a frosted glass wall. There were screams echoing in his head, moans, cries of anguish and horror.

He saw a field of fire, blazing with unnatural heat and fury.

He tasted strawberries.

“Hey, Trent!” Justin jolted the ruminating Scotsman back to reality. “Don’t you get all spaced-out on me. You told me you could hold your liquor, you know.”

Connor snapped-to and glared at Justin with a light smirk. “Better than you can, anyhow” he retorted. He motioned for Endross to replenish their beverages. “I dunno, though. Sometimes, when things get really hot, I guess I can lose track of time. Hell, even events.”

“Lose track?”

“A-yeah. You know, fighting’s what we do. It’s what we’re trained for, what we’re paid for. It’s something we *should* be used to-”

“And you’re not?” Justin surmised.

“No. Maybe it’s that I’m *too* used to it. When my blood gets to the boiling point, I mean really hot, things can just become a blur, like a dream...” He shook his head. “Eh, what does it matter, anyway? They say life’s a dream, don’t they?” Justin didn’t know who *they* were exactly, but judging by Connor’s drunken pseudo-philosophical gaze, neither did he.

He shrugged noncommittally. “Tommy Westphall strikes again.”

“What?” The Scotsman glared at Justin quizzically.

Justin returned the gaze. “What do you mean ‘what’?” He pursed his lips. “Oh, yeah, Tommy.” He realized that an explanation was in order. “Uh, do you like television, Connor?”

“Next to the Bydo, it’s the great harbinger of the downfall of society and of civilization.” He growled disdainfully.

Justin pursed his lips even more. “Ooookay...” he paused.

Connor sighed. “Just tell me what you’re talking about.”

“Well, there’s this old show, and I mean *old*, older than old school, you see?”

“I *ken*.” Connor barked, irritated at the slow pace of Justin’s exposition.

“No, you’re Connor...” Justin continued, his drunken eyes waxy. “Anyway, it was this doctor show, a show about doctors, called *St. Elsewhere*.”

“Nice name.” Connor admitted after a pause.

“Mmm...” Justin agreed. “About a hospital-”

“-and a doctor called ‘Westfill’?”

“Westphall.” Justin corrected him. “And the Doctor’s name is actually *Donny* Westphall.”

“But you said-”

Justin wagged his finger. “Tommy was his son. His autistic son, no less.”

“Autistic, eh?”

“Oh, yeah.” Justin nodded. “He had it bad, too.”

Connor kicked his boots back up on the table. “Right... so, f-give me if I’m being dense, but how exactly was he important, then?”

“He wasn’t. Not even a little bit. Strictly a secondary character... or even a tertiary character, if there is such a thing.”

“Hmmm...” There was a definite irritation in the gruff Scotsman’s verdant eyes.

“Until the final episode,” Justin continued, “when it turned out that the whole friggin’ series was just a fragment of his imagination.”

“Fragment?” Connor arched an eyebrow.

“Uh, figment...” Justin corrected himself. “His dad wasn’t even a doctor; he was some kind of sanitation worker, or something. The final shot of the series showed the kid looking into a little snow-globe that had a miniature hospital inside: the inspiration for his fantasy. Six years worth of stories and character arcs, and it was all nothing but a dream. And it all disappeared with a simple shake of his little snow-globe.”

“...neat...” Connor replied, obviously not impressed.

“Ah, ah, ah,” Justin again wagged his finger (he appeared to really enjoy doing this when he was sloshed), “it doesn’t end there.”

“How’s that?”

“You see,” Justin suddenly perked up and began drawling like a pompous professor, “back in those days of TV, spin-offs and crossovers between shows were all the rage.”

“Do tell...” Connor said, disinterestedly.

“See, one of the fictional characters on *St. Elsewhere* also appeared on a show called *Homicide*. That show had character crossovers with *another* show called *Law and Order*. Well, *that* show had about a trillion spinoffs. Also, there was a character involved in almost *all* these shows called John Munch, and *he* appeared on this show called *The X-Files*, which links up to...”

“Is there a point to any of this?” Connor interrupted.

“Okay, okay okay...” Justin was really getting in to this, “bottom line is, when all things are said and done, *St. Elsewhere* ends up being linked to about 200 different shows, from some barfly comedy called *Cheers* all the way up to *Star Trek*...”

“*Star Trek*,” Connor smirked, “at least now you’re taking stuff I’ve heard of. But again, *what’s the point?*”

Justin smiled devilishly. “If *St. Elsewhere* was a frag...” he corrected himself, “if that entire show was a *figment* of Tommy Westphall’s mind, then it stands to reason that *everything* connected to the show, that is, everything that’s linked to that same fictional universe, is *also* a product of that boy’s imaginative noggin.” He spread his hands dramatically.

“Tch.” Connor grunted, thinking about the implications. “A dream within a dream, then?” He whistled drunkenly. “That’s a real mind job.”

“A real mind job.” Justin agreed. “So, bottom line is, if you feel like something’s screwed-up, or if things are somewhat muddled, just remember that it’s all Tommy’s

fault.” He grinned. “Because, sooner or later, you can probably link everything back to him.”

The pair had a good laugh at this train of logic. They spent another hour jawing it up in the dingy little bar. Soon after, Justin got a ‘chirp’ on his canalphones: the *Love* was ready to depart. Connor demanded to see him off, saying that it was his “duty to kin” to make sure a fellow Raiden pilot makes it back to his ship without falling and fracturing a bone.

They wandered in a wavering, unfocused line, crossing the orchid-scented pedestrian mall. The sun was shining, though it was low in the sky, and the many quaint brick crossroads around the Bydo Labs were lightly populated with pedestrians. A few kestrels chirped noisily overhead. Southland was a small island, but it was fairly pleasant.

As they came to the North end of the complex, where the Raiden docking bays were located, Connor brightened as he saw a familiar face.

“Hey, Havoc!” He called warmly across the plaza. A man in military fatigues glanced in his direction. Connor slammed Justin on the back and told him: “Ah, you gotta meet this guy: he’s a cut-up!”

Justin noted the man nervously as Connor dragged him across the plaza. “Uh, is he in the... Raiden business?”

“What, Havoc? Hell, no! He’s Lab Security, but a hell of a gent anyway. Come on!”

“Alright, Connor, but look: I’m *D6*, you hear?”

Connor looked at Justin skeptically, like he’d just been stabbed in the side. Meanwhile, Havoc was crossing to meet them. He waited to speak until he was fairly close to the pair. “Trent, huh?” He called in a dark, deep voice. “I thought a Typer like you wouldn’t show your face around here, seeing that you owe me, and half the security-force, a round of drinks...” His grin was unsavory, and several of his teeth were diamond-studded.

“Ah, shut your cursing mouth, man!” He belted with a grin. “But that’s not the way I remember it.” He motioned to his Justin and, throwing him another skeptical look, introduced him. “This here’s my friend Justin, Justin Storm. He’s a... Korang pilot from Edinburgh.”

Justin sized-up Havoc: the man was a good foot taller than even Connor. He had biceps like tree trunks and a sharp, severe face with more than its share of scars.

“How do.” The man acknowledged Justin with his deep, velvet voice. He did not, Justin noticed, offer his hand.

“H’lo.” Justin nodded weakly.

Connor and Havoc talked for a few minutes. Justin couldn’t help but notice that, even as the pair laughed and gabbed, the towering Havoc continually shot sidelong glances at Justin. They were the kind of glances that first made him wonder if he had anything stuck in his teeth, but as the fatigue-clad commando continued surveying him Justin grew uneasy.

After a brief conversation between the towering Havoc and Connor, Justin was again stumbling back to the Raiden hangars. He needed a little help from his equally-inebriated drinking buddy.

“Sooo...” Connor drawled with a sidelong glance, “mind telling me what that was about?”

“What?” Justin responded.

“What d’ya mean ‘what’? I’m taking about your classification! I’ve never met another pilot with a *D6* classification...”

“Oh,” Justin nodded, “that. By the way: good thinking on your feet back there.” He scratched his head absently. “I dunno. It’s something my Aryl’s hung up on. Truth be told, our unit’s kinda new on the block, so to speak. People want to keep us under the radar to anybody outside the ‘community’, at least for a while.”

Connor shrugged. “Secrecy I can understand, I guess.” He leaned in closer to Justin and whispered conspiratorially. “In fact, you know how I told you that Havoc was in ‘Lab Security’? Bullshit. I’d wager my Raiden on it. We’ve run into each other from time to time, and he fed me that ‘security’ line awhile back. From what I can tell, he spends *way* too much time away from all the Bydo Labs branches to be a regular security grunt. I dunno *what* he really does, but the way he’s so tight-lipped, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s in the intelligence branches, maybe even Spec-Ops, ‘ya ken?”

“Tch.” Justin waved his hand drunkenly. “Come on: in my book Spec-Ops is nothing but a myth.”

Connor smiled. “Then I think your book is missing a few pages.”

They stumbled on for a few more paces, then Connor asked: “Anyway, where does your unit hail from? I have to be honest: I haven’t heard anything about a new squadron or anything like that.”

Justin shook his head. “We’re small, very small, actually. We’re out at this rusting little hellhole in the Gulf.”

“The Gulf?”

“Yeah, actually we’re pretty close to the Great City at Nash Ultima. Our base is so pathetic that it doesn’t even have a proper name. They just call it ‘Base-10’.”

Connor stopped walking. “...Base-10?” His face suddenly changed.

Gears started grinding along the wall next to them. The hangar doors parted and revealed the *Platonic Love*, its spheroid shell gleaming in the bright afternoon light. Justin gazed at it proudly.

Connor bit his lip at the sight of it. He bit it hard enough to draw blood.

“Ah, here’s my baby...” Justin said haughtily. He looked up at the Raiden with a sly and arrogant face, intending to show-off as much as possible to his fellow Typer. He was drunk, and he was feeling competitive.

But Connor just stared at the gleaming silver sphere and balled one fist.

Justin continued. “Sure, she’s got one of the most powerful wave cannons you’ll ever see, but I always thought her handling could be a little better. Eh, nothing’s ever *completely* perfect. Well, what do you think, Trent?” Justin turned to face Connor.

He turned just in time to see Connor’s bare knuckles flying towards his face. Justin’s right eye exploded in a flash of pain. A sick, bright flash filled his vision as the punch connected.

Justin’s head flew backwards as if he’d been hit by a bullet. He barely managed to keep on his feet as he stumbled backwards, clearing the cobwebs from his head. That’s when Connor connected with his second punch, slamming his dominant right fist into Justin’s nose.

“Geah!” Justin squealed as he fell backwards, landing in the dusty street with a thud. He felt a warm goo trailing freely over his lips and down his cheeks. Dazed, Justin tenderly touched his nose, recoiling at the sudden pain that rose from it. He looked at his hand and saw that it was coated in blood.

Connor walked around Justin’s body in a predatory semi-circle. “Tha’s for my squadron, mate.” He sneered darkly.

“Your... your *what?*” Justin gasped, still dazed and confused. His green eyes were wide in terror.

Connor noticed this. “That’s the face...” he spat. “That’s the face you must have been wearin’ when you flew *away* from my squadron when we needed you, fucking prick!” Growling, he brought his foot forward in a vicious kick, slamming Justin’s side. The kick sent a sharp wave of pain into Justin’s kidney.

“Augh!” The supine pilot screamed, drawing his arms in towards his wounded side. He groaned, curled up in the fetal position, as Connor continued pacing.

“One of us *died* because of your unit, because of *you!*”

Justin shuffled quickly through the rolodex of his mind. “I... we... the Salt-o-Scots...” he remembered the incident from a week ago, when he and Chenine were coming back from Epdin. “We didn’t... know you were in trouble...”

“No trouble.” Connor sneered, shaking his head slowly. “We can hold our own without the likes of you, and we did. But medical attention? That’ve been nice...” He bent over and grabbed Justin’s hair, lifting his face up. “Our youngest boy died out there. He was fourteen. *Fourteen*, you hear?” He shook Justin to and fro.

Justin was breathing hard and trying to keep from choking on the blood that streamed from his nose and over his lips. “That’s impossible...” he weakly groaned. “The... enlisting age... is 18 for the pilots’ program...”

Connor grinned ironically. “Oh, no. See, SJC’s taking ‘em younger and younger these days. Nowadays, all they want to see is hellacious reflexes in their pilots, and so they use their precious Moro-Plantar test to get the ‘fastest fingers in the West’, if ‘ya ken...” he released Justin’s head with disdain. “But you obviously *don’t* ken, do ‘ya?”

Panting, Justin shook his head. “Our Aryl, he made us keep radio silence-”

“*Don’t* blame your God-damned Aryl and don’t blame your support staff. *You* were out there, *you* saw us on the water and *you* turned tail and ran!”

Justin rested his head against the dirt. He shook it and coughed on the blood that trickled into his mouth. He winced as his nose touched the rough ground.

Connor stared at him, his eyes still blazing like fractured gems, but he appeared to have a bit more composure. “It’s broken.” He said, motioning to Justin’s nose. He turned his back on Justin and walked off. “File a complaint with the MP when you get back home if you’d like. They’ll probably bust me down to Lieutenant for it, but I don’t care.”

Justin kept his head to the ground, adjusting his body to the pain in his face and in his side. After a minute he gingerly rolled over and rose to his feet. There was no sign of Connor. The area around the Raiden hangars was still devoid of any people. Even the birds in the trees had taken flight during the assault.

He controlled the bleeding in his nose and weakly clambered into his cockpit. He cried out loud as the myriad seatbelts and harnesses shot over his body and strapped him into the seat, pressing viciously against his bruised side.

A red warning light flashed in the cockpit and a tinny voice said: “Warning: chemical-contamination detected. Analysis pending...” Justin gritted his teeth as a needle plunged into his shoulder from the side of his chair. The voice continued. “Toxin identified: ethanol. Concentration is 120 milligrams per deciliter. Initiating purification...”

Justin drew in a sharp breath as another needle jammed into his neck and connected with his carotid artery. Within thirty seconds, a special mixture of ‘GABAcide’ flowed through every blood vessel in his body, eradicating his drunkenness as it went.

Two minutes later, he was stone-cold sober.

Justin hung his head. Two strips of handkerchief were stuffed comically into his nostrils. The harsh, cold light of sobriety hit him like a ton of bricks. He thought about the bar, about how just a few minutes ago he was having a drink with a ‘pal’; they were swapping stories and having a good old time. Sure, it was all thanks to a little ethyl alcohol, but there it was.

Well, there it had been...

It’d been a very long time since he’d had that kind of fun. It had been a long time since he’d just been able to talk like that, one-on-one, with a ‘buddy’. And in the middle of a bar, no less!

Who’d have thought you were even capable of something like that, anymore?

It didn’t matter though. With a shake of the snow-globe, reality had set in once again.

Justin shook his head and drew his defenses around him, hardening his heart and keeping a stoical mask on his busted face. For all it was worth, this whole damn incident could have been nothing but a transient daydream.

“*Life is but a dream...*” he said through clenched teeth as he began his pre-flight routine.

There was a small wooden gazebo across the way from the Bydo Labs’ hangars. Myriad palm fronds and oleanders swayed between it and the dingy docking bays. Havoc was resting his calloused, gigantic hands on the splintery wooden railing and looking towards the bays. His eyes were glued to the hangars: his left one was black; the right one shimmered and glowed with a faint blue tint: the light of augmentation.

Havoc watched Justin’s silver ship blast out of the docking bay and ascent into the heavens. He could see it as clearly as if he were a fly on the canopy. His enhanced right eye was keen enough to spot every little scratch on Justin’s windscreen. He touched one finger to his ear.

“It’s me. The *Platonic Love* has left Southland.” His deep velvet voice was a shadowy whisper. He paused as he listened to a voice on the other end of the line.

“...no, sir: the cargo hold was welded shut; I don’t think they trusted the pilot... That’s correct, sir: the hafnium-carbide skin prevented any invasive procedures... yes, it is unfortunate... Yes, sir. I understand...”

A group of security guards were approaching from the rear. One of them called out to him. “Hey, Havoc! It’s shift-changing time: let’s get on over to the Watering Hole!”

Havoc, his back to the men, slipped a contact lens into his right eye and turned to face the other guards. He looked at them with two perfectly equal black eyes.

“Sounds like a plan to me.” He agreed.

“Hmmm...” Jen Drake was slouching in her chair at Command Ops, a wad of bubblegum covertly wedged between her gums. With Commander Faught holed-up in his office, it was safe to chew, at least for the moment. Laura, sitting beside her, didn’t fail to notice the sickly-sweet cherry scent.

She leaned closer to Jen. “It looks like you’re doing *two* things that you’re not supposed to do, Jen. For one, you’re chewing on a stick of grade-A contraband.”

“Bite me, cola-girl.” Jen cast Laura a sidelong glance with a catlike grin.

“Buuuut...” Laura lyrically added, “the other thing’s a little more serious, I think.”

“What other thing?” Jen asked innocently.

“Drop it, Jen. You may be good enough to commandeer the station’s satellite array, but you’re not good enough to keep it from registering on *my* workstation.”

Jen flushed. “It’s not ‘commandeering’, I’m just piggybacking off the ambient signal-”.

“Call it what you want. If the commander found out...”

“Oh, come on!” Jen leaned towards Laura and whispered. “I’m not looking to mess anything up. I’m just using it to take a little peek at what’s out there...”

“What you’re *supposed* to be doing is compiling that data.” Laura accused.

“Oh, I did that an hour ago,” Jen waved her hand. “C’mon, there’s really no harm in any of this...” She flashed Laura an innocent, puppy-dog gaze.

Laura dubiously checked her system files and, finding all of Jen’s data compiled, blinked in surprise. “Eh.” She shook her head and retrieved a hidden can of cola from under her desk. “We’ll call it a break. But don’t make a habit of it. The subcommander’s put the base on elevated alert, you know. He wants all communication to stay at a minimum since he had that satellite shielding system installed. And that order could easily extend to your little ‘peeks’, too.”

Jen nodded in acknowledgement. She continued tapping out commands on her console. Finally Laura asked: “Do you even know what you’re doing? Long-range sweeps aren’t a simple matter, and they take a bit of practice...”

“Oh, I’ve got it down...” Jen flashed an arrogant grin. “I’ve already spotted two units out at the Belt.”

“Really?” Jen sounded impressed.

“Yup. I think they were Raidens, but their mass-readings were on the heavy side. They were kinda big, at least from what I know about Raiden Tech...”

“They were Strikers, then.” Laura nodded. “Have you tried peeking at Jupiter?”

Jen nodded. “It’s difficult as hell,” she acknowledged. “I try to glean a signal from anywhere even close to that region, and all I get back is this wavering static...”

“You’re hitting the same problem that our artillery fleets have. It’d be pretty nice if we could just send up a few Za’ar bombs and vaporize the Bydo Masses, but those things don’t just scan like wizards, they can *jam*, too. Of course, if you fired out an Active-Systems Scan at the thing, you’d be able to see it, but then *it* could see you, too...”

Jen had been frivolously typing while Laura talked. “Found it.” She nonchalantly quipped.

Lara looked at her skeptically. “What?” she said, almost laughing at the ridiculousness of Jen’s claim.

“Here.” The pink-headed girl swiveled her monitor with pride. “Whadda’ya think of that, huh?”

Laura looked at the image on Jen’s screen. It was a myriad of bright colors: density imaging, heat signatures, and motion-analyses. After a few seconds of crunching the numbers, Laura laughed.

“What?” Jen said defensively.

“You’ve managed to find a battle cruiser.” She said mockingly. “You’re scanning the *pre-Jovian* orbital, Jen. I told you that it takes practice to get the hang of these scanners.”

“But, come on, that mass-reading is huge-”

“And it isn’t even 1/20th the weight of a bona-fide Bydo Mass.” Laura shook her head. “It’s pretty big, though. Looks like you’ve found the *Onychophage*.”

“You mean the SJC flagship?”

“More like the *flagship* of flagships.” Laura shrugged. “I guess it’s helping to set-up a perimeter for the Allied Military’s upcoming assault.”

Frowning, Jen growled: “well, I *could* have found the Mass if these sensors were up to snuff...”

Laura smirked at Jen’s arrogance. “It’s still not as simple as all that. It’s not just our sensors, or even the Mass’s jamming. Our ships out at the staging area have been sending a few Active-System scans towards Jupiter recently, and they’ve confirmed that the Mass’s power output is starting to nose-dive.”

“Nose-dive?” Jen asked, a small pout still gracing her humbled lips.

“Yeah, it’s something the Masses do right before they unleash an ‘incarnation-wave’. Their power output drops-off pretty quickly. In official jargon, we say their ‘Autistic-Withdraw Factor’ goes up. We’re likely to see a bona-fide invasion force soon. Thank God for the Belt’s Thantos Tails, and Epdin, of course...”

Tap... tap... tap... Sven Wraith’s black cane clicked on the concrete floor behind them.

Jen tensed-up and quickly removed all traces of her sensor-sweep from the computer monitor’s window. With pursed lips, she pulled-up the next batch of tedious data she was supposed to compile and got cracking on it.

Tap... tap... tap...

“Lieutenant,” the RL acknowledged Laura as he tottered into Ops.

“Subcommander, sir.” She gave a seated salute.

Wraith looked over at Jen, then back at Laura. “Didn’t the commander forbid beverages during working-hours?” He asked, his keen eyes finding Laura’s half-hidden can of cola beneath her desk.

Laura bit her lip and nodded. “Um, yes, sir. You see-”

“I see perfectly, Hayle.” He cut her off. “And do you have any excuse for your actions?”

“No, sir...”

A thin smile wormed over Wraith's steely face. "Good, because Faught doesn't have an excuse either. In my book, there's no need to follow idiotic orders, assuming they're idiotic enough."

Laura smiled wanly.

"I'm expecting a communication, Lieutenant." He continued. "It's coded priority-3. Has there been any traffic coming in recently?"

"Yes, sir." She replied, pulling up the communications log on her monitor. "We've been getting a low-grade signal since 1245 hours, but I can't exactly pinpoint the origin-"

"That's not important." Wraith interrupted. "Send the signal-data directly to my office, please." He ordered.

"Yes, sir." Laura acknowledged.

Then, quite suddenly, Wraith leaned down right next to Jen, putting his scarred cheek next to her pink head. He whispered into her ear, very softly so that Laura couldn't hear. After a few seconds of whispering, he stood-up and hobbled back to his office, the ominous thumping of his cane fading as he went.

"What did he say?" Laura asked.

Jen's eyes were wide and she was white as a sheet. "I... think I'd better start obeying the rules a little more... from now on..." she said with a quivering voice.

"Are you insane!?"

Johnny's taking the news well... Wraith thought.

"You're talking about treason, for God's sake!" The man belted through all the static on the secured line. "This stupidity is beyond description! Do you know what the SJC would do if they found out?"

"Probably the same thing that the Council on Human Rights would do if they found out what we were doing to our test subjects." Wraith whimsically opined.

"Don't give me that 'ends justifies the means' lecture, Wraith. Antipathy might be morally-ambiguous, but *this* is treasonous!"

"'Treason' is the ultimate grey-word, Johnny. What some people consider 'treason' others might consider 'heroics'. In the end they're just words, but it's the *results* that speak louder than those words."

"Damn it, Wraith: the Mass's AW-Factor spiked yesterday; it's closing in on itself and getting ready to let-loose with an incarnation assault. Using those Raidens to plant a computer virus on Epdin and causing it to fail at a critical moment like this isn't heroics: it's *murder*."

Sven ground his teeth and shot dagger-like eyes at his computer-speaker. "So... is... Antipathy..." he said, very slowly, and with venomous intonation. "You want to have the project succeed, Johnny, but you don't want to get your hands dirty. I'm planning to have the First Vector prepared for the Mass *before* the assault on Jupiter begins, and there's only *one* way to do that. Forcing an engagement right now will accomplish several things at once. If we can get the R-H's some spectacular exposure, they'll be put on the front-lines of the Jupiter invasion-fleet, isn't that right?"

Johnny sighed with exasperation. "Given suitable heroics, the Committee *could* manage to get your Raidens placed somewhere in the initial wave of the invasion-fleet, but-"

“Good.” Wraith cut him off. “And before you complain any more, consider the fact that we need to significantly ‘stress’ our current test-subject in order to even *create* the First Vector.”

“If your precious little subject doesn’t die in the assault, that is...”

“That’s always been a risk with the project, hasn’t it?” Wraith countered. “But don’t forget: the *Platonic Love* will be protecting her.”

“That doesn’t fill me with confidence.”

Wraith’s lips spread into a cruel grin. “This engagement won’t be quite as bad as you think, Johnny. Besides, urban combat is always a little less-risky than open-field engagements, what with all the artificial cover that’s present...”

“True, but-” suddenly Johnny’s voice cut out, like he’d been choked. “Did you just say ‘urban’ combat?”

“The virus I implanted at Epdin is selective: I can choose *exactly* where I want the system to short-out, and we need a target whose defense would constitute ‘suitable heroics’, don’t we? We can’t just have a little skirmish over the water, or at some anonymous rock-quarry. No, the target needs to be ‘high-value’, so to speak, and I believe there’s a rather high-value target *somewhere* in this area...” he mockingly raised the tone of his voice into a sing-song timber.

“This is madness...” Johnny protested.

“It’s war.” Sven shook his head. “If you don’t like it, then get out of the business. True, the Committee probably doesn’t have the balls to allow this ‘dramatic’ type of action, but rest-assured: there’s no way that anything can be traced back to me.”

“Unless you left any loose ends out there...” Johnny growled.

“And those will be your job to tie-up.” He replied.

Then there was an awkward silence on the line.

Sven changed his tone, from snide arrogance to conciliatory pleading. “Johnny: this *is* ultimately the right thing to do. I know it, and deep down I think you know it, too. But, if the Committee were to find out, there’d be trouble for *both* of us. Don’t forget: you’re my pipeline to the other members, and our fates are somewhat linked...”

“How can I possibly forget that fact when you choose to behave like *this*?” Johnny grumbled.

“The virus will initiate in 76 hours...” Wraith said. “I’ve calculated that, given the Mass’s current Autistic-Withdraw Factor, this time should coincide with the thing’s incarnation wave-assault.”

There was a very long silence on the line.

“Your growing independence troubles me. It troubles me a *great* deal, Wraith. This war is a nightmare. You know: ‘man-versus-monster’ and all that. We’re blurring the lines with Antipathy, maybe, but it’s still the same old nightmare. With your willingness to do things like this, throwing an entire *city* to the wolves without batting an eye, without so much as a drop of sweat or remorse, it makes me think that you’re treating all this as if it were some simple little game. Like a dream, or something. Maybe that train of thought helps you sleep at night, but I swear: in the end this will all blow-up in your face. And then, Sven, I suppose you’ll be able to dream to your heart’s content...”

Wraith, sitting at his desk, absently rubbed his lame leg. He sat back in his chair and pulled out a Caribe. “Didn’t you know, Johnny? Life *is* but a dream,” he replied

briskly before killing the transmission. He looked out his window: the sun had descended over the sea, and the gaudy white lights of Nash Ultima glowed ostentatiously on the horizon.

Ready or not: here we come...



T I A