



Two Close Calls and a Funeral

His body bounced violently as the *Principalities* slammed into the turbulent purple ocean. A dreamy chime noise rang in his head; his temples throbbed and a fresh stream of blood flowed down his forehead. Connor screamed with ferocity as he yanked his controls up, down, left, and right: they were unresponsive.

“Raaaagh!” He bellowed, immediately reaching behind his seat and retrieving his snub-nosed firearm; it was loaded with Aegis shells. The bleeding pilot slammed one sweat-encrusted fist against his emergency cockpit release, and the crystal canopy shot off with a blast, landing fifty-feet out in the cold violet water.

Connor clambered out on to the top of his crippled ship like a man possessed. Two other Raidens in his squad were still frantically dancing through the air, blindly firing their photonic cannons at the invisible terror that pursued them. All the other ships were bobbing dead in the water, their hulls fractured and torn.

But not shot... he discerned in his blind rage. No cannons on these incarnations... nothing but propulsion and claws... That would make them invisible to all but the most discerning sensors. Then there was their damn skin. Optical camouflage? Trick of the light? Hell, what about broadcasted hypnosis?

Who the hell cares? He thought bitterly.

A sudden, fierce growl sounded from behind Connor. He whipped around and discharged the gun; a small shell sailed aimlessly out to sea and exploded with a loud ‘pop’ as it impacted the ruddy surface of the water.

“Gah!” Connor screamed savagely as his body was spun around by an unseen force. The chest-piece of his rubbery flight suit was gashed with five long, horizontal lines, like claw marks, and a mess of blood flew from the wound. He fell to his knees and an inhumanly strong claw grasped his throat.

It was terrifyingly macabre: both the claw and the horrible arm it was attached to ‘wavered’ into visibility as they made contact with Connor’s skin. It hung in the air like a

vapid mirage, the grisly frame trailed away and eventually disappeared as Connor moved his eyes up the arm. From somewhere there sounded a terrible, bird-like shriek.

Connor retorted with his own savage scream and, drawing a long, serrated utility knife from his breast pocket, raised his hands above his head and brought the blade down with startling fury. A spray of black fluid rained down from the invisible incarnation's severed appendage, and Connor fell to the hard roof of his ship. He immediately rolled his body twice over the metal hull.

'Whamp!' 'Whamp!' Two loud thumps sounded within seconds of each other, the first grazing Connor's rolling back and the second scratching his arm, ripping his suit. Both impacts left three-inch conical dents in the roof of the *Principalities*.

There's a tough beak on this bird... he thought in the back of his rage-filled head.

The red-headed Raiden pilot scrambled across the metal platform and picked-up his Aegis. Running on muscle-memory and reacting with lightning-fast reflexes, Connor flipped the 'full-auto' switch on the handgun and swung around to face his assailant.

The terrible incarnation was hemorrhaging black fluids from its severed shoulder in a volcanic, arterial spray. The black stuff spread across Connor's Raiden and collected on the swan-thing's invisible skin, outlining the fearsome Bydo. It had a long, spiny neck and awkward, webbed feet. People often spoke of 'swan-like grace', but few could accurately imagine what 'swan-like horror' could possibly look like.

This thing qualifies... The oversized bird looked like the kind of twisted creature that would putter around a pond in hell.

Connor pulled the trigger on his handgun, holding it down tightly as the firearm bucked once, twice, three times in rapid succession. One round went wide right, the other two impacted on the thing's 'chest' and 'hip' area. The rounds exploded inside the incarnation's flesh, sending a rain of skin and false-organs showering out from the source like a dark supernova.

The vicious swan-thing fell backwards and landed on the *Principalities* with a sickening 'thud'. Its body shuddered and spasmed. In a surreal twist, the thing kept fading in and out of sight, wavering like a column of steam. Whatever method of camouflage it was using to make itself invisible, it didn't have the power to maintain it in the throes of death.

Connor, teeth gritted and sticky blood trailing over his head and torso, fell hard on his rear and put his head between his knees (his gun was still positioned towards the dying incarnation). He moaned with his dry lips and cradled his open chest wound with one hand. It was deep, but not life-threatening. Connor withdrew his hand from the claw-wound and saw the copious amount of blood on his palm.

...make that 'probably not life-threatening'... he corrected himself.

"Ooooh..." he moaned again, grimacing as his adrenaline subsided. The sharp pain of his wounds began to come to the forefront of his mind.

By this time every Raiden in his squadron was down on the water, either their airframes were shredded beyond operable condition, or their engines burned from extreme damage. All along the water pilots were out of their cockpits, pelting the ghostly swan-demons with their handguns. Connor's squadron-leader was still inside his long black ship, the *King's Mind*, spinning the damaged craft on the water with his one functional engine and letting loose with his still-operating photonic cannons. As Connor

watched, two serpentine shapes exploded in the air around the ship as those cannon rounds made contact.

The gunshots and explosions became sparser, and then they disappeared entirely. An eerie calm began to fill the open ocean. Connor fell backwards, resting his back on the warm metal surface of the *Principalities*. He stared at the amber sky with two green, bloodshot eyes. The exhausted Scotsman's head fell to one side, and he gazed disinterestedly at the ocean's faraway horizon.

His eyes widened: out in the sky, many miles away, there were two silver dots glimmering in the air. They were moving fast, very fast. There was only one kind of ship that could move like that: his kin. *Raidens*. It was a sight too good for words.

"Bloody good timing..." he grinned as his heart did a somersault. "Nothing like a good clean-up crew when you need it..."

There was a metallic 'bump' against his ship, causing it to rock violently on the water. It startled Connor into a quick, involuntary roll across the roof. He regretted it immediately; the maneuver caused his chest-wound to open up with a fresh bout of bleeding, and he cradled it again as he rose to one knee, his hand gripping his Aegis tightly.

He was breathing hard, his gun-hand trembling. Connor's body was braced for an attack that did not come.

Instead he looked over the rim of the *Principalities* and saw the source of the ruckus. It was another Raiden from his squadron, the *Thrones*, drifting dead on the water. Its glistening armor was riddled with claw marks and exposed wiring hung out of the small craft's open wounds. The violet-colored canopy was still sealed shut.

"Hey, Quentin!" He yelled. "This is no time for napping, mate!"

Then Connor got the scare of his life. The dying swan beside him reared up and, knocking Connor over, extended its retractable-claws to full-length and raised them over the Scotsman's body.

That was careless, a little voice sounded in the back of Connor's panicking mind. Maybe in the next life we can learn to keep our guard up, eh?

But the incarnation never brought those talons down on him. The hideous bird extended its thorny neck and raised its black head. It screeched with a savage fury. Black blood ran freely out its beak and down its neck. The yellow light of the Bydo blazed like hellfire from its calloused, sickly eye-slits. It pushed Connor aside like a rag doll and began to slide awkwardly across the metal hull of Connor's ship. Its body was fatally wrecked by the handgun's blasts, and it dug its front claws into the ship to pull itself along.

Connor watched all this with curious wonder. The terrible swan was pushing itself along with all its remaining energy. It was glaring out at the oceanic horizon, focusing all its dying effort on something out to sea.

The baffled Scotsman rose slowly and, retrieving his Aegis, hobbled over to the thing, stopping just behind its hideous frame. He followed its gaze: it was glaring at the two approaching Raidens. It reached out with one hideous claw and screeched again.

Connor jammed his boot down onto its neck and twisted his foot viciously. He felt the tender snapping of faux-vertebrae in the swan's neck, like cracking twigs. That would have done-in any real animal, but of course that didn't mean anything when it

came to true Bydo tech. The swan-thing cooed and shuddered, pulling itself further along the hull, fighting to get just inches closer to the incoming Raidens.

You don't attack our group until we spot you, and yet you're all antsy to take on these new-arrivals? Connor shook his head at the irrationality of the devilish things.

“At the point of dyin’, and you still want to play?” He spat. With a hardened heart, Connor put his Aegis down against the incarnation’s head. With a pull of the trigger the bird’s face exploded in a shower of black blood and brain-matter. He didn’t flinch as the stuff splashed across his chest and face, he knew that he was destined to go to decon anyway since he was already contaminated, so why not enjoy the moment? Connor savored the kill and licked his polluted lips, rolling the foul-tasting Bydo-matter between his gums.

“*Greannach earchall!* You god-damned bastard ‘a nature ‘n ‘o God himself!” He venomously cursed, allowing his native accent to come out fully with his rage, his face covered in dark fluids.

As quickly as his adrenaline had come it went, and Connor fell backwards again. He grabbed his head with one hand and cast his Aegis away in disgust. He took two deep breaths to calm his nerves (predictably, they didn’t help at all). He growled angrily, like a wounded wildcat in a corner. After a few seconds he recovered himself and, re-holstering his weapon, remembered the crippled *Thrones* floating beside him.

Connor moved over to the side of his ship. The *Thrones* was much smaller and sleeker than Connor’s *Principalities*, being a newer production model. He had to dangle himself off the side of his Raiden and fall a few feet to the canopy of the *Thrones*. The maneuver was devastatingly painful to his injured condition.

He rapped on the opaque crystal of the canopy and called-out. “Quentin, wake-up, ‘ya lazy ass!” There were no noises or movement from inside the ship. A sudden chill gripped Connor’s heart as he considered that silence. He found the external controls box on the *Thrones’* side and blew it open with his Aegis. Connor rooted around in the box (hoping against hope that he didn’t end up electrocuting himself) until he found the emergency cockpit failsafe release. He blew the canopy and scrambled back up to the front of the ship, swinging down into the cockpit.

“Bleeding Christ...” he whispered.

The young pilot of the *Thrones* was lying on his side, still buckled into his seat. There was extensive internal cockpit damage, and the ship’s main console was fractured and split open. One of those razor-sharp shards had been hurtled into the rear of the cockpit from the force of his crash-landing. The other broken shard was jammed into the fair-haired pilot’s side.

Connor raced to the ashen boy and inspected the wound. The impalement was a good five-inches in width, and how far in him was it? Hesitantly, cautiously, Connor reached behind Quentin’s back and slowly ran his fingers down the pilot’s rubbery flight suit.

He shuddered involuntarily as he felt the tip of the console protruding from the youth’s back. He brought his hand out: it was covered in deep scarlet blood; it was mushy, chunky blood. Connor almost retched.

“Quentin, Quentin!” He grabbed the pilot’s head and lightly slapped his face. The boy was an avid outdoor sportsman, and his skin was usually darkly tanned, but now he

was deathly pale. There was a curl of blood trailing down his blue lips. His breathing was slow and labored.

“Goddamnit, wake-up, kid!” He roared, shaking him gently.

Connor’s ears buzzed and he raised his head: he could hear the muted roar of the approaching Raidens’ engines. He leaned down close to the boy’s head. “Calvary’s coming: we’re gonna get you out of here, mate!” He scrambled out of the cockpit and clambered back on top of the *Principalities*. All around him on the water the other squadron members were taking stock of the damage to their ships and casting the dead bodies of the terrible swan-things off the sides of their hulls.

The two R-Types in the sky were hurtling through the air from the southwest. Connor watched with hope-filled eyes as they screamed closer. He watched as the elegant pair, a silver ball and opal bird, screamed into view.

He watched with questioning, disbelieving eyes as they roared overhead, high-above him in the sky.

And he watched with furious anger as they screamed off towards the setting sun, their exhaust tails snaking in the air in what looked like a mocking grin.

His mouth was agape, his fists balled. Connor glared at the fading specks of light as the cold sunlight set his hair afire. Behind and below, he could hear Quentin violently coughing, warm pulmonary blood clogging his throat.

He could barely speak, or see clearly, but Connor screamed at the two receding points of light in the sky. He bellowed the most vile and vicious curse-word he could think of: the most heinous thing to call a fellow soldier.

“*Cowards!*” He howled into the approaching darkness.

Wraith was staring moodily out his window and working on his second cigar when he heard a sudden commotion coming from Command Ops. Laura Hayle burst into his office, unannounced and without knocking. Her face was red and she was panting heartily.

“Caffeine overdose, Lieutenant?” Wraith asked with dangerously lethal eyes. He did not enjoy interruptions, to say the least.

The panting girl didn’t even stop to salute. “Sir, you need to go down to the docking ring...” she put her hand on his doorknob and bent over, panting all the while. “The Raiden harbor...”

Wraith’s gaze remained cold, but his heart suddenly skipped a beat. “What is it?” he said, betraying some apprehension.

“There’s... there’s been an accident...” Laura hesitantly replied.

The first thing Wraith saw was the massive gnarled scar on the metal floor, like a giant eraser had been rubbed across the bay floor. It started at the far end of the bay, where the mecha-arm that was supposed to hold the R-H’s in place lay broken in two. The gash in the floor ran all the way across the bay and ended against the far wall, at the separator between bays R-A and R-B.

The *Platonic Love* lay against that rusty wall, embedded in the metal sheet. White smoke still billowed out of its twin engines. From what Wraith could see, the canopy was open and it was empty. Its arms were drawn forward and stuck in the wall.

“What the hell happened here!?” Wraith barked as he ran over to the crash site. Several strong-armed dockworkers were frantically pushing crowbars and metal pipes between the *Love* and the wall. All around the site men were screaming orders like ‘push!’ and ‘get another one in there!’ as they desperately worked to remove the Raiden from the wall.

Scott Tabris, assisting with the effort despite his scrawny build, swung around to address Wraith, firing off a sloppy salute as an afterthought. “Sir... RL... I dunno what it was, the *Love*... it just went *off!*” His speech was rapid and disorganized, his face bathed in sweat.

Then Wraith heard something that sent an icy chill down his spine (for someone as steely as the RL that was no mean feat). There was a soft, thready voice in the air, coming from somewhere between the *Love* and the wall.

“A... Aryl...”

He couldn’t see the speaker, but he could identify the subdued, feminine voice.

“God in heaven.” He muttered, his cold eyes wide. For a second Wraith was stunned by this horrific development. However, being a trained veteran of combat and administration, this shock didn’t last long.

“Get the mecha-arm from bay R-A over here on the back-up track, *now!*”

“Maintenance’s on it!” One muscular deck hand roared as he dug a pipe into the crevasse between ship and steel, kicking it with his dirty work boots to gain some purchase. Wraith spun around and looked up to the superior floor: Pyotr Frieze was hammering away on the controls with his stubby hands. In the distance Wraith heard the mecha-arm from the *Gazer’s* bay moving along the ceiling, but it would take several minutes to reach them.

The RL grabbed a megaphone and began coordinating the rescue effort. “One, and two and PUSH!” He barked sharply to the deckhands on the right. “One and two and PULL!” He commanded the men on the left of the ship. Everyone strained mightily to move the ridiculously weighty vessel, if only a matter of inches. Tabris worked side-by-side with a deckhand easily twice his size; sweat poured off both men’s faces equally.

After several tense minutes of pushing on one side and pulling on the other an extremely narrow crack was formed between the *Love* and the wall. Without hesitation, and ignoring all commands to the contrary, Scott Tabris dropped his pipe and darted headlong into the hole. He emerged a few seconds later with Chenine supported on his shoulder, her body limp and dirty. The small crowd helped him drag the girl away from the wreckage and lay her down on the floor.

The base doctor pushed through the crowd and knelt at Chenine’s side. The pilot was bleeding profusely from her shoulder and she winced when the lady physician ran her hands over her knee. Within moments she had the supine girl bandaged and strapped to an emergency ‘crash’ cot.

“Get her to the infirmary.” She ordered her assistants. Turning to Wraith she said: “I don’t think there’s any major internal damage. Her shoulder is broken, but that’s not a big problem.” She looked back at the girl on the cot; Chenine was moaning distantly. “She’s in severe pain, obviously: I’ll sedate her and keep her in recovery tonight. We’ll get her started on osteo-regenerative therapy tomorrow.” The doctor sighed as she watched the litter carrying Chenine disappear into the elevator. “The shoulder will

probably grow back without complications; she'll probably be in recovery for a couple of days, but it could have been a lot worse..."

Tabris was by the RL's side. "I've never seen someone move that fast." He observed, still shaky from the ordeal. "One second the *Love's* shooting across the bay like a runaway freight train, the next it's got Miss Chovert pinned. But she managed to do this spinning dive..." he tried demonstrating the maneuver with his hand, but seeing Wraith's cold, dark gaze on him, Scott decided to forgo any reenactments. "She was damn fast..." he repeated.

"She's a Raiden pilot," Wraith said. "She's supposed to be."

The RL gritted his teeth as he picked out Justin. The pilot was sitting on the other side of the bay floor where the large gash in the ground began, cradling his right leg.

Wraith stormed over to him, his dark cane banging sharply on the cold metal floor. He cast the cane aside and grabbed Justin by his flight suit collar. He lifted the skinny young man off the ground with surprising strength, balancing himself on his one good foot.

"What the hell did you do, Goddamnit!?" He screamed. Justin didn't answer, he averted Wraith's gaze.

Shaking the dazed pilot, the RL repeated: "*What the hell did you do!?*"



T I A