



Agonal Respirations

I

“Not a ‘scrape’, Roont: a full-blown *concussion*.”

“Yes, damnit, I understand that, but-”

“And a dislocated shoulder, too.”

“Oh, come on, now! That’s a five-minute repair job, tops-”

“And then there’s your pilot.” The doctor barked, slamming her electronic clipboard down on the infirmary desk. She held up two fingers: “pulse of 200 beats-per-minute, and that was *resting rate*; blood pressure of 60/40, his EKG was a God-awful mess-”

“And, yet, the stupid bastard didn’t die, did he?”

“That’s not the point, you ass! That ‘link’ he has with the ship nearly fried his brain! Do you understand that?”

“It doesn’t damn-well matter.” Roont yelled back, knocking the clipboard off the desk, if only to demonstrate his exasperation, “We’re ditching Mister AGP, anyway: the son-of-a-bitch was obviously not the right person to pilot *Love*. We’re kicking his ass out of the cockpit, and *that* should solve the problem.”

“There is *nothing* in the literature that mentions a pilot’s vitals getting *that* out of control, even during full-fledged Limerence-Psychosis. I suggest you try looking under the hood of that monstrosity in bay R-B before you jump to any conclusions.”

“*Don’t* tell me how to do my God-damned job!” Roont wagged his finger at the doctor.

Chenine absently kicked her legs back and forth as she watched the doctors argue through the Plexiglas wall. She rested one elbow on her khaki-clad knee and sighed quietly, placing her chin in her hand.

“Do they really think that we can’t hear them?” She muttered.

Laura Hayle looked up at the pair briefly. She was sitting beside the medical bed where Donald Plinshine lay. The Quartermaster’s trademark Coke-bottle glasses lay on the table beside him. Without the glasses Plinshine had a rather serious look to his face: the dramatic arch of his eyebrows and fine lines under his orbits gave him a scholarly look, like he was a college professor. Two oblong tubes sat on either side of his head. Electrodes ran from both of these to different points around his temples.

“Something about this whole ‘induced coma’ thing really puts me off...” the Lieutenant muttered. She ran her fingers delicately over Plinshine’s forehead.

Chenine yawned. “Well, until they’re sure that there’s no damage-”

Laura spun around aggressively. “He got smacked by a two-ton mechanical arm, Chenine, I think it’s a matter of *minimizing* the damage that’s there.” She turned her attention back to Plinshine and, balling one fist, muttered under her breath: “Fucking Justin Storm...”

Roont and the doctor came into the room, still arguing in subdued whispers.

“Limerence-Psychosis is a bitch,” Roont conceded, “but as they go this is a pretty *typical* full-blown case: it can be very dramatic-”

The doctor cut him off: “-and how do you explain that his body went through *two* sexual climaxes during the ordeal?”

“Tch! That’s all just artifact from the link: any orgasms that a linked pilot experiences are just secondary responses to brain stimulation! As for him having two, well, this may be a shock to a prude like you, but people can have multiple-”

“-within *45 seconds* of each other, Roont?” The doctor growled. “That’s physiologically impossible for an average human!”

“Well, maybe he’s not average.” Roont shrugged. “Some people have pretty itty-bitty refractory periods...” He looked over at Chenine. “Case in point:” he said, pointing at the girl, “how about you? What’s your record for downtime, little missy?”

Chenine looked up at Roont, first with surprise, then with a more defensive look on her face. If the girl ever blushed, she might have done so. As it was, she just looked off to one side. “I... don’t-”

“You perverted snake!” The doctor bristled.

“Well, what about you, then?” Roont sneered.

Needless to say, their conversation went downhill from there.

“Well, it sounds like Justin had a good time, anyway.” Laura muttered darkly.

“Limerence isn’t much fun.” Chenine countered. “I got it when I first started training in the *Gazer*. It can be a... strange experience.”

Laura’s dagger-like eyes fixed on the Typer; the fact that Chenine was trying to excuse her colleague’s behavior didn’t sit well with her. “What about you, then? Shouldn’t you be comforting you precious little combat-buddy?”

“No.”

“Isn’t that your duty?” she sarcastically spat.

The girl shook her head. “No, it’s not, and for three reasons.”

“What’re those?”

Chenine looked down at her foot; she was still kicking it up and down. “For one: that’s not my job. For two: I don’t think he wants ‘comfort’ right now, and three: I’m not particularly interested in coddling him, anyway.”

“You’d rather stay with us, huh?” Laura smiled with conciliatory warmth. She was drawing her own set of battle-lines, and she really wanted Chenine in her camp. “Then at least *you* understand how royally Justin screwed-up. He’s a menace! Guess you’d rather spend your time with the people who deserve it; you know how to pick your sides, right?”

“I don’t pick sides.” Chenine slid off the exam table and shook her head. “I do hope that Quartermaster Plinshine gets better, but the only reason I’m here right now is because it’s quiet.” She looked over at Roont and the doctor on the other side of the room. They were going at it with renewed vigor. “And that doesn’t seem to be the case, anymore.” Chenine traipsed toward the infirmary door. “It doesn’t really matter: I’ll be on remote standby in an hour, anyway.”

“Oh, about that, little missy: the Old Man put you down for the South-Pac region today.” Roont briefly interrupted his argument with the doctor to rattle-off that tidbit.

“Commander Faught issued his own deployment orders for the *Gazer*?” Chenine asked, tilting her head.

“Well, because of Lieutenant Storm’s *mishap*,” Roont turned his head and spat that word at the doctor venomously, “I think the Commander’s got it in his head to keep you and your shiny-little Raiden as far away from base as possible.” He wandered closer to the girl. “He’s quite a prejudiced man, you know: he’s never been comfortable with having those pretty little Raidens on his base...” one of his fingers trained over Chenine’s arm, right below the sleeve of her turquoise shirt. “...or pretty little pilots,” he whispered.

Chenine allowed this touch. She didn’t display any outward revulsion on her face, but her blue eyes flashed with subdued hatred. “What about the Aryl?”

“The subcommander’s down in the Zephyr Chamber; he’s been there all morning.” The doctor answered as she checked one of the monitors beside Plinshine’s bed. “I try to stay out of base politics, but from the looks of things he’s completely obsessed with whatever he’s doing down there, so he’s letting the Commander have his way with you.

“For the moment, at least.” Roont cooed into Chenine’s ear.

Chenine slowly pulled her arm away from the Bydo Doctor’s fingers. “I see.” She mumbled.

“South-Pac’s a long ways away.” Laura considered. “I think the Commander’s being a little paranoid.” She raised her head smugly. “Of course, if I had my way, I’d launch Justin Storm all the way to the fucking Sea of Tranquility...”

“It’s fine: there’s nothing wrong with South-Pac.” Chenine mumbled as she stepped through the door. “I think...” she trailed off, then stated with confidence: “I think I’ll go to New Zealand.”

“Why New Zealand?” Laura asked.

“Because I think I’ll enjoy it. I need to keep training with the *Gazer* anyway, until I can make it work properly again.” She turned and left without another word.

“Good girl.” Roont called after her. He smirked and leaned against one of the doctor’s über-expensive monitors; it was just another way for him to provoke her. “You know, not that he deserves it or anything, but Little Miss Chenine won’t even try to

defend her witless wingman. That foxy little bitch must have ice in her veins, or something...”

II

The Southeastern strut of Base-10 is remarkable for two reasons only. For one, it houses a massive hydroelectric generator. The dark waterfall is located deep down inside the strut; it extends far below the surface. The tip of this strut is blunted, unlike the other cardinal struts, which are sharp-edged. The tip of this strut houses a massive water-intake chamber on the surface; this elongated slit in the base armor extends the entire length of the surface. A constant stream of ruddy purple seawater rushes in through this slit; from here it falls down, down, down into the abyssal darkness below. The strut is little more than a massive hollow chamber, capable of generating more than enough energy to power the base.

The excess energy it produces is used to power the second remarkable thing in the strut: the Zephyr Chamber.

Even in the dimly lit control room Wraith could hear the eerie rumble of the water plant. That hollow, bleak boom haunted the entire strut like the whispers of a ghost; it gave the heebie-jeebies to anyone unlucky enough to have to spend time down here.

To Wraith, however, it was merely an irritation.

“30,000 RPM!” He yelled into his headset. He knew that he didn’t *have* to yell, but it was a force of habit: between the ghostly echo of that electric waterfall and the squeaky din of the Zephyr Chamber’s massive turbines there was little room for him to hear his own voice.

“Copy that, Sir: 30,000 RPM.” A monotonous male voice droned with the calm cadence of a professional pilot.

The *Platonic Love* hung in the air, suspended a good twenty-feet above the floor of the gigantic wind tunnel. Roughly two-dozen brightly-colored cords ran from the Raiden out to various points along the tunnel’s edges, as if the *Love* were a massive cell body and the wires its dendrites.

As the wind-speed of the tunnel increased the pilot slowly increased the ship’s throttle.

“All parameters are nominal.” He droned.

Scott Tabris snuck into the control room. Careful not to disturb the RL, he stood far behind him, on tiptoes, trying to peer down into the chamber.

“Are we feeling curious today, JG Tabris?” Wraith asked, not turning around.

Scott gulped self-consciously. “Dr. Roont wanted me to observe this stress-test.”

“It’s not a stress test,” Wraith shook his head as Tabris walked up to the window. “The gentleman down there at the controls is on loan to us from the Experimental-Technologies Squadron.”

“Oooh.” Scott pressed up against the glass, genuinely impressed. “He’s from Ex-tech? The ‘Cherry-Poppers’, right? Aren’t they the guys who do trial runs on all the military’s new toys?”

“Mmm. Given Justin Storm’s little mental meltdown we’re in need of a new pilot...”

“And you needed someone experienced, like an Ex-tech member, to make sure the Raiden’s safe for a pilot, or at least safe for a *decent* pilot.”

Wraith scowled. “There’s nothing ‘safe’ about the R-H’s at all.” He muttered.

Scott nodded sullenly. “Yeah, I know that.”

“Link-devotion is 27-percent... that ‘Impingement Factor’ number of yours is sitting steady at 1.04.” The pilot called. “So far, so good: *everything* is normal.”

“But what happens when he starts to rile-up the flesh?” Scott muttered under his breath.

Wraith looked over at Tabris. “I see Roont keeps you well-informed about the R-H’s, doesn’t he?”

Scott swallowed again; he was suddenly very conscious of the dark aura that rose off the RL’s skin. “I’m his assistant,” he explained, “and I work on the things, so yes, I have to know how they work.”

Wraith didn’t respond to this point, but instead activated his headset:

“The rate is going to change to 35,000 RPM: you are going to disregard *all* physical controls and keep the ship in place using the link alone. Do you understand?”

“Roger that, Sir.” The pilot replied.

“Roont trusts you out of necessity, you know.” Wraith mumbled.

“Yes.” Scott admitted.

“I’ll freely admit to you: if it wasn’t for your assistance during that unfortunate ‘incident’ with *Cross-the-Rubicon* last year you wouldn’t be associated with this program at all.”

“I know that, Sir, but I’m happy to assist-”

“And I take it you understand the responsibility involved with this program? You’re aware that most of the information you’ve been privy to thus far is classified far above your rank...”

“Oh, I’d never reveal information about the R-H program to anyone, Aryl-”

Tabris gasped, aghast at his vocal slip: he’d inadvertently referred to Wraith by *that* name; it was a name that only pilots were allowed to use. “Oh, man! I’m really sorry, subcommander, I didn’t mean to say-”

Then Sven did something Tabris never would’ve expected: he smiled, very warmly. The RL slapped his hand down on Scott’s shoulder and chuckled.

“That’s alright, JG.” He laughed heartily. “I certainly don’t take any offense at the breach of such a trivial formality. Why, in a lot of ways you’re like the unofficial ‘third member’ of the Tears’ Shower Squadron, aren’t you?”

Scott’s body stiffened as if he were being embraced by a boa constrictor; he bit his lip uncomfortably. Wraith’s 180-degree change in demeanor hit him like a ton of bricks and put him even more on guard.

The RL’s grip on his shoulder tightened and he leaned in closer to Tabris’s face. “I’m very pleased to have you working for us, Scott my boy, but if you ever so much as *dream* of breaking my confidence I’ll have you before a jury in a heartbeat.” He released the shaken Tabris and turned his attention back to the *Platonic Love*.

“...and I’ll have you before a lethal injection in *two* heartbeats.” He added.

Scott swallowed again.

“Pilot: give me your statistics, now.” Wraith demanded of the Ex-tech pilot.

The man inside the Raiden replied. "Systems are nominal... Pragma-link devotion is 43-percent... engines are at 21-percent total power..."

"What's your Impingement?" The RL demanded.

"The 'IF' value is steady at 1.27."

"Fine." Wraith cut the line. He looked back over at Tabris, who'd taken the opportunity to shuffle a few feet away from the RL. He smirked darkly. "So Roont ordered you to come down here, did he?"

Scott nodded.

Wraith rolled his eyes.

He's a contradictory man, that Roont: filled with a characteristic cowardice, but he still has a very controlling nature. Roont would never try to butt-in on Wraith's dealings with the Committee, since he had no interest in sticking his head someplace where it might get cut off, but he did have a nasty tendency to micromanage the R-H project as a whole.

And that kind of attitude can become problematic in itself...

Suddenly, above the noise of the massive Zephyr turbines and the whooshing roar of the hydroelectric waterfall there rose the largest, loudest scream that Wraith had ever heard in his life.

The running lights of the *Platonic Love* went dead; the ship's engines cut-out and the Raiden immediately fell to the ground; it shot backwards like a pebble kicked-up in a dust storm. The cords and wires connected to its frame snapped like twigs and the silver sphere slammed into the soft, padded rear wall of the Zephyr Chamber and rested there like an insect stuck to flypaper.

As soon as the monitoring cords were severed the chamber's turbines immediately cut-out and ground to a rusty halt; a warning alarm rang out in the chamber.

"Maybe *not* so fine..." Scott mumbled, his skin crawling.

"Stay here!" Wraith barked at Tabris as he limped over to the elevator. The lift brought him down to the floor of the Zephyr Chamber. He hobbled over to the *Love*, his cane clanking urgently across the metal floor.

By the time he limped down the tunnel- which was a good two football fields in length- a group of techs were already lifting the *Love's* canopy off. They pulled the Ex-tech pilot out of the ship.

The man hung limp in the technicians' arms. He was wearing a standard black *Liefde*-class suit. Sweat glistened across the rubbery chest-piece of the uniform as the sticky fluid flowed freely down his chin and neck. The man had a hard face; it looked grizzled and cynical with experience when Wraith first met the pilot, but now that was all changed: his eyes bulged as if he were a demented cartoon character and giant red blood vessels screamed out from the whites of his eyes. One of those vessels burst, leaving his left eye clouded with a milky red pool. Similarly, one nostril was flared, caked with crusty drying blood, and a train of crimson trailed over his lip. The techs quickly spirited him off for the infirmary. They carried him awkwardly, being careful not to injure themselves on the link prongs sticking out of his back.

As he was carried away the Ex-tech pilot gazed at Wraith with horror-stricken eyes. He grabbed hold of the RL's sleeve, his limbs shaking uncontrollably. He muttered one word:

"Blue... B-blue... blue! B-...*blue!*"

He screamed that word again and again as he was dragged off to the emergency elevator. The lift screamed off for the surface and Wraith was left alone in the wind tunnel, staring at the frame of the *Platonic Love*. He stood there, motionless, for several minutes.

Finally he raised his black cane above his head and brought it down on the silver Raiden with all his might.

“Son-of-a-Bitch!” He growled, not in a scream, but a controlled whisper.

III

Jen stepped through the dingy corridors of the seventeenth floor. This area was part of the central ‘hub’ of Base-10, but the real-estate wasn’t too desirable: the whole section was located right on top of the main Korang launch bays, so every so often the floor would send rippling vibrations into your feet and any loose windows would rattle uncontrollably as a ship, or a whole *squadron*, launched from the massive bay below.

Not much went on in this part of the base. Actually, it was nearly deserted; many of the harsh fluorescent bulbs up here were burned out and awaiting repair. The ceiling leaked in several places. In point of fact, this area was being used for one thing at the moment, and one thing only.

Jen slipped into the rear corridors of the floor; the halls back here were very narrow, like those on a submarine. A door in front of her squeaked on rusty hinges and Chenine Chovert stepped through it; she was clad in her jet-black flight suit. The Typer was in the middle of hiking one of her uniform gloves on her hand; she held the other one in her mouth.

“Oh!” Jen stepped back, startled.

“Wry-rat.” Chenine managed around the glove between her teeth. She finished pulling the first glove up her arm and attended to the second one. “Why’re you here?” She mumbled disinterestedly as she hiked the second glove over her fingers and flexed her slender digits.

“I, uh, came-”

“-to see him.” She guessed, tugging at the belly of her *Liefde* suit to even out the wrinkles. She stepped by the flustered girl and continued down the hall. “It’s the third door on the right.” She said. “It has a male-symbol spray painted on it.” She turned back to Jen: “and it’s the only door with an armed guard in front of it.” She offered.

“Uh, where’re you off to, then?”

“New Zealand.”

“Oh,” Jen mumbled, “well, uh, be sure to bring me back a kiwi.” She smiled wanly. “Preferably one with brown eyes and nice legs...”

“Mmm.” The Typer grunted quietly and disappeared around a bend in the corridor.

Jen sighed. She rolled her eyes and banged her forehead against the sterile blue wall.

Bring me a kiwi!? For God’s sake, you dolt...

She continued down the hall and came to one of the last doors in the corridor. This door boasted a hastily-scrawled male-symbol on its upper frame in bright blue paint. The guard in front of the door looked bored and he took great interest in Jen, probably

because she was the only person he'd been able to talk to all day. Jen didn't exactly have a silver-tongue, but she was able to talk her way past the man in short order. She crept silently into the room. It was dim inside; there were no windows and the humming lights overhead were set to minimal power.

The male 'barracks' of the Tears' Shower Squadron were, to put it politely, pathetic, but more-or-less appropriate for a squadron that counted only one male member among its ranks. Six old, rusty bunk beds lined two iron-plated walls, and two additional bunks sat in the dead-center of the room; a locker with a busted lock sat near the entrance, and there was a sink with a leaky faucet beside that.

Not exactly homey, she appraised, but Chenine's digs probably aren't any better.

"Pie Jesu... Pie Jesu..." a familiar voice sang softly. Jen crept around the middle set of bunk beds and peered around the corner. She could barely make out the singer in the darkness of the room.

"Pie Jesu do-mi-ne..." Justin finished, rolling that last word slowly off his lips. He was lying on the lower bunk in the corner of the room, his back to Jen and the door.

There was an awkward pause. It was awkward for *Jen*, anyway. She prepared to announce herself when Justin spoke instead:

"Hello, Private."

Jen started. "How'd you know it was me?"

He sniffed the air twice. "Cherry." He mumbled. "I can smell it on your lips."

Jen smirked and tongued-out the wad of bubblegum that she'd tucked inside her cheek. "Good nose." She complimented.

Justin rolled over sluggishly. His half-open eyes were tired and listless.

"Could we turn up the lights, maybe?" she requested.

"I'd rather not." He shook his head. "I'm a little 'light-sensitive' right now." He tapped his nose. "And 'smell-sensitive'." Then he tapped his ear: "not to mention 'noise-sensitive', too."

"And 'touch-sensitive', right?"

"Always." He mumbled quietly.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." He shook his head. "Anyway, it's called 'PLP' Hypersensitivity."

"'PLP'?" Jen furrowed her brow.

"Post-Limerence-Psychosis."

"Oh." She nodded uneasily. Just then the private noticed something disturbing.

"Justin, your eyes..." she began.

"I know." He grunted. "It's just bioluminescence."

Jen looked at him doubtfully. She stared uneasily at the faint yellow corona that graced his orbits: it was glowing ever so softly in the darkness of the room.

He sighed. "It's a very long story, but the bottom line is: when a link manages to overpower a pilot it fries a bunch of neurons and screws-up...I dunno, 'cellular metabolism', or something. So it makes some kinda..." he moved his hands expressively, "'unnatural' chemicals build up in the body."

"So the 'fried' neurons make you hypersensitive?"

"For awhile. And then some of those 'unnatural' chemicals happen to glow in the dark..."

“And the only place you can see those chemicals are in the eyes?” She nodded. “After all: the eyes are the only *living* part of the body that you can see, aren’t they?”

Justin opened his mouth and half-heartedly stuck out his tongue: the surface of his palate was rife with tiny granules, all of which were very faintly glowing. It looked liked he’d just busted open a glow-stick and eaten the contents.

Jen smiled. “Okay: they’re *one* of the living parts of the body you can see. But what about the chemicals themselves: they’re not toxic or anything, are they?”

Justin shrugged. “Probably.” He muttered. “Tch! that gives me something to think about while I wait for the ‘official’ end of my military career.”

“Don’t say *that*.” Jen crossed her arms and looked down at the floor.

“Truth is good for the soul.” He sarcastically growled. “Soon, and it could be in an hour, a day, or maybe a few minutes, some smartly-dressed military-flunkey is gonna parade his sanctimonious ass in here and hand me my walking papers.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Those’re the rules. Rules aren’t always fair, are they?” Justin growled. He rolled over again.

Jen scrunched her face at his standoffishness. “Would... would you prefer to be alone?”

“Maybe. Probably. As a matter of fact: definitely.” He snarled.

Jen sighed, nodded, and started stepping backwards. Then she reached into her breast pocket and pulled out a slender silver container. It sparkled in the dim light of the room.

She unscrewed the cap and took a swig.

Justin’s ears suddenly pricked-up, as if he were a rabbit who’d just noticed a large carrot in the garden. He didn’t roll over to face the private, but he sniffed the air once again and mumbled: “Is that what I think it is?”

“You tell me.” Jen challenged as she screwed the top back on. She suddenly brought her arm back like a softball pitcher and heaved the silver container at Justin. As soon as it was airborne he rolled over and snatched it out of the air, his arm extended way above his head.

“You really *do* have good reflexes.” She laughed.

Justin flipped the top of the flask and drank deeply.

“It’s ‘Elsie’s Finest’.” She helpfully pointed out. “You know: the ‘official beverage of champions’.”

“Mmm.” He groaned dreamily as the liquid passed down his throat. “That’s fit for the immortals. It’s like they’re making Ambrosia from corn these days instead of honey. I think the Greek gods would approve of this stuff, though.” He took another swig of the smooth whiskey.

Jen noticed a small red welt on his face. “Did you get that in the, uh... struggle?”

“No, that’s from the Lieutenant. I wasn’t aware that Laura Hayle and Donald Plinshine were an item.” He smirked. “So that really makes me *persona non-grata* with her.” He looked over at Jen and raised the flask in salute. “So I find myself on the outs with the ‘Cola-Nut’, but for some reason it looks like I’ve still got a friend in the ‘Cherry-Popper’, huh?”

Jen reciprocated the smirk and blew a large bubble with her gum. “Are you being crude, wiseguy?” She accused after the bubble popped.

“Always.” Justin swiveled off his back and planted his feet on the floor. “Call-up computer: lights to normal.” The fluorescent tubes above rattled noisily as the bulbs sputtered to life. Justin spread his arms dramatically. “Welcome to my humble abode. Hmph! I’m surprised that you even managed to find the place, let alone get in here.”

“Well, conning my way past a low-level military-grunt isn’t such a dramatic feat. As for finding you, well, I was assisted by your colleague.”

“Former-colleague.” He morosely added. “Where’d you see Chenine, anyway?”

Jen motioned towards the door. “Right out there; she was coming out of her barracks. Hasn’t she been in to see you?”

“I didn’t even know she was around here.” Justin emotionlessly mumbled.

“Oh.” Jen nodded. She suddenly blushed, despite herself, and stared at her feet. She scuffed one of her uniform-boots against the iron floor.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing, it was just a little awkward, running into her like that. See, the other day I met her down in the showers, it was after shift change, and I tried to-” her eyes shot back up to Justin self-consciously; she blushed anew and quickly cut her story short. “It’s nothing, really. It’s kinda silly: I’ll tell you some other time.” She shrugged. “I dunno, but I get the feeling that she really hates me.”

“Don’t take it personally: Chenine hates everyone.” Justin growled with a wave of his hand. He sank back down onto his bunk.

Jen changed the subject. “What was that song you were singing?”

“What, the *Pie Jesu*? Oh, it’s just a little old tune that they sometimes played back in New England. At churches and places like that, mostly.” He put his head on his pillow and covered his eyes with one arm. “It was part of my Limerence hallucination. I can’t figure out why, though: it’s been so long since I’ve even heard it. The last time I can remember hearing it, I think, was...” he rolled the word on his tongue as he thought about it, “yeah: it would have been during Cyn’s funeral.”

“Cyn?”

“She was a girl I knew back in the Territories. She was part of my hallucination, too. I guess I dredged up that old song because I was thinking of her.”

“And it was real? I mean: it felt *really* real? You couldn’t for the life of you tell that it was all in your head?”

Justin shook his head. “It’s like a vivid dream. It all doesn’t make too much sense, and pretty weird things can happen, but you don’t question anything as it plays out. You only think of the strange things that happen as, well-”

“A little odd?” Jen helpfully interjected.

“Exactly.” Justin rolled off the bed and stormed over to the sink. He glared at his reflection in contempt. “You know, they say that God gave man dominion over every single animal on the planet.” He looked back at the girl sardonically. “And then there’s us: we’re all supposed to be the pinnacle of mankind, aren’t we? We all managed to struggle out of our mommies’ wombs even after the False Moon fell and poisoned the whole fucking planet: we’re the great and powerful ‘Eve Generation’, right? And that’s not all: look at me! I’ve got those five ‘perfectly’ integrated senses that I can so fucking effortless share with that God-damned collection of circuit-boards out there and I can’t even totally dominate it with my will.” He bowed his head against the sink bitterly.

“We’re supposed to rule all living creatures, and I can’t even control a non-living machine. Whaddya think God thinks of that, huh?”

Jen didn’t have an answer to that question. “I’ve noticed how you talk so trivially about your commission, and how you like to make light of your duties, but piloting the *Platonic Love*, it really does mean a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

“Sometimes it feels like the only meaningful thing in my life.” Justin looked up after a moment, attempting to transform his devastated eyes into a cheerier hue: “I’m being a little overdramatic.” He lied. “But I guess I’m just embarrassed, *totally* and completely embarrassed, about the whole thing.”

The two stood in silence for a long while. Jen felt like she should keep him talking, if only to allay her own discomfort. She finally asked: “What else did you see during the hallucination, anyway?”

“Ordinary things. Random odds ‘n ends. They’re hard to remember now; it’s like trying to recall a three-day old dream. The memories I have of it... they’re filled with familiar faces, familiar places... but why?” He shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. It really is like a dream: the synapses just randomly fire and the ‘ol sensory lobes try to process everything as if it were real, hard data coming in from the outside world.”

Jen nodded at this, partly understanding what he was talking about.

Justin turned the sink’s faucet on and splashed some ice-cold water over his face. He suddenly rose up from the wash basin. “No, wait: there was also something else...”

“What?”

“A kid.” Justin slowly answered. “I remember: I saw a little boy...”

IV

“*Mo-ther...*”

clank!

“*fu-king...*”

clang!

“*piece-a...*”

clank!

“*shit!*”

whang!

Dr. Roont snarled as he brought the large metal pipe down on the upper hull of R-H-AGP. He chucked the rod against the crystal canopy; it made a sour chime noise as the piece of metal glanced off the ship, but it left no damage on the canopy or the silver hull.

The squeaky freight elevator bumped and jostled the doctor as he rode it down into the bowels of Base-10. Roont wiped sweat off his brow and dove beneath the nose of the *Love*, growling maniacally. He manually unscrewed one of the large ‘Type-B’ control rods, which fell to the floor with a metallic clatter.

The agitated doctor grasped the big cylinder with two hands. He brought out a wrench from the pocket of his hazmat suit and beat-away at the end of the rod until it broke off and fell away. The exposed end was a black, gooey tendril that pulsed with terrible life. He carried this to a power-jack beside the elevator control panel and ripped some wires away from the wall. He stabbed the pulsing cord with these wires; it instantly stiffened into a very long, very hard spike.

Still growling with rage, Roont turned around and rushed the rear of the prostrate Raiden, holding the razor-sharp control rod in his hands like a spear. He screamed as he stabbed the rear hull of the *Platonic Love*. This hull once withstood the impact of a 20-story freefall, but the exposed tip of the control rod sank right into the ship's skin as if the Raiden were made of lukewarm butter.

Then, something very strange happened: the entire Raiden 'shuddered'. The ship bucked once, twice, then three times, very weakly. Then it was still again.

"Ooooh, you like that, don't you: you stupid little bastard?" Roont sneered as he stepped across the ship's frame. "Can't you just *taste* that lovely control fluid? Can you taste it while it's flooding your fucking veins!?" He kicked the Raiden again.

The elevator came to a shuddering stop. The doors opened and the base of the elevator, the freight truck, started out on its preprogrammed route. The black conveyor, which resembled the flatbed portion of a truck, shuddered and squeaked as it rode a set of rails on a downward slope towards the bowels of the base.

The truck stopped in a room that was nearly pitch-black. The only light in the room came from a faint green pool swirling beneath the floor. The metal floor was a cross-stitching of bars with tiny slits in between, and beneath this patchwork a glowing sea of froth bubbled and churned.

Still growling with rage, the doctor pulled a data pad from the pocket of his hazmat suit and awkwardly gripped his writing stylus. He remotely accessed his office computer and sifted through his private data until he came to a specific page. Even in the unwieldy hazmat suit Roont was able to manipulate his stylus. He vigorously scratched out one line on that page, after which he surveyed his hasty editing-job:

TSS DATA SUMMARY: RAIDEN-HYBRID TESTS
(RE: ANTIPATHY PROJECT)

<u>TEST TYPE:</u>	<u>VESSEL:</u>	<u>PILOT:</u>
Prototype Test	R-H-CRTS	Chenine Chovert
Diapente Test	R-H-AGP	Justin Storm
Combatant Test	R-H-ERS	-- <i>Selected</i> --
DIGFAST Test	R-H-MNA	<i>Forthcoming</i>
Blood Test	R-H-AME	<i>Forthcoming</i>
Special Test	R-H-PHLA	<i>Forthcoming</i>

T.I.A.

“Ha!” Roont laughed as he kicked the clamp-release switch on the freight truck. The *Love* immediately tumbled off the transport and rolled over the ominously illuminated floor, coming to a noisy stop in the center of the cylindrical room. It rested helplessly on its side.

Roont followed the silver ball down the ramp and ran his hands over its polished finish, cradling the Raiden around the spot where the control rod stuck out of the casing. “Can you even hear me now, you poor little baby?” He cooed. “You should really think of us as your *God*, you know.” He circled the ship. “In the beginning, man saw his enemy, and he saw that it was strong...” he smashed his fist against the control rod, digging it deeper into the Raiden. “...so he built himself a sphere, and he saw that it was good.” Roont motioned to the *Platonic Love*, then punctuated his words with another vicious kick to the rod. “But...” Roont wagged his finger dramatically, “that wasn’t enough, oh no! Man sought to make a weapon, in his enemy’s image, and he put *life* into that unremarkable, dead little sphere. This was all *against* his better judgment, but he was magnanimous, and gave that gooey pond scum a bona-fide chance.”

The control rod in the Raiden’s back started quivering at regular intervals; those quivers became more frequent, like a heartbeat, then erratic, like hollow gasps.

“Oh ho, ho! *Now* we can taste that wonderful control fluid, can’t we?” Roont again caressed the silver hull. He leaned down close to the puncture wound. “Poison in the veins, my little bastard. Like the nasty ‘ol fang of a viper that just won’t let go, huh?” He grinned as the rod started shaking even more violently. “We’ve got a phrase for that kind of thing in medicine.” He gestured dramatically. “See, even at the point of dyin’, any organism will try its hardest to keep going. Yeah, it may know it’s licked, and that its number is up, but the organism always struggles on, its throat ragged with that disgusting, gurgling ‘death rattle’.” He put his face even close to the sphere; the plastic facemask of his hazmat suit pressed up against the hull. “Yes, its poor lungs choking in clumsy spasms...”

He pushed the rod in even deeper.

“...in those pathetic, agonal respirations...”

He twisted the rod like a knife.

“...probably because that doomed organism thinks: ‘there’s always hope!’

Because it knows that if it only holds on...”

Roont pulled up on the rod with both hands, withdrawing a small portion of the spike. The part that emerged was coated in a thick black syrup. The tar ran down the shell of the Raiden like a deep river.

“...if it only holds on, there might be daylight at the end of the tunnel somewhere.”

The doctor leapt across the thatched metal floor. The glowing green liquid beneath him bubbled like an angry sea. He ascended a nearby ladder and landed on a small control platform.

“There is no light at the end of the tunnel for you, my friend.” He spat. “You see, my murderous little bastard, I’ve grown weary of making excuse after excuse for you... watching you ‘misbehave’... having you not stick to our *schedule!*” He cut himself off, a finger to his lips as he regained composure. “So you tried to kill-off Little Miss CRTS. Who cares? So you mind-fucked one of our innocent little seatwarmers. So what? *That* I can forgive.” He spread his hands in a gentle benediction. “But now that you won’t play

nice with others..." he sneered. "Well, that makes you worthless to me, to *us*: to your *Gods!*" Roont flipped a switch. "*That* is unforgivable, my little bastard! And in judgment, I'm sorry to say: 'because the sin is very grievous'..."

Lights flooded the cylindrical chamber. The *Love* lay sprawled across a crack in the metal floor. It was a dividing-line, designed to allow the floor to separate and open up to that churning pool below.

"... 'I will consume the wicked with my wrath!'"

On the wall high above Sam Roont's head there rested a large chunk of metal which hung from steel hooks. The tailfins of the hollowed-out Raiden swayed idly above a thin frame, which was scorched from the tip of the cockpit to the rear, but it was intact. All the identifying marks of the hanged ship were scorched off except for one: its nickname was barely visible beneath the cockpit canopy. That name, in delicate calligraphy, read:

"*Cross-the-Rubicon.*"

The Bydo Doctor rested his hand on the controls that operated the moving floor. "So much for dying breaths, AGP." He flipped the large red lever. "You're damned!" the gears holding the floor together began to move.

The floor parted, inch by inch, and the *Platonic Love* dangled precipitously near the edge of the bubbling goo below. The ship started tipping, and tipping, and tipping towards the pool.

Then the Raiden began an ominous slide, squeaking across the floor, leaving a trail of scratched metal in its path. That trail looked identical to another scorch mark on the floor; that other scratch in the floor looked faded and worn with time. Every second brought it closer to the edge. It left a trail of that sticky black tar in its wake as it continued to bleed from its puncture wound.

Roont cried with surprise- and quite a lot of pain- as a large black blur sailed in front of him. It slammed square into the red lever and flipped the switch back to 'close'. The projectile whanged Roont's shoulder as it bounced off the lever.

The floor ground to a halt and, with a slow, deliberate grinding, closed up once again.

"Saved..." A bleak, commanding voice declared from the upper landing. Sven Wraith glared at the doctor with blazing eyes. His arm was extended out over the landing and his body braced against the railing in a 'post-throw' posture. "...by the reflexes of a Raiden pilot."

Roont glowered at the RL. "Damnit, Wraith: don't interfere with this! The experiment with R-H-AGP is *over!* Our only trained seatwarmer's a certifiable nut-job and this fucking-" he pointed to the tipped-over Raiden, "-this fucking *thing* here won't play ball with another pilot!"

"None of that matters. The Allied Commanders released the official battle plans for their campaign to re-take Jupiter. Miss Chovert has been invited to join the front-line assault team. In all likelihood, she'll be part of the Penetration Squad."

Roont smirked, despite his homicidal rage. "You mean she'll be *traveling* with the Penetration Squad. Once they escort her sweet ass inside the Galilean Mass, assuming everything goes to plan, she'll become our '*Ejaculation Squad*'." The grin fell from his face and he motioned to the prostrate Raiden again. "But that doesn't bloody-well concern this piece of shit, here!"

“As a matter of fact: it does. The Allied Commanders extended this invitation to the Tears’ Shower *Squadron*,” he barked, “and that means they expect to see *both* Raidens at the staging area. If we only send the *Chaste Gazer* they’ll immediately assume that we’ve got problems in our program, and Miss Chovert’ll be yanked out of the lineup.”

“In case you didn’t know: we *are* having problems, Wraith! That damn Ex-tech pilot’s gonna be sent home wearing a straightjacket and drooling all over himself, and as for AGP-”

“the *Platonic Love* will be at the Jupiter Campaign, and it *will* be piloted by Justin Storm.” Wraith barked. He looked over at the Raiden, his eyes cold, and noted the control rod sticking out of its rear. “Take it out,” he ordered in a subdued voice.

“Listen to me-”

“*Now!*” Wraith shouted with all his might. The echo of his voice reverberated throughout the cylindrical room like the remnants of a tornado.

Sullenly, Roont trudged down the ladder and grabbed hold of the rod. He planted one foot on the Raiden’s hull, which by this time was coated in fluids, and jerked at the impalement. He struggled with the control rod until it finally broke loose from the *Love* and sent the doctor sprawling backwards. He cursed vehemently as he landed on his ass.

A volcanic spray burst from the wound in the *Platonic Love*, but it died down within seconds, and after a minute there was barely any fluid leaking out of the Raiden’s skin.

“For your sake I sincerely hope it hasn’t been damaged.”

“Not permanently.” Roont growled. “The control fluid’s not a real poison: it’s more like a ‘smothering’ device. It’s like holding a pillow over the thing’s face. As long as it doesn’t die while the rod’s in there, it can break-down all the toxins that remain inside it once the rod’s removed.”

Wraith eyed the doctor suspiciously. “I want you topside, Roont.”

“Not until-”

“*Now*. I’ll send JG Tabris down here later to collect the *Platonic Love*; I take it he’s trained in using the freight truck, yes?”

The doctor grumbled and mounted the ladder.

The RL cleared his throat purposefully. “Ahem.” He coughed. “My *cane*, Roont. Bring me my cane.”

The Bydo doctor’s eyes were burning coals as he glared at the RL, his hatred barely concealed. He dismounted, retrieved Wraith’s black cane, and re-mounted the ladder, eventually rising to Wraith’s level.

“The Committee wouldn’t have tolerated what you were about to do, Roont.” Wraith declared as he snatched his cane from the doctor’s hands. “I’m not in the habit of being my ‘brother’s keeper’, so I suggest you watch your step from now on.” He hobbled through the upper chamber’s doorway with the chastised doctor trailing behind him. “A friendly suggestion: if you want to see the *real* wrath of God, then go ahead and piss off the Committee.”

The pair walked out the thin airlock. The door’s hydraulic locks hissed shut behind them and the steel-plated door locked itself with a resounding click. The taupe-colored door bore a large warning prominently stenciled over it:

“Caution! Main storage room for the *Purity* solution: this room contains concentrated Karat slurry.”

V

“I’ve gotta admit: that’s pretty fucking weird.” Jen declared as she took a sip from her flask. “Do you remember anything else about the little kid you saw?”

“No.” Justin answered. “Of everything I saw, I remember the *least* about him, actually. Every time I try to recall anything about him my mind just gets all cloudy.” He was again sitting on his bunk. Jen sat on an adjacent bed. She tossed him the silver flask and Justin drank deeply from it.

The Typer hung his head. He felt like a condemned man. His *career* was condemned, at least. As he thought about everything that was happening- his loss of the *Platonic Love*, his very public humiliation and his likely discharge from the Allied Military- Justin’s heart sang in his head. He could feel every breath he drew very clearly; they were shallow and erratic. He was suddenly very anxious as he considered the consequences of his own mental weakness behind the wheel of that damn R-Type ship.

Nothing special: just the last dying breaths of an unremarkable career, he thought wryly.

It didn’t matter, anyway, did it? Another Sunday was just around the corner, and since his life was now *totally* devoid of any purpose, it would be that much easier to pull the trigger.

Fuck it all. He darkly declared. Fuck them all. They can go to hell. Tch! I’ll probably see them there.

Justin shelved these black thoughts and drank some more whiskey. He eyed the laser-etched design on Jen’s silver flask: it was an intricate series of patters, like flowers and leaves strung together on a trellis. In the center there was a design that connected the entire setup: two arches of differing heights bowed out from the middle, swooped down below the florid design, and connected at the base. It was an irregular heart-shaped design, with one side being much larger than the other.

He held up the flask. “This is an Airen symbol, isn’t it?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Jen nodded. She anticipated his next question. “Guess you’ve picked-up on my obsession with their culture. Well, I don’t have any Asian heritage, or anything, but my family did a lot of traveling when I was a kid. The Airen culture just really impressed me, I guess, so I’ve kinda adopted a lot of their customs as I’ve aged.”

Justin smirked. “Including the philosophy of the ‘imbalanced heart’. Well, I suppose they’re as good a role model as any, so long as they don’t get their asses nuked by the Sino-Confederacy. I don’t wanna be a wet-blanket, Jen, but in the long run the Airens are a pretty hopeless cause.”

“That’s just it, though: I’ve always loved an underdog.” She grinned. “You can learn a whole lot from a hopeless cause, or at least a cause that *everyone else* thinks is hopeless. They’re the ones that always end up surprising you. I think that they’re really the best teachers ever.”

Justin stopped mid-swig and slowly capped the flask. “Teacher...” he muttered. Jen furrowed her brow. “What is it?”

“There was one other thing I remember about that kid. During the hallucination, I saw him naked...”

“And?” Jen asked after a long pause passed between them.

“He didn’t have any balls.”

“What?”

“Testicles.” Justin muttered, staring off into space. “He didn’t have ‘em.”

“Well, maybe they hadn’t dropped yet.” Jen shrugged whimsically.

“No.” Justin sounded more serious. “No, he had all the ‘external plumbing’, everything was in place, but no balls.”

“What do you think that means?”

He lay down on his back. “I think it means that I need to get my subconscious in order.” He smiled thinly.

Suddenly the door squeaked open on its rusty hinges. Justin sat up just as a smartly-dressed private entered. The solemn-faced young man looked at Jen with a touch of surprise; it broke his overly-dignified tone. He recovered in half-a-second and turned back to Justin. The private held up a data pad at arm’s length from his body and grandly read-off the contents:

“Flight Lieutenant Justin Storm:” he declared majestically. “For your actions on the date of June 12th you have been accused of conduct unbecoming an officer, aggravated bodily assault in the first degree, as well as mental disease or defect incompatible with continued flight duty.”

Justin stared at the ground without emotion on his face; at this point he was all but resigned to his fate.

“Vis-à-vis these charges,” the pompous private continued, “you have been found guilty, with the aggravated assault charge subordinate to the charge of disease or mental defect. Proper action has been decided upon, and thus, immediately and forthwith—”

Jen looked over at Justin with quivering, apologetic eyes.

“...you are to be placed on indefinite probation, and evaluation as needed, as well as restricted flight duty for a time to be determined by your Commanding Officer, RL Sven Wraith.”

Jen’s head shot up like a bullet.

Justin caught his breath, unsure of what he’d just heard. His head rose, slowly, and he blinked once, then twice. He finally looked the young private square in the eyes and said:

“You’ve gotta be—”

VI

“-*fucking me!*” The obese bartender finished his off-color joke to uproarious laughter from his patrons. Chenine rolled one finger around the rim of her half-drunk glass of ginger-ale. She gazed at the giant mirror behind the bar and eyed the customers behind her in the booths.

It was warm in Auckland, but Chenine was wearing a thin blue jacket that was way too big for her, as if it belonged to a burly man. The garment came down just below her waist, leaving her legs exposed. The bulky jacket ultimately made it look like the girl was wearing a pair of black tights instead of a flight suit, and any observer would assume

that she was wearing a miniskirt beneath the bulky coat. She slapped seven small coins on the bar and shored-up the coat.

Pilots actually drank for free in the ‘Mount Eden Bar and Grille’ but Chenine wasn’t very keen on exposing herself to that kind of publicity. The girl slid off her barstool and wandered towards the exit. The fat bartender, hustling towards her in his grease-stained apron, pleaded with the Typer:

“Ah, come on, missy! Let us pour you a drink now; and a *proper* drink, too. It’s on the house: really!” Chenine looked past him at a couple of women doused in rogue and slathered with mascara; they looked like sexy clowns. The ladies were getting ‘friendly’ with a couple of guys at the bar.

What price does that ‘friendship’ come at? She thought.

She instantly saw through the bartender’s platitudes: he’d mistakenly assumed that Chenine was a professional whore. Since prostitutes were good for business at these types of bars he wasn’t very keen on seeing her leave.

She decided to toy with the greasy man. “My price is too high for your clientele.” She declared as she leaned in to the bar. “Besides: it looks like your drinks are laced with something other than alcohol...”

“Hey, now!” The offended bartender growled, “And just how do ya’ figure that, you uppity little bitch?”

Chenine was already walking out the door. She turned towards the barkeep one last time. “Those boys over there are shilling out two-hundred chits a piece for those two pieces of ‘merchandise’ over there.” She motioned to the hookers. “They’re only worth fifty, tops, and I just figured that these guys would have to be high to waste so much money on them.”

She tromped out the doorway with the bartender glaring at her in rage. The two prostitutes gaped with slack-jaws. Their ‘dates’, meanwhile, quickly retrieved their coins and, mortally embarrassed, quietly followed the girl out.

VII

Thirty minutes later Chenine was perched atop a serene hilltop overlooking the city. The *Chaste Gazer* was idling inside a copse of trees behind her.

You’re being very nasty today, she chided herself.

Chenine brought her knees up to her chest. She didn’t know why she was so bitter today. She’d lost her new boyfriend recently, it was true. It turned out that he had a child from a previous relationship that he’d ‘neglected’ to mention when they first met.

But that whole ordeal was ancient history, now. So what else was bothering her?

The rent on her apartment was starting to bleed her dry; even with all the Double-J rations she’d stolen from the base her food budget still wasn’t low enough to offset the exorbitant price of her little apartment.

But even if she couldn’t find a ‘better-half’ to room with and had to move somewhere else, she could easily cope.

‘Cause as long as I’ve got a cushy bed, I’m good to go, she sardonically reasoned. Then what was making her so snippy?

Well, *he* was about to be kicked out of the R-H Program. That would be a change, to be sure. But she'd made peace with the fact that her fellow squad-mate was a thing of the past. Of *course* she had; that wasn't too hard.

And, in all fairness, she really didn't care about such things.

She really didn't.

Suddenly a big ball of fluff wandered right in front of her; Chenine leaned back as a sheep crossed right over her splayed legs, paused, then started grazing right in front of her.

Lovely view, Chenine smirked. The girl leaned forward and rested her forehead against the soft but smelly wool of the docile animal.

She drifted into a dreamy half-sleep. She dreamed of the Kit-Kat Club and the lights of Ultima True after midnight, when the city came alive. She dreamed of her ex, her ex-ex, and her ex-ex-ex before that. She dreamed that she was strolling across a massive Sudoku puzzle, rubbing her feet along the squares as she went and painting in numbers as her toes rubbed over the squares. She started prancing along the puzzle faster; she began to slide her feet over the squares and produce elegant, calligraphy-style numbers.

She danced manically across the board, sweat leaping from her spinning body as the girl swept her toes over the squares and scratched in numbers on the grid. She jumped, performed an impressive pirouette and landed. Then she stopped dead in her tracks. *He* was standing there, with his sheepish expression and subdued body posture.

"Fancy footwork!" He complimented with a warm grin.

Her breathing became erratic, and then labored. Chenine awoke gasping. A fresh coat of sweat simmered on her face. The sheep, put off by the girl's noisiness, wandered away, its woolly backside swaying comically as it pattered off.

I know what it is, she finally deduced: *no good news*. She nodded, satisfied. *It's not that anything bad has happened to me recently; it's just that I haven't had any good things happen*. None of those little trivialities were affecting her at all: it was only the *absence* of good things that had put her in a funk.

She gazed at the city of Auckland. The sun was setting behind the skyline and tiny points of light were starting to sparkle in the city below: it was coming alive. Chenine's eyes sparkled vibrantly as she considered the awakening city.

Don't even think about it. You're on duty, you dumb pop-tart.

Still, her entire body was suddenly aching to go down and hit a club.

"Be still..." Chenine mumbled. She took out her tiny pill bottle and downed a few of the chalky white tablets.

"'scuse, me, miss." A voice sounded behind her.

Chenine's head swiveled around: there was a young man behind her. He was short in stature, Asian, with short-clipped black hair. He was wearing a salamander-green flight suit; it bore a small design on the breast pocket. Chenine had to stare at it for a few seconds before she could correctly identify it as a light-bulb.

"Identify yourself." She demanded as she wiped two small tears from her cheek.

"Oh, hey, I'm very sorry to intrude, if I am, that is..." he fawned obsequiously. "I just saw you coming out of the 'Mount Eden' bar back in the city, and I--"

"I'm *not* in your price range." She coldly answered.

"What?" He started, confused. "No- I mean your flight suit."

Chenine lifted her head at this. She rolled off the ground and dusted off her backside. “Oh, I see...” she extended her hand. “I apologize: my name is Chenine Chovert.” She extended this bare-minimum courtesy to her fellow Typer.

The young man extended a hand. “Hiya; I’m Kensu Onizuka.”

Now it was Chenine’s turn to start. “Did you say ‘Kensu’?”

“Yup.” He grinned sheepishly. “Master and commander of the Precious Metals Squad’s own Raiden, the-”

“-*Silver Halide*.” Chenine remembered, her eyes askance.

“You’ve heard of me?” He raised an eyebrow. “Well that beats all. Usually no one ever hears about data-miners in a squad. I guess I’m at a disadvantage, then. Uh, what’s your commission, ma’am?”

“I fly the *Ch-*” she caught herself. “...my Raiden is called the *Platonic Love*.” She muttered.

“Huh. Sorry to say, but I’ve never heard of that ship.” Kensu scratched his head.

“Not surprising.” Chenine noted. “Why are you up here?”

“I’m here for the view.” Kensu answered. Chenine crossed her arms and cocked one knee; she stared at him with challenging eyes. “No, no!” Kensu waved his arms expressively. “Not that: I really mean *the view*.” He unslung his shoulder harness and brought a small tripod and camera out of a sack. “See?” His camera was big and clunky; there was an old-fashioned lens on the front and a massive flash bulb at the top. She conservatively guessed that it was based on a 150-year-old model. Evidently, Kensu Onizuka was into retro-photography.

Chenine decided to toy with him some more: she cocked an eyebrow.

“Uhhh, hey, that’s not to say that *you’re* not, you know, ‘viewable’, but, I mean, this is my, um, hobby, see?”

She let the abashed man twist in the wind a bit; it was all just indicative of her foul mood.

“I see.” She finally muttered after Kensu struggled through a protracted explanation. She turned away from him to face the city skyline; Kensu, meanwhile, started to assemble his photography gear.

Within a minute her canalphones chirped: it was the acting duty-officer at Base-10.

“You’re off remote standby, Miss Chovert.” He said. “Your RL wants you back on base by the end of shift change.”

“Understood.” Chenine mumbled into her molar implant. Then, only for curiosity, if nothing else, she asked about her colleague. “Have they handed down a ruling against the *Love’s* pilot yet?”

“Um... yes, I think...” there was a pause as the duty officer talked with someone in the background. “Let’s see: Lieutenant Storm was found guilty of all charges and he was sentenced to indefinite probation.”

Chenine raised her head.

“What?” She blurted.

The flash bulb on Kensu’s setup discharged and blinded her for a moment.

“I’m so sorry!” He apologized. “This old thing doesn’t always work when I want it to.” Kensu paused and considered Chenine’s facial expression: it had changed rather drastically. “Uh, who were you on your ‘phones with, ma’am? Is everything alright?”

She stared into space, then looked Kensu in the eyes and declared: “I think I just got some good news.”

The girl couldn't help but flash a tiny grin.



T I A