



While, by the Eve, He Determined to Endure

I.

The wind whipped through the bright-lit streets of the Great City at Nash Ultima. Business in the City ended very early today, well before the blood-red sun went down behind the ocean. The day was by no means normal, and the night was certainly not typical; tonight was ‘Confrontation Eve’: it was Jupiter-minus-one.

The halls of the Central Museum were something right out of a history book. Ornate marble pillars stood imposingly all around the main gallery. The grand central chamber contained a massive set of stairs linking five separate floors.

Serafino Grafsteen leaned his back against a railing on the top floor. The bright lights of the gallery reflected off his brilliant amber eyes. The young man’s mad raven sat immobile on his shoulder. His drab and somber suit looked out of place in the hall’s gilded splendor.

A dozen or so footsteps echoed in the chamber below. A perky female tour guide launched into her spiel:

“The genetic structure of the strange life forms known as ‘Bydo’ remains a mystery. The fact that their DNA has the same double helical structure as ours has, however, been demonstrated..”

“Seven minutes to midnight and this museum is still open,” Grafsteen mused, “how could they possibly justify that kind of operational schedule?”

“It’s ‘Confrontation Eve’:” his companion muttered, “it’s considered patriotic to keep these places open around the clock right before the AM engages a Bydo Mass.” This

man was a scientist, the same one that sat amongst the Antipathy Committee's ranks when Sven Wraith gave his last update to the group.

The men were a study in contrasts: the scientist carried himself much like Sam Roon: he had the same arrogant scowl tattooed across his face that seemed to be the birthright of surly researchers, or maybe tenured professors. Serafino, on the other hand, reeked of simplicity: everything from his simple, clog-style dress shoes, his nondescript-though very expensive- tailored suit and his short-cropped, long-in-the-back grey hair smacked of precision and efficiency. The scientist may have believed that he was God, while Serafino believed that he could cut Heaven's operational costs in half, given the chance.

"They're not working, are they?" The scientist asked.

"What?"

"You know damn-well what: your company's Karat Spheres. They can't control the flesh, can they?"

"No." Serafino admitted after a moment's pause. "They cannot." He reached up, holding a shelled peanut between his fingers, and his raven greedily grabbed it out of his hand. The ravenous bird also nipped Grafsteen's thumb in the process; a crimson pool sprang up on the tip of that digit.

"Why the hell did they let you in here with that *thing*, anyway?"

Smiling, Serafino licked the blood from his cut. "Gouden Preek finances over 25-percent of this museum's budget through charitable contributions; being the executive VP of a multinational corporation has its perks, after all. Anyway, Diablo's something of a must with me. He's like a fashion accessory, don't you think?"

The scientist shook his head. "Disgusting bird." He mumbled.

"On the outside, maybe, but it's inner beauty that's truth: Diablo possesses that in droves. Actually, in that regard he's the polar opposite of the R-H's: beautiful silver birds on the outside, and on the inside? Humph: the depths of hell itself." He absently scratched the mad raven's neck.. "You should know: there's no doubt that they're going through full-emergence, now." Grafsteen somberly noted.

"Our *other* disgusting birds."

"The Karat Spheres seem to only slow them down, not hinder them completely. Science was never my strong suit, but from what I've been told they have the potential to become..." he waved one hand as he struggled for the right word, "to become *influential* in their own destinies, if you know what I mean. As they start to bypass the Karat Spheres, and with greater and greater impunity, that 'neural-stimulation' they keep getting from those pilots is going to do more than just keep them alive..."

"It'll allow them to grow." The scientist mumbled.

"Like goldfish in a jar: the things should grow to the size of their container. And since our safeguards aren't able to keep them away from the pilots' heads, well, that container becomes exponentially increased, doesn't it?"

"That, and the possibility that they could actually move into the ship's circuitry. We already know that the stuff is *capable* of organizing itself in an electronic framework, so merging with the Raidens' on-board electronics is a definite scenario."

Serafino scrunched his lips, impressed. "Could they really make a *huis*- ahem, I mean home- out of the ship's circuitry?"

“If they can’t be properly contained, then they’ll have all the room they need to expand.” He raised his head in exasperation; the harsh lights of the gallery reflected off his balding pate. “Their sterility, of course, is still absolute: nothing can change that, so they can’t spread beyond the ships, but still-”

“-they *can* make themselves known from within those shiny little coffins.” Serafino finished with a nod. “Well, congratulations, *mijn vriend*: it looks like you’re a father!”

“Shut your mouth, damnit!” He growled. “This isn’t funny. Oooh!” He grabbed his head with two hands and groaned. “Look: the Prototype Test is ‘locked and loaded’ with serum, right? There are no signs of complications, and no signs of rejection. Not *yet*, anyway. Well, then, we’ll just push to get Antipathy introduced to all the future R-H pilots as *soon* as they’re introduced to the Hybrids. That way, the Hybrids won’t have the *lifespan* necessary to start emerging. This whole damn plan can still work... yes, it can.” He wrung his hands. “But we can’t let the others know about this, alright?”

“You are awfully eager to kill-off the poor things. With all the time you’d spent doting over it, I would’ve thought that you’d be more willing to take the ‘Polaroid’ approach to the R-H’s.”

“‘Polaroid approach’?”

“To ‘see what develops’.” Grafsteen smirked.

“I’m not *interested* in what ‘develops’, nitwit! I serve the aims of the Committee, that is all! The R-H’s are tools to be used, *nothing* more. Now, what do you think of my plan?”

Serafino was absently inspecting his nails.

“Goddamnit, Grafsteen! Say something.”

“Whatever you think is fine: my company’s pay is the same, either way.”

“Your *company* might be out of a job soon!”

“No, we won’t. The Karat Spheres we’re providing are ineffective: *not* useless. They’re still granting at least a small amount of protection to you pilots. And don’t forget, as far as the sterility issue’s concerned: you may have figured out how to clip the R-H’s little *gonaden*, but it’s Gouden Preek that’s doing all the actual ‘snipping’.”

“Your contract was for both ‘snipping’ and ‘*stunting*’, Grafsteen!” He growled.

“Easy, papa,” Serafino patted the man on the shoulder condescendingly, “so things aren’t working exactly to plan: so what? That’s the age old story: how long do you think it took our hairy-knuckled ancestors to craft their first proper spear? The Chinese puttered around for centuries in their dingy little workshops before they perfected gunpowder. I mean, *mijn Gott*, something as primitive as the first nuclear bomb took years to develop, too. *All* things are difficult before they are easy.”

“That analogy’s not valid: your researchers are working on a glorified carrying case, *not* the actual weapon itself. For that, we have our Mutual Acquaintance to thank.”

“Yes, yes, but I’m telling you that even with all these snags the vessels *will* be useable long enough to serve the needs of your glorious weapon.” Serafino raised his voice as he hammered this point across.

Suddenly, the mad raven on his shoulder began beating its wings fervently. It extended its head and let loose a pealing shriek. The scientist had to cover his ears at the outburst; Serafino’s brows twitched expressively. The young man quickly rounded-up his attaché case and walked off across the marble floor.

“I think that we have come to terms, haven’t we? Anyway: I have to go.” He bluntly declared over his shoulder. “A peaceful night, *ja*? And star-filled skies to you always.” The dynamic VP broke into a brisk run at he reached the stairwell.

“*Goede nacht.*” The scientist acerbically called after him. Alone in the gallery, he leaned against the handrail, at the same spot that Serafino stood, and glared down at the fourth floor: the museum’s main Bydo exhibit hall.

‘*You’re a father!*’ The glib young man’s remark played through his head. He brought a big flask out of his overcoat and took a long pull from it.

No cigars, please! No cards, thank you... he thought. He considered Serafino and his arrogant, bottom-dollar outlook on everything. Thanks to the one constant behavior in all of human thought and action- stupidity- he was helping to birth a monstrosity.

‘Rosemary’s Baby’ had *nothing* on him.

We’ve laid two eggs so far, and these are eggs laid for consumption, not for raising. But, like a horrified breakfaster standing over the skillet, we’ve cracked one open and discovered a beak in the yolk.

A chill went down his spine as he recalled the report outlining the ‘Limerence-Experience’ (ha!) of the *Platonic Love*’s seatwarmer. The scientist destroyed all copies of that account as soon as he’d received it from Johnny Unitas. He ordered Johnny to keep his mouth shut and to instruct Sven Wraith to do the same, but those two didn’t need much convincing.

‘*You’re a father!*’

There was a chick in the egg.

“And it’s a boy.” He sarcastically congratulated himself.

Then he took another swig from his flask.

And, with all these things carefully considered, he decided to get stinking drunk.

II.

The bells of St. Dwynwen’s rang in the darkness. It was Monday: the start of another week.

Justin sat at his kitchen counter. He was twirling the UCP around his ring finger and staring into space, lost in thought. His brows twitched in silent recognition of the church bells.

It had been four days since his little ‘mishap’ behind the wheel of his Raiden. That was the euphemism Sven Wraith had come-up with to describe Justin’s meltdown. Justin couldn’t imagine why the Aryl was so keen on downplaying the incident.

He shouldn’t be let anywhere *near* the *Platonic Love*. He knew that, and he was pretty sure that everyone *else* must know it, too. He was a major pariah on base; people were calling him ‘Brain-Storm’ behind his back. The other day some wiseass snuck into his barracks and stashed an old-fashioned straightjacket in his locker.

Simply put: Justin was a loose-cannon. Worse than that: he was a nut-case.

Well, maybe a little better than that: I’m a nut-case with a 22-ton weapon of Mass destruction at my disposal.

He scoffed irritably and disassembled the UCP. He chucked it back in the kitchen drawer.

He started thinking of Cynthia again. His little bout of Limerence-Psychosis opened up that little wound, too. Actually, that wasn't a big deal: Cyn was a wound that never really healed, anyway. Justin closed his eyes and inhaled: he thought he could actually smell her amber hair.

He picked up his now-empty glass and sniffed the rim; he could still detect the faint trace of Galliano. The star-anise exuded a delicate licorice scent.

Mmm... how you loved that licorice...

He could almost feel the touch of her hands.

He opened his eyes: there was nothing to see but his dilapidated kitchen.

"I want my hedgehogs." He mumbled aloud.

Justin spent a good hour pacing around his bedroom. Sigs danced back and forth across his shoulders; cars swung around inside his pouch, which Justin wore around his neck.

He'd isolated himself from literally everyone at Base-10, more so than normal, even. Chenine certainly wouldn't ever count on him again, but at least she wasn't totally *hostile* to the idea of him sticking around. Like most things, she appeared to take the news with that usual, casual indifference.

I can live with that. He thought.

He stared out his bedroom window: he could barely make out the new moon through the midnight smog.

She must be living it up, tonight, he thought. After all, today was 'Confrontation Eve': the day before the Allied Military engaged the Jupiter Mass. Military grunts- and especially pilots- would have the run of the city tonight: everything and anything was free for them- within reason, of course.

Justin had no reason to be out there with them.

Spiders and sharks... he thought. *You failed at being a true, blue human once again, kiddo.* Any frail social connections he'd managed to build at Base-10 had snapped apart as quickly as a spider's-web crumbles in a storm.

He bowed his head and scratched his chin.

Well, so what, huh? If you can't cut it as a 'spider', then why keep torturing yourself about it, anyway? Just forget it: you stupid, whiney crybaby.

He raised his head. *There* was a notion. If he played it that way, then his situation would look something like this: it was Confrontation Eve, and he was a Raiden pilot. That's all he had to know.

Why don't you worry about being a warrior for awhile, hmm?

He could work on his humanity some other time- *if* there would be any other time. Right now he felt like working on his *inhumanity*. Pummeling that Galilean Mass would be a good start. It was already Confrontation Eve, anyway, and the AM attack was imminent, so he could endure for that long, at least.

Sigs tumbled off Justin's head and dug his claws into the pilot's shoulder, barely regaining his footing. The little hedgehog held on tight enough to break Justin's skin, but the pilot didn't feel it at the moment.

All Justin could feel was a thick, cloying hatred in his heart. There was a rage seething under his skin, and he desperately wanted to nurture it: even if it meant dying at the hands of that dark planetoid at Ganymede.

After all, he reasoned, *I could pick a worse way to go.*

With that problem resolved, he rounded-up his Galliano, Vodka and orange juice and spent the next two hours getting hammered out of his head. Around 2:00 AM he stumbled out of his apartment, heading nowhere in particular.

III.

“Muhver-fugging... cog-fuggers!”

Samantha Rayne mumbled to herself as she sat hunched over a bright, neon-lit bar. It was five minutes past midnight, and for Sam these oh-so-precious first five minutes of ‘Confrontation Eve’ were suitably miserable.

“Mohr .” She shouted at the bartender. Despite the blaring tekno music and the obstruction in her mouth, the pilot’s commanding voice made it the length of the bar.

The slick-haired bartender made his way over to the moping girl. He surveyed her for a moment, eyeing the two big sweet-sticks jutting out either side of her mouth.

“Not another one, now.” The young man teased. His brown eyes were flirting laser beams. Thirty minutes ago Sam left her squadmates in the pricey private room they’d fought to book for themselves. She was sullen, bitter, sulky, and just about everything else, too.

And she was also one of the only ladies in the gaudy Kit-Kat Club who was sitting all by herself; the massive establishment was dominated by Allied Military cliques: whole squadrons and maintenance teams were out for a night on the town before their big sendoff. There was the usual smattering of pop-tarts and inebriated rock-jocks, but they were far outnumbered by the rowdy AM personnel.

Sam yanked both sweet-sticks from her mouth and growled: “Yes, another one!” She glowered at the surface of the bar with her copper-colored eyes. “Motherfucking cock-”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, cutie: I heard you the first dozen times.” He leaned closer to her and held up a shrink-wrapped sweet-stick. He dangled it in front of Sam’s nose, teasing. “But seriously: you’re gonna give yourself a fatal sugar high if you keep sucking these down so quickly: why don’t you try getting a little drunk? The way I’ve seen you down the saccharine, getting hammered is probably safer for you than getting the sugar-buzz.” he grinned widely.

“I’m both.” The girl declared, proudly raising her nose at him.

“And, yet, you’re still in a pissy mood.”

“It’s only because of those motherfu-”

“Ai!” He threw up his hands in resignation.

“Sorry.” The girl sullenly apologized.

“Well, come on: your superiors had to have a good reason, didn’t they?”

“Not ‘superiors’: we call ‘em ‘commanding officers’.” Sam grabbed the sweet-stick out of the man’s hand, unwrapped it and jammed it between her gums. “Aferenlee, they wannuh keef my *ash* saveh-”

The bartender gently grabbed the tip of her sweet-stick with two fingers and pulled it out of her mouth. “Say again?” He sweetly asked.

Sam’s golden eyes blazed with anger as she held her head in her hands. Her nose was wrinkled along with her thin eyebrows in a scowl. The trillion or so freckles on her face, which were pretty faint to begin with, were invisible in the dim light of the bar-area.

“Apparently, they wanna keep my ass safe so I can transfer to a new unit after the Jupiter campaign.”

“Well, that’s a good reason.”

“What? It’s a good reason to yank me away from my mates, nail my butt to the ground and have me hunker-down under my bed while everyone else takes on that damn Galilean Mass? To hell with that.” She growled. One of her arms slipped; she nearly nailed her chin on the bar before catching herself. “What the hell kinda group name is that, anyway: the ‘Tears’ Shower Squadron’? It sounds like a line of hair-care products...”

“What was that?”

“Nothin’.” She dejectedly grunted. “I was just thinking about my new home.”

“Where is ‘home’, anyway?”

“Here.” She tapped the bar top with one finger. “It is now, anyway. I lived here once before for almost- what was it- seven years, I think, before I finally got my Dancer commission.”

“Where else before that? I’m only asking because of the accent...”

“Jolly East Africa.” She mumbled. “My birthplace, at least.”

“Speak any Afrikaans?”

The girl held her hand above the bar and tipped it back and forth. “A little; it’s the Kenyan I can speak without an accent.”

“Neat.”

“Yeah, fantastic.” She sardonically grumbled. “And now I’ve been shipped back to the Great City itself: it’s the friggin’ circle of life...”

The rave song ended on the fourth-level dance floor. Seconds later several large groups of dancers descended the large central staircase; they were heading down to the lower levels for drinks, among other things.

Sam’s eyes were instantly drawn to a sextet of pop-tarts: they descended the stairs in an orderly phalanx. Each girl was done-up in perfectly-layered makeup and subtle, reflective body paint. Some wore more clothes than others, though none of them were what Sam would call ‘decent’. The pale-skinned goddesses moved through the sea of people like a graceful school of fish; the crowd parted around them.

“What’s with all the geisha girls?”

The bartender followed Sam’s drunken eyes. “Oh, you mean the ‘Goo-Goo-Dolls’.” He grinned. “They’re all regulars here: they really tear it up on the dance floor. They’re what I’d call an ‘elite hottie squad’. They work themselves pretty hard at all the club scenes around the city, not to mention in the sack.”

Sam looked back at him cruelly.

He raised his hands. “Hey, that’s just what I’ve heard.”

The six girls passed by the bar. Each one of them bled sweat from their skin, and several were busy letting their glistening, sweat-soaked hair down. Sam’s eyes were naturally drawn to one of the girls bringing up the rear: the tart’s skin was paler than a full moon. She was the shortest of the group, though by far the most well-proportioned. Her eyes were blue sapphires; her v-neck top was especially torn at the neck to make it plunge way down between her A-cup breasts. However, to her credit, the girl was wearing a pair of ultra-tight white pants, in contrast to most of her fellow-tarts’ barely-existent miniskirts.

The most striking aspect of this girl, though, was her radiant white hair. As she bobbed and weaved through the crowd, walking past golden spotlights and red-and-green laser lights, Sam could see several golden-blond streaks along her bangs.

“She’s trying to look older than she really is.” Sam discerned immediately. “Don’t know why, though: she’s probably legal tender.” Sam sucked on her sweet-stick. “Someone needs to cram that girl in a tanning booth, though.”

“Ah, you mean, um... what’s-her-name? Jenin, I think. Or something like that.” The bartender rounded up some empty glasses from the table as he spoke. “She’s not an albino, or anything; she’s Ketoni, I think. Don’t know much about her, though: the Goo-Goo-Dolls spend most of their time at the bar in the lounge; they like to crash in a booth between dance numbers.” He allowed himself a brief peek at the snooty girls. “Tch! That Jenin is the cream of the crop, though. To most guys, anyway.”

“The ‘brass-ring’, huh?” Sam smirked derisively at the retreating girl. She abruptly spat out her now-defunct sweet-stick and sat up. “Gimme a nice, thick pilsner and a tube of GABAcide: I’m calling it a night.”

“Oh, don’t be that way...” the young man brushed his fingers over Sam’s brow, cradling her dirty-blond locks. Before he could tell what was happening Sam grabbed his hand and slammed it down on the table.

“I do things the Arab way, amigo: next time that hand comes off, ‘kay?”

“Alright, alright!” he pulled away from her quickly. He came back a minute later, much more sullen, and set down her pint of beer. He also placed a brightly-colored auto-injector syringe next to the pilsner. “You didn’t have to be so touchy.”

“You didn’t have to be so feely.” Sam retorted. She downed her beverage in one pull, snatched-up her syringe and stumbled off the barstool. “If I’m in a bitchy mood, mister, you can bet I’m entitled. Anyway, it’s all because of those... those-”

“-aforementioned ‘motherfucking cocksuckers’: yes, I’ve heard.” He grumbled.

Bleary-eyed and tired, Sam wandered through the maze-like Kit-Kat-Club for a good two hours, getting lost multiple times. She checked in on her squadmates, who were right in the middle of wet t-shirt contest with a group of spirited party-girls. The ‘wet’ part of the contest was provided by a massive keg of Gambrinus’ De-Light.

Quality booze. She thought sourly.

At some point Sam desperately needed to pee, so she stumbled around the lower floors of the club, in comical futility, until she remembered her syringe of GABAcide.

That might help a bit with my sense of direction.

She pressed the tube against her neck. The edges instantly sucked on to her flesh. She leaned against a wall, resting her arms on a railing as the auto-injector located her pulsing carotid. The syringe then pierced her flesh.

She closed her eyes, breathed deeply, then opened them again.

Her mood had, understandably, not improved.

Nothing’s more sobering than sobriety, she wryly noted.

Thanks to her new-found coordination Sam located the narrow restroom hallway in the rear of the club. As she tromped down the corridor she noticed a scraggly haired rock-jock stumbling out of the unisex bathroom. His face was damp with sink water and he passed Sam wordlessly, an ecstatic grin cemented across his dopey face.

Whatever he’s high on, it must be good... she bitterly judged.

Before she could put her hand on the bathroom door it swung open towards her; the swift-footed girl had to jump back to avoid getting clobbered. The little platinum-blond 'Goo-Goo-Doll' was on the other side of that door. The girl was reapplying some pink-hued, glittery lip-gloss to her freshly-washed face; she was doused in a whole new coat of sweat. The girl slunk past Sam wordlessly, zipping up the fly of her pants as she sauntered by.

Huh. I guess that was his drug of choice...

Samantha stared at the pop-tart as she passed; the girl reciprocated this by flashing her a dark, stinging look that clearly said: 'go to hell'. The tart trotted off, still smearing the gloss over her lips.

"Charming." Sam mumbled as she went into the bathroom.

The facilities were much better than Sam expected out of a downtown Nash Ultima club: it was relatively clean and boasted two full rows of stalls. Most of these were empty and Sam heard only a few active 'streams' from the urinals on the other side of the dividing-wall.

She did her business and then set to work re-organizing her face in front of one of the sinks. Sam wasn't the kind of woman that spent a lot of time preening and cleaning herself, but she did have some very basic feminine vanities, and at 2:30 in the morning these desperately needed to be attended to.

She noticed a small pill bottle sitting beside the sink; it had a tiny white prescription label wrapped around it.

Let's hope it's someone's club drugs and not their heart medication...

She picked up the bottle and was about to check the ID label. Suddenly, a stern little voice cried out:

"Samahani!"

Before Sam knew what was happening a white hand darted before her eyes and snatched the bottle away.

The platinum-blond girl glared at Sam angrily. Then, looking away from Sam's eyes, she turned and darted out the bathroom door. One second later she stuck her head back in the room, very briefly, with her sapphire eyes more apologetic.

"Nasikitika", she declared, then disappeared.

Left alone in the room, Sam gazed at the door, truly mystified.

"Se neno..." She softly answered.

IV.

The scientist stumbled in the dark. He put his hand against the outside wall of the museum.

Just to keep the place from falling over, he hiccupped.

He heard glass shattering somewhere around the corner. A few seconds later he heard it again. Then again; this time there was some venomous cursing thrown in as well.

He rounded the corner and nearly took a beer bottle to the face.

"Ah!" He cried as the bottle shattered against the wall just inches from his body.

"Sorry about that." A black-haired young man slurred his words from across the big patio. He was leaning uncertainly against a supporting column near the museum entrance.

“*Gott in Hemel!*” He cried. “What are you trying to do: kill me?”

The green-eyed man smiled slightly; then he grinned with waxy eyes. “No, actually: I’m trying to kill *this!*” He lobbed another green bottle across the patio: it sailed above the museum entrance and smashed against a big granite sculpture. The imposing statue depicted a Bydo incarnation: it was massive, with a cumbersome bean-shaped head and the body of a gigantic slug, or perhaps an undeveloped embryo. That incarnation was called ‘Dobkeratops the Guardian’, and it was indeed one of a kind.

The man drew his hand back once again. “God-damned...” he let another bottle said: it hit the defenseless sculpture square in the head. “...*bastards!*” he finished.

“Here, now: that’s vandalism!”

“No: it’s patriotism.” The drunk man stumbled over to the scientist and rested against the overlook. There were many marble stairs leading up to this entrance of the Bydo Museum, and the landing they were on was a good twenty feet above ground level. “There’s no nobler thing that to die for a cause, right? *That’s* the ultimate demonstration of devotion, and kinship, isn’t it?”

“I really couldn’t say.”

“It is.” He smiled wickedly. “Nothing says ‘membership’ more than martyrdom.”

“And you’re a martyr, are you?”

“Not yet.”

In all honesty, neither man had the motor coordination to navigate the museum’s marble staircase, so the scientist and the young man stayed on the landing a while; the elder man generously shared some of his flask with the unstable youth.

Both of them were in pretty sour moods, to put it mildly, and they spent their time on the moonlit patio rattling off their complaints about the world at large. He did most of the talking, but the black-headed youth did eventually give one pertinent soliloquy.

“...and I didn’t make any *unreasonable* promises, either, like Se-, like my *private sector* colleague...” the scientist spat the words ‘private sector’ with obvious derision.

“Sounds like you got royally screwed, Doc.”

He wagged his finger: “Alletalen, please. Call me Alletalen.” He hiccupped with the introduction. “And you, my would-be-martyr.” He sized-up the young man: he didn’t have the muscular build of a soldier, but his sour disposition spoke volumes: he could tell that the young man was trying to re-grow his spiky black hair, probably after having it compulsorily clipped short. “What are you: some kind of AM grunt?”

“Yeah, some kind.” He agreed with a smile. “Just a simple wrench-monkey: my name’s J-”

“-have you ever heard about the concept of ‘serendipity’, *vriend?*”

“Uh, it sounds familiar...”

“It means that you bowl a perfect strike, but you do it by accidentally heaving the ball into a different bowling lane.” Alletalen gripped the granite rail tightly. “I set out to design one thing, and for one *purpose*: it’s a noble purpose, to be sure. But now everything’s coming out differently. What I’ve done...” he craned his head up to the moonlight, “Let me put it this way: have you ever encountered something that reeks of danger, and terror even, but at the same time it’s full of glory and wonder? I mean, something that you’re both enamored of and terrified by at the same time?”

“I encounter *that* every day I step out my door.” The green-eyed man cryptically replied.

“But this is something that I *shouldn't* be enamored of.” Alletalen lowered his face and shook his conflicted head.

“What is it, anyway?”

“A seed.” He mumbled vaguely.

“If it's an apple seed, you might want to give it to me: I wouldn't mind trying to grow a tree for myself.” The youth grinned.

“The fruit of *this* seed should be quite rotten, when grown.” He growled, irritated at the boy's snarkiness.

“But you think that it could become a flower, too, huh?”

Alletalen looked over at the youth, now impressed. “*Ja, ja*: that is the situation. But it doesn't change the fact that my... ‘work’, is an abomination before God and man.”

“God doesn't matter.” The youth grumbled.

“Because he doesn't exist.” Alletalen guessed. “Well, that phrase is just an expression, you know...”

“He exists, but I don't think he really cares about this speck of dust we call a planet, one way or the other, anymore.”

“Ouch!” The scientist laughed. “These aren't the words of the faithless: they're the words of one *losing* his faith. Well, that's the first step, my boy, toward rehabilitation.”

“Rehabilitation from faith?”

“From mystical thinking. Good for you. Besides, if you were really so far gone into that superstitious nonsense you'd be huddling in some drafty, smoke-filled church right now, praying for salvation from that big, bad Bydo Mass.”

“I don't want salvation.” He growled. “Just redemption.”

“From your God?”

“My peers.” He shook his head. For the first time that night, the young man gazed up at the big, full moon overhead. The soft white light glanced off his long, thin face and sparkled in his emerald eyes.

“Humans,” he muttered, “are proud creatures, aren't we? Some would say we have the right to be, but I don't. This planet is the third stone from the sun, skipping aimlessly through a dark night ocean, dancing around a massive, loving lighthouse, but the whole fucking world is nothing but unending cold and pain. We're born from troops of apes, right? They relied on their social cohesion to survive, and we just inherited that idiotic character flaw.” He looked down at his shoes. “Everyone's building their own little webs between each other: it all comes together in a great network of networks that spans this planet like flakes in a snow globe.” He gritted his teeth. “And some of us spin those webs better than others. But just when all the slow-pokes start to put out their feelers and spin a few fragile little webs of their own, the motherfucking snow globe gets all shook up again: circumstances change, people die, people *turn* on you...” He glared at the stars. “Humans are proud, sure, but they don't have any right to be. None of us are amazing, and some of us just can't rightly adapt.”

Alletalen smiled heartily: he was amused by this bitter, drunken man's rant; somehow egging him on seemed to make the scientist feel a little better.

“But, humans *do* adapt, don't we? Why, look at you, *vriend*: you are a quarter-of-a-century old, or thereabouts, right?” When the man nodded Alletalen continued: “You

yourself are of the most beautiful ‘Eve Generation’: the best symbol of human adaptation, *ja?*”

“‘Human adaptation’”, he scoffed, “that was *God’s* meddling.” he growled.

“How so? I thought you said-”

“Tell me this, Alley-tin:” he stumbled on his feet, regaining his balance just before whanging his head on a marble column, “tell me: what is a God without His people?”

“Nothing, I suppose.” The scientist replied after a considerate pause.

“Exactly.” The drunk youth sprawled his hands out to either side and raised his head. He droned, in a mocking, high-pitched sermon: “The Lord deigned to cast his eyes downward, and He looked out over His people, the unwashed masses, and saw the shadow of death falling over the land: the False Moon blighted the world, drying up rivers, turning trees into ash and poisoning the little wombs of His antlike people.” The man stared at some passersby on the street far below them; then he glared at Alletalen. “Did He care *about* these people? No. I mean, how could he? We’re little more than a failed experiment: trash discarded from Eden and left to grovel in the *dirt*. Tch! We think we have the right to be proud as a species, but we’re a joke: we’re God’s shame, and some of us more than others-”

“-and, if I may ask: where do you rank *yourself* on this lovely hierarchy?”

“Me? Oh, I’m the shame of the Father, the Spirit, and, most especially the Son.”

“Ah, you mean that oh-so-important carpenter from Galilee?” The scientist laughed. “Well, you certainly don’t keep Christ’s Golden Rule, do you?”

“‘Love my neighbor...’” the youth muttered after a minute. “I *do* love humanity,” he growled at the scientist, “...or, at least, the *idea* of humanity, if that makes sense.”

“Not really.” Alletalen shrugged. “But, pray, continue: *why* did your almighty spare his ‘sinful children’?”

“‘cause, without a people, what’s a God? He decided to intervene, and through that intervention He allowed another generation of humans to be born.” The young man smirked darkly. “The only way He could keep being ‘God’ was to allow Generation Eve to come into this world. How do they put it: *A place in this chaos he meant to secure: while, by the Eve, he determined to endure?*”

“Here, now: that’s not what the verse is supposed to mean. You’re taking it completely out of context.” Alletalen chided. “That poem speaks of *man’s* resoluteness, not some cynical motivation of the almighty...”

“I’m putting it into its proper context.” He retorted with a growl.

Alletalen chuckled softly and gazed at the moon. “Heh! I’ve still got the greater problem: I’m so conflicted about bringing new life into the world, but with that nihilistic philosophy of yours you don’t have a second thought about it: sounds like you’d strangle a baby before it could worm its way out of the womb!” He looked over at the youth.

“And yet, you seek martyrdom?”

“I don’t know *what* I seek; this miserable planet’s not worth my life. But, then again, my life’s not worth anything, either, so we’ve got a nice little equation that balances out to a big, fat zero either way.”

More chuckles. “Ah, no offense, but it’s a very good thing that the future doesn’t depend on the likes of you. That kind of hatred is a very illogical thing. We’re all supposed to want to thrive and procreate; I don’t know how Darwin would explain your

self-loathing. That irrational antipathy of yours...” Alletalen flinched at his own Freudian slip. That word hit him like a ton of bricks.

“Irrational Antipathy...” he muttered again, softly.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Alletalen mumbled.

The raven-haired man shrugged and stumbled off. “Thanks for the booze, professor. And, as for that ‘seed’ of yours,” he turned and faced him unsteadily, “if you want my advice, you should try to hold onto *anything* in this world that you find valuable. It’s what keeps this horrible place bearable.” He stumbled off. “...course, I wouldn’t know: my fingers are somewhat slippery, and I don’t have much luck holding on to anything...” he chortled bitterly as he descended the stairs and disappeared in the darkness.

“...anything I find valuable.” The scientist repeated slowly.

You’re a father! The words rattled in his brain.

“Not really...” he muttered to himself. If the ‘chicks’ do break out of their ‘eggs’, then those pathetic Raiden seatwarmers would be the parents.

“Me? I would be the grandfather.” He mumbled.

As he gazed at the moon, drunk as all-get-out, his eyes glistened with tears.

V.

The alleyway reeked of stale cigarette butts and garbage. It was dark and narrow; the only lights came from the barely-visible moon directly overhead and the gaudy neon strobe lights inside the Kit-Kat Club, twenty floors up.

Chenine tromped out into the alley, banging the steel door shut behind her. An amorous couple, hands all over each other, discarded their cigarettes and passed her on their way back in. Alone in the alley, the girl pulled a thick white cigarette from her pocket and lit up.

The steps into the alley were thick with sooty dirt, but Chenine didn’t have the energy to care: she plopped down on the steps and hung her head, exhausted. She knew this feeling all too well: she was ‘crashing’, as she euphemistically called it. She had the overwhelming urge to roll into a fetal ball and sleep right there on the dirty steps.

If I wasn’t dressed so nicely, and I could pass for a beggar girl, I’d do it in a heartbeat.

Her eyes were big and cloudy in the scant moonlight in the alleyway; she felt like crap. Chenine stubbed out the cigarette and sat compactly, with her legs together and her arms over her abdomen.

That pain... it’s still there. She squirmed uncomfortably.

It was always there, it seemed.

She got up and dusted herself off: that scraggly-haired rock-jock would be waiting for her in the lounge. As much as she wanted to slip into a stage-3 coma, the girl had her obligations...

Chenine turned around and reached for the big rusty door. Before she could grasp the handle, however, a strong hand seized her around the waist. She yelped and flailed out at her assailant. It was tricky, however, since her left arm was pinned to her side.

The girl growled angrily as she kicked with her legs and tried to find her attacker’s face with her free hand. The attacker pulled her closer to his body; Chenine

grunted as a shiny blade found her throat and sat there, snug between her trachea and carotid.

“Okay, okay, okay...” she growled in submission. She went limp and turned her head to one side to relieve the pressure on her neck.

The man began walking backwards, dragging Chenine by her heels. He pressed the knife deeper against her throat until the girl stepped with him. He led the girl, like a dancer in a passionate tango, deep into the shadows.

I wonder if he's after my purse, or my 'pocketbook'. She grimly wondered if he was a robber, or a rapist.

“Business, or pleasure?” Chenine asked in a controlled tone. He answered her by pressing the knife even tighter against her neck.

The pair stopped beside a bleak brick wall. Chenine stood, very docile, with her hands folded tightly over her crotch. One of her eyebrows rose as she felt the assailant's breath on her ear; her silver hair ruffled as the man panted.

“You're not to go to Jupiter: d'ya understand?” A gruff voice barked.

This caught her very much off-guard.

Looks like he's none-of-the-above...

“I hadn't planned on it.” Chenine answered softly. “The military typically doesn't allow their secretaries to get very close to active combat zones.” She enunciated the word ‘secretaries’ in a controlled staccato.

This was met with a poke at her flesh. Chenine stiffened as a few drops of blood trickled down the scratch on her neck.

“Charlie-Rho-Theta-Sigma...” the voice growled slowly. “...and if you fuck with me again, I'll snip your God-damned windpipe: got it?”

How interesting... she thought as she considered the knowledge-base of her assailant.

“Why haven't you, already? If you're so keen on keeping me from Jupiter, why haven't you cut me?” This was purely Chenine's logical, internal monologue passing through her lips; she didn't consider the stupidity of saying these words out loud.

“Don't tempt me...” His grip on her waist slackened a tiny bit, “but I live by the Law of Just Punishment: you don't penalize the ‘child’ for the sins of its ‘mother’.”

Chenine's hands fumbled over her crotch. “What do you mean?” She tilted her head to one side, then instantly regretted it: she forgot about the knife against her throat and very nearly impaled herself.

“You're going to refuse to pilot your Raiden during the attack,” the man ignored her query, “and you're going to resign from the Raiden program.” His grip on her tightened. “Seriously, chick-a-dee, you're not even a pilot. You know it, and I know it: this business isn't something for little girls in pretty clothes.”

Chenine's eyes flashed at this.

He knows everything, doesn't he? But if he had access to classified information-like her file, for instance- why would he want to keep her away from the Jupiter Mass?

“I... rather like piloting.” She mumbled. “A little, anyway.”

“It's a profession, honey-chile, *not* a hobby. Now, I really don't *want* to hurt you, but if you can't give me any assurances...” the knife rose off Chenine's throat: the assailant was preparing to stab her.

The blade came over and found flesh: Chenine yelped quietly as she twisted her knife in the assailant's arm.

"Geah!" The man roared with pain. He released the girl instantly, then quickly grabbed her shoulders and flung her headlong into the wall. Chenine hit the slippery brick face and fell back into a big pile of garbage.

She heard the man's frantic footfalls while she dug herself out of the trash. She poked her head out of the garbage and looked down the alley: she caught the fleeting glimpse of a man, clad almost entirely in black, sprinting through the misty alleyway. It looked like he was wearing a cape of some sort.

Chenine blinked as one of her eyes clouded up. She blinked again, but the problem only worsened. Reaching up she felt a sticky train of blood gushing out of the laceration in her forehead.

Over by the club's rear entrance there were several men and women in a group. They were out for their cigarettes, had heard the commotion and were now rushing to Chenine's aid.

Well: at least I can do that 'beggar-girl-fetal-ball' thing, now...

Chenine lay on her back in the smelly, slimy trash as her head began to swim. She shoved her blood-soaked utility knife in her pocket, then zipped-up the fly of her pants before the mob could reach her.

Overhead, through the endless tunnel of building facades and fire escapes, the sky was turning pink: morning was coming.

Confrontation Eve was over: every single member of the Allied Military had 14-hours to prepare themselves for the strike.

The 6:00 AM sirens sounded in the distance just as Chenine lost consciousness.

Morning was here: it was Jupiter-minus-zero.



T I A