



“Appoint the wicked over him: place such an evil at his right hand.
When he shall be judged, let him be condemned.
Let even his prayer be counted as a sin.”

Psalm 109:6-7

Psycho-Babel

I.

His nightmare was bad, but it was the knock at the door that sent his body flailing. Justin’s dreams were dark tonight, or rather this morning— the clock on his nightstand read half-past three. He took in his surroundings, the darkness of his bedroom and the shuffling of Sigs and Cars in their cages.

“G’morning, boys...”

Judging from the indignant hisses that met his ears, Justin’s hedgehogs didn’t share the sentiment.

His eyes flickered in the darkness.

The moon...

Justin stumbled across his bedroom and whanged his leg against the nightstand as he reached the window. He pulled the curtains back and was greeted with a bleak, snowy scene: cold mush enveloped the endless rows of tenement houses in Trident Bay. The sky was sick with fog. This insidious smog wormed around frozen streets below. The evening atmosphere was like the stare of a stillborn baby: ugly, lifeless, and hideously inhuman. The moon leered out behind all this. The sooty air— like fouled paintbrushes— gave the orb a hideous red tint.

But the moon *was* there.

And that’s all Justin needed to know.

He sat on the side of the bed rubbing his face. A chirp sounded from the kitchen: his telephone. After three rings the signal automatically transferred from the kitchen to his integral canalphones:

“Strom, are you awake?”

It was Morley: Justin’s neighbor who lived two apartments down, right next to Mrs. Elcane.

“I guess...” He yawned. Justin made no attempt to correct the man’s mistake: he’d tired of that pointless task long ago. Morley wasn’t the kind of person to pay Justin any genuine notice (though he might’ve taken it upon himself to torture the poor lieutenant if they attended the same junior high). Justin thought of the man as an almighty jerk, but of course that was how he sized up most people, and his feelings toward the man were tainted by envy more than anything.

“What the hell, guy? A god-damned flotilla of warships just buzzed the building! Just now it felt like a bomb went off on the roof. Couldn’t you feel the vibrations?”

“No: I was having a bad dream.”

“Bad dream?”

“I dreamed I was there: I was at the Cataclysm. I was standing on a grassy little hill right above a fairground, or something like that. There were kids playing on a carousel.” He rubbed his eyes. “But when I looked up at the sky all I could see was that giant, flaming ball. It— it was made of rock, but somehow it looked like it was... it was grinning at us: grinning at *me*. And then, right before it hit, I could’ve sworn it was laughing...”

“Hey: I don’t wanna hear about your nightmares, guy. And who the hell are you kidding? You’re not old enough to have lived through the Cataclysm, so cut the bullshit, Strom!”

He sighed: “Fine. What’s with the airships, then?”

“I wanted *you* to tell me: you’re with the Allied Military, aren’t you? Someone told me you’re on a cleaning crew in the Water Fortress. Listen, we don’t know what’s up and my kid’s freaked out like you wouldn’t believe. You got any idea?”

Things made sense, now: Morley’s call wasn’t a concerned warning to Justin; it was a demand for information. This was just more evidence for his ‘universal truth’: people like Morley treated people like Justin as raw equipment rather than equals.

Just a means to an end...

As far as this situation went, Justin was a rather poor means: he told Morley he had no earthly idea why an AM unit would be mobilizing.

“To hell with it.” The man retorted. “I’m gonna find someone who knows what the hell is going on!” He hung up without waiting for ‘Strom’s’ reply. But just what would a squadron of warships be doing over the Eastland Slums at this hour?

Justin raised his head: that was a rather good question.

And then there was another question: why did he wake up just now? Wasn’t there something that shook him from his sleep?

Aside from the nightmare, of course....

Five very loud knocks at the front door roused Justin from his confusion. He jumped up from bed, threw on a pair of shorts and stumbled out through his kitchen and to the front door: he had to look through his peephole twice before he believed his eyes. Samantha Rayne stood outside, tapping her foot indignantly.

“Why the hell did that take so long?”

“Sorry: had to throw on a pair of shorts.”

“That’s great. Now take ‘em off.” She threw his *Liefde*-class flightsuit at him.

Two minutes later he was chasing the girl down the moldy brown hallway, struggling to keep up with the captain as he tugged his suit into place. Sam darted into a stairwell.

“Were you with someone just now?” She asked.

“No.” Justin blushed, defensive. It dawned on him how his sweaty body could be misinterpreted: “I was dreaming.”

“Some dream.” She didn’t crack a smile as she ran up the stairs in threes.

“Not really: it was a letdown.” Justin was already panting. “What the hell is going on, Sam? Are the 101st Korangers on the move?”

“All units in the greater Gulf area are mobilized: we’re rendezvousing a couple hundred miles outside of Isla Lian. That’s where most of the debris ended up.”

“Debris?”

“Just wait ‘till we’re in private, okay? I’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

She pressed through the door to the roof. A blinding array of floodlights set the whole place afire: a great cargo carrier hovered just a few hundred feet overhead, setting the roof alive with a steady rumble. Even the water in the apartment’s swimming pool splashed around chaotically.

Several dozen tenants milled about up here, confused and chattering amongst themselves. Morley was with them, holding his four-year-old tot in one hand and gripping his wife around her shoulder with the other. As soon as the man saw Justin he moved to approach him, but then Samantha escorted the pilot past a barricade of black-hooded commandos, all of them wielding oversized machine guns.

Justin was taken aback to see the *Platonic Love* itself sitting idly on the roof. The silver sphere rested atop a metal cargo holder: evidently it was lowered directly onto the building by the airship above them. The sleek and sexy *Platinum Heart* rested beside Justin’s bird.

“Get in, now.” Samantha ran to her own Raideen and slipped inside.

Vents from the cargo carrier whipped hot exhaust through Justin’s black hair as he took in this haphazard scene: what could stir up the hive like this? He slipped his ratty brown overcoat off and let it fall to the ground. It flew off behind him, sailed past the line of marine commandos and landed at a dumbfounded Morley’s feet.

Sixty seconds later Justin’s engines were primed and his Raideen was ready to go.

Sam’s voice met his ears: “Your neighbors sure look surprised, don’t they?”

“Can’t blame ‘em. None of them know that I’m a Raideen pilot. Or at least they didn’t know until now.”

“We’ve been off *D-6* for over a month: why haven’t you told anyone?”

“That’s my business.” Justin growled. “Now why the hell are we mobilizing from the hip like this? This kind of deployment is sloppy. What’s up, Sam?”

“It’s not what’s *up*: it’s what’s *down*...”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s Evergreen, Storm: it fell out of orbit about two hours ago.”

Justin’s jaw slackened. He shook his head: “You— you mean they brought it down? Was it a controlled descent? And why?”

“There was nothing ‘controlled’ about it: the whole thing blew up over Japan, and then it rained down into the Gulf. There was no warning, and very little time for the colonists to do jack shit about it. We’re scrambling for rescue and recovery.”

Justin's heart hammered away at a mile a minute. His brain still couldn't adequately process the magnitude of this statement. He had no idea how to respond to it, so he picked a few simple words:

"Jesus Fucking Christ..."

II.

The construction of EPDN began in 2069, mere days after the Bydo's first attack on the planet. Of course at the time no one envisioned building a network so vast and powerful that it would have the ability to turn Earth's upper atmosphere into a corona: the technology for that kind of setup would take years to mature. Epdin's first architects didn't look to the stars as their working model: they looked to the sea.

Believe it or not the first incarnation— no pun intended— of the Earth Perimeter Defense Network was modeled after the Portuguese man o' war. One of the chief engineers at the American Department of Defense was an avid marine biologist by hobby, and he was struck by the behavior of this odd little invertebrate. It seemed that in warm waters these deadly, jellyfish-like man o' war would cluster together and swarm a certain type of tortoise, circling it in a protective shield. They do this because the fish and eels who regularly feast on the man o' war are themselves a possible meal for the mighty tortoise: out of fear of the reptile they wouldn't get close to the otherwise-vulnerable man o' war colony. Conversely, the giant fish that consume tortoise flesh wouldn't even try to get through the man o' war colony, as the sting from those floating bags of poison is deadly: they can kill a man within an hour, after all, and a lowly fish can succumb to their toxins within a minute.

What was most striking, though, is the observation that these man o' war colonies swarm their tortoises in very small numbers: they leave large, gaping pockets of empty space between the reptiles and their potential killers. Despite this the fish still refuse to slip through the gaps. That's because the man o' war has the ability to radiate its tendrils all about the balloon sack at the center of its body: each of these creatures could effectively quadruple in size within seconds. Therefore— functionally, at least— there *was* no hole in their shield.

With this in mind, Epdin was designed to be a patchwork of massive, deadly structures bearing a gargantuan arsenal of weaponry: conventional, nuclear, chemical and biological. These giant islands were planned to circle the proverbial 'tortoise's shell' in a loose conformation. The architects named these theoretical floating islands Pneumatophores. A dozen were built, but most of them were prototypes and mock-ups: the cost of such a setup was impractical, and eventually this approach to planetary defense was abandoned in favor of a new approach: the great 'spider's web' of refracted solar energy seen in Epdin's modern incarnation. The prototype Pneumatophores already built would eventually be cannibalized into small chunks and incorporated into the grid. The second-largest of these stations was converted into the functional 'capital' of Epdin: Satellite Alpha.

But the largest of these Pneumatophores, a towering column of transplanted rock and metal, was left abandoned for years. It bore an incredible amount of material sent up from the Earth and accounted for over 80% of the mass of all manmade objects currently in space. During production it was known only by its project name: the 'Aegis' satellite.

This structure was the only *true* Pneumatophore built by Epdin's architects: it was this Aegis satellite that they envisioned replicating 100 times over— perhaps 1000 times over— if not for practical and financial concerns. This vast orbiting platform would never be known to humans as a comforting shield to oppose the Bydo's Empire's incarnation wave assaults. History would remember it as something much more important: the Evergreen Colony.

Historians explain that the early years of the Bydo War were tough on Mother Earth, leaving the world 'sick'. That's an understatement if there ever was one: after several waves of ravenous incarnation took their time raping the planet (and were themselves raped by a vindictive intercontinental nuclear strike) the Earth was not 'sick', it was in critical condition. Residual Bydo corruption, compounded by the taint of nuclear fallout, settled into the soil as an incurable and slow poison. Years before the False Moon would come to put a bullet into the ecosystem's brain people were genuinely worried about the legacy of Earth, and whether or not any wildlife from the Blue Marble would be around for much longer.

Humanity's concerns were answered by a couple of colorful entrepreneurs who hailed from their own 'sovereign nation', as they called it. Philip Furst and Marguerite Hansha— the self-proclaimed rulers of the 'Principality of Sealand'— were on the case. They were influential, both in character and in cash, and even though the 'nation' they represented was really just a glorified oil rig situated about a dozen kilometers outside the UK's territorial waters, the pair hounded authorities until their demands were taken seriously.

Philip and Marguerite were allowed access to the cold and vacant Aegis satellite with the aim of establishing a working ecosystem, and not just any ecosystem, but one that demonstrated radical autonomy. The Big Three Powers had no interest in continually re-stocking this pet project: like the Earth below it, this place would be forced to run on sunlight alone and have no help from her big sister down below. Quite sensibly— and unimaginatively— they called this the 'Ark' Project. It kept that name for several years, up until the human population crashed to dangerously low levels and officials at the Human Reintroduction Project decided to name their vast collection of male sperm and female eggs 'the Ark'.

After having its name stolen in favor of humanity's vast collection of genetic material, this vast collection of the *Earth's* genetic material was renamed 'Evergreen'.

Over the next few years the Earth Perimeter Defense Network was cobbled together piece by piece, and Evergreen grew up right alongside it. Both of these structures— EPDN and Evergreen— represented the greatest chance for the planet's survival, with one ensuring the slaughter of all invaders, and the other ensuring the protection of Earth's remaining life forms. Without a doubt one of them is the greatest single achievement in all of human history, and the other is the second greatest. To figure out which is which one has to decide what the best kind of defense is: is it the type that ensures survival through life, or the type that ensures survival through death?

Eh, they're both good choices, really...

Evergreen's importance waned considerably after the human Ark was expanded to include the genome of Earth's other species. The Human Reintroduction Project made sure that the overwhelming focus of the Ark was still on human genetic material, but 'Harp' officials eventually opened up the Osiris Wing to include material from plants and

animals; Evergreen's impressive stock of flora and fauna was among the first to be catalogued and preserved in the freezer.

Now it was no longer an important scientific center, but Evergreen soon found new usefulness as a human colony. The great biosphere in the sky matured rapidly thanks to windfall funding from Philip and Marguerite. While the massive vivarium at the center of Evergreen could never hope to support a large number of colonists, the colony was equipped with a series of reinforced spires that wound about the great central bio-dome. The idea was that colonists would live in the spires and play in the jungle. The concept worked, and Evergreen's sign-up list for potential colonists was filled twenty-times over just minutes after being posted to cyberspace.

In addition to serving as a miniature paradise, one of the perks of 'citizenship' at Evergreen was a functional freedom from the Allied Military: the satellite was designated a 'historical artifact' and immune from political micromanagement and military domineering, mostly through the efforts of the two wacky entrepreneurs who founded it. By then Philip Furst and Marguerite Hansha were already looking to other places for their expansion efforts, and they saw the naked shell of the recently-deceased Kuiper Mass as a very tempting prospect...

But that's literally another chapter altogether. There's no need to begin talking about Hansha-Furst's story right now, because at the moment we're talking about something else: the end of Evergreen's story.

Justin banked the *Platonic Love* into a giant cumulonimbus cloud, tailing Samantha Rayne.

"Hey: we're one short, aren't we? Where's the *Chaste Gazer*?"

"The Military Police track Chovert down to a rave club in Ultima True about thirty minutes ago: she's in no condition to fly."

"Really? But she doesn't drink..."

"Nope: zero on the blood-alcohol— and club drugs, too— but she passed out on the dance floor in the middle of a championship for something called 'Para-Para'. She refused medical treatment, but the MPs uploaded her vitals to the doctor and she nixed Chenine for flight: the girl wasn't stable enough to be put under a sensations-link."

"Tch! Who is, really?" Justin snorted. He turned his head to starboard. The dark line of his Korang escort was just visible in the morning twilight: a whole line of red afterburners shimmered on his tail. "Well, that's a pity: I'll bet Chenine would've gotten a kick out of being in command of her very own squadron of Korangers."

"You're not in command of anyone: *lieutenant*." Sam snarled. "Remember: those boys are an autonomous unit, and most of them outrank you. They're only riding your ass out of deference to protocol. After all, it'd be ludicrous for a Raiden pilot to report to a bunch of Korangers, wouldn't it?"

Justin set his teeth on edge: "You'd be surprised, Sam. You really would..." he wagged his head to and fro. "But listen: what the hell happened to Evergreen? Is this another demonstration from those psychos in the Unity group?"

"We've got to assume they have got the technology to do this, but all the chatter I've picked up tonight is pointing to some kind of atmospheric anomaly: it just kinda showed up all of a sudden right inside the spider's web."

"Like a meteor? So Evergreen was brought down from without, and not from within?"

“Yeah, but these are just rumors until proven otherwise, so don’t quote me, alright?”

As they flew on across the sea, chasing the morning’s light, Justin prepared himself for the possibilities ahead: “Evergreen’s a sphere, so we should be looking at about a 25-percent loss of mass on reentry, right? That means some of the crash rooms should’ve survived the ride, right?”

“That’s textbook astrophysics you’re quoting, and things don’t always go by the book, you know.”

“You’re being pessimistic, then?”

“No: realistic. It’s more practical than blind optimism, anyway.”

“And I’ll bet you just kill at parties, don’t you, soldier-girl?”

A playful lilt wafted through Sam’s voice: “I save my killin’ for the battlefield, little ‘Fiver’.”

Justin scowled like a surly ape.

Not that, again...

“Looks like I’m gonna have to save some of my killing for a certain overweight quartermaster back home...”

The rescue fleet caught up with the sun at the same time they caught up with Evergreen. Unfortunately, this was when they stopped operating as a rescue fleet.

The sea was black as a Mass’s Ocean of Nostrum, slick with oils and fuels from the fallen colony. Water blazed with fire in all directions, and flames towered into the sky in an endless row. Impossibly small specks bobbed up and down amid the burning sea at irregular intervals. In total there were perhaps a trillion shards of metal and glass: all the remains of the Evergreen colony.

There was no rescue mission, here. The mission, it seemed, was to be recovery. Morning light streamed through the side panels of Justin’s Raiden. They illuminated one side of his face; the pilot’s emerald eye glistened with a tear. He could only manage a few words:

“Score one for the realists, Samantha.”

III.

He didn’t smoke as a rule, but they say that rules are made to be broken.

And— *God in Hemel*— if this wasn’t a time to break them, what was?

Dr. Alletalen puffed away at the cheap cigarette he’d bummed off one of the grunts sent out to protect him and his colleagues as they sifted through the remnants of the Evergreen colony. The air was cold tonight, and the sky pitch black, morning’s twilight a good hour away. Even the stars were smothered in a blanket of clouds.

Ten days since the fall, and it seems that God is still mourning his children.

The doctor scoffed. Serafino Grafsteen shared Alletalen’s hatred for magical thinking, and yet that cutthroat youth still belted out that iconic phrase of his: ‘may the stars shine upon you, always’. The Bydo Labs doctor found no comfort in such folksy nonsense. He preferred *not* to see the stars in fact: it kept him from thinking about the utter insignificance of man in a universe of infinite wonders.

And infinite horrors...

His mood was sour, and not just because of the situation with Evergreen. Alletalen was coming under increasing suspicion both from the Allied Military hierarchy as well as his fellow conspirators in the Antipathy Committee. Most of his troubles were due to that wild-eyed runner of his: the silver-tongued Joe Montana. That scheming weasel seemed hell-bent on undermining Alletalen's authority at every step. Twice already he'd been 'looked in on' by his coconspirators. Their second visit to him was made by that brutish thug himself, the one called 'Havoc' by their Mutual Acquaintance.

If they were trying to scare him, it wasn't working. Frankly he was less afraid of Havoc's cruel hands than he was by his own obsession: it was keeping him awake at night, invading his dreams and allowing him no peace at all. At the core of this agony was the fact that Alletalen knew he'd never be allowed to follow-up on his hypothesis about the Hybrids, and the *Platonic Love* in particular. The vessels' chain of custody had long since passed him by: he was the *builder*, and not the tinkerer.

But if the Committee only knew the ways he wished to 'tinker' with those ships...
Just what type of chicks did we hatch from those eggs?

He had to know. For more than one reason, he just needed to know.

The net beneath the research watercraft's bow bobbed up and down: a mess of rusted metal jostled about in the muck below. These scraps were yet more pieces of Evergreen picked up by their yacht during the day. That pile would be on his plate tomorrow, even though Alletalen was already backlogged with debris from yesterday.

"I suppose if I let things pile-up too high then I'll be out here until doomsday itself."

The scientist tottered below deck, shivering despite his thick white lab-coat and knitted beret. He shuffled down a wood-paneled hallway, weaved between two lab security guards with a polite nod to each and came to an ornate doorway engraved with woodcarvings and decorated with an ornate placard:

'Dr. B. Alletalen (*M.D./PhD/P Eng./Prof/Doc of Exper B-T/Etc...*): Senior Administrator of Research, Bydo Labs.'

He stepped into a warm parlor. It was quite spacious given the small size of the rest of the ship. Two mahogany tables sat in the middle of the room; one bore a pile of miscellaneous debris, and the other various strange devices, most of which required more than five years of schooling to understand, and over a decade to operate. A buttoned leather armchair graced the far side of the parlor, sitting in front of a marble fireplace.

Such a thing was, of course, an extraordinarily odd thing to find on a research vessel, but it was a must-have for Alletalen, and when a man of his credentials and professional acumen demands the eccentric— or even extravagant— the Labs are usually quite eager to give in. They weren't hurting for money, after all.

The fireplace was the only source of light in this dark parlor, and it cast bleak shadows everywhere. They fell on the wrinkles in Alletalen's face as he sat down at his desk: he was weary, and his sparkling grey eyes reeked of fatigue, but he would keep going.

If only to keep ahead of my peg-brained colleagues. Perhaps I'll be the first one at the pile tomorrow morning. In the final analysis this was very bleak work, and he hated it.

He was so distractible tonight that his eyes began to wander after only a few minutes. They fell upon an antique Bunsen burner on the table across from him. It was

more an aesthetic relic than a practical tool. His heart skipped a beat when he checked it: he'd left something *very* important dangling from the hook at the burner's top, but now it was gone.

The thing he'd left dangling there was not something he was keen on losing, and he was even *less* keen on someone else finding it.

The scientist jumped up from his chair: he fidgeted with his lab-coat, checking each pocket in turn. Then he rushed to the table and scattered its contents in a vain attempt at turning up the item, but there was nothing. Alletalen bowed his head over the dark wood of the desk.

That was when he felt a pair of eyes upon him.

"Mmmmmmm..."

The man stumbled to his feet and looked behind him: his plush leather armchair sat before the fire, casting a long shadow like the eerie pall of an upright coffin. A slender, bare wrist peeked out from the left side of the chair: the arm attached to it was also bare, and whiter than the waxed skin of a corpse. A silver bracelet dangled between blood-red fingernails; the hand jangled it back and forth. A giggle permeated the air around him. It was an unsettling giggle, very soft, and yet omni-directional, as if the giggler's disembodied voice were reaching him from all corners of the room.

His shock subsided:

"*Wat de duivel?* Who are you? What are you doing in here? The audacity!"

A head appeared from behind the chair. It was female: a young girl with nettled, eggshell-colored hair and a set of wide, almost obscene lips. Her eyes simmered with fire: it seemed that her shoddy blue irises ebbed like balls of dark water. A flare of yellow light roiled in the center of her orbs, where the young ladies' pupils should be.

Ik denk niet zo: *surely that's an illusion from the fire, yes? My eyes are worthless at this ungodly hour...*

Alletalen rounded the chair in a cautious semi-circle: each step revealed a little more of this mysterious interloper. The girl, meanwhile, watched all this with bemused interest. She leaned back in the armchair and craned her neck to one side:

"Tell me: do you believe in God, Bunic Alletalen?"

"I believe in knocking at a stranger's door, child, and not just letting oneself in!" He suddenly stopped walking when he realized that this woman was completely naked. For her part, the girl seemed pleased that he noticed this; proud, even. She rolled off the armrests and stood before him, hands to her hips.

Alletalen's shock returned, not so much at the sight of the nude girl before him, but at her face:

"Is it... is it you? How can this be? You are Lieutenant Chenine Chovert!" He stepped backwards and pointed with a limp hand. "The Prototype Test Subject!? Impossible!" He retreated, spreading his hands before his face like a saltwater crab backing away from an eel.

The girl flashed him a not-so-nice smile as she followed him across the room. As they left the fireplace's influence Alletalen noticed that the 'liquid' quality of the girl's eyes did not diminish, and the yellow dots where her pupils should be blazed even brighter.

"You—you cannot be her. You are not... but who are you?" He fumbled for words.

The entity stopped. It looked to the right, toward the big glass windows lining the wall of the parlor. ‘She’ stepped across the room, soundless on bare feet, and approached the corner: a cane rested there. It was a cherry wood staff, polished to a sheen, bearing a jet-black egg at the top. However, that orb soon began to sparkle, and it grew in color with each step the ‘Chenine-demon’ took towards it. Alletalen gaped in horror as the orb brightened, and brightened, and brightened, until he could no longer even see it clearly.

Once the sinister girl got within five feet of the cane it quivered. The entity stretched one hand towards the ball, and that was all it took: the thing exploded. Pieces of the orb rained down all around the parlor, and darkness once again swamped the room. Alletalen’s blind eyes strained to re-adjust to this darkness, and when they did he was staring right into the demon-girl’s face, and she was mere inches from his nose.

“There was darkness, and no one could see anything around them.” She smiled, and ran a coquettish finger across the desk. “But the people in darkness have seen a great light, right?” The entity sauntered back to the plush leather armchair.

“What are you?” He demanded.

The ‘girl’ splayed herself across one of the armrests and pouted at him, bearing a look of infinite fatigue like a field hand who’d just completed a grueling day’s work:

“Oh, don’t ask me to answer that question. I say no one should be forced to answer that question. Can you imagine: trying to qualify your own existence? I could just as well ask you what *you* are, and I doubt your answer would be very coherent.” She laughed at him with her eyes. “Or even truthful, for that matter...”

The scientist stepped backwards slowly, his fingers brushed against the desk drawer containing his handgun.

“The question you want to ask, doctor Alletalen, is ‘*who* am I?’ I can answer that question, at least.”

“Very well then: who are you?”

“My name is Antithesis.” She hissed with a snakelike tongue. The demon held up a leather-bound book, pilfered from Alletalen’s bookcase. “And you didn’t answer my question: do you believe in God, doctor-o-mine?”

“No. I believe in rational thought.”

“Providence?”

“Again: no.”

“That’s interesting.” The Chenine-demon opened her tome to a dog-eared page and ran a bony finger across it: “‘Before You— humbled— Lord, I lie: my heart like ashes: crushed and dry...’” she leered up at him: “‘Assist me when I die.’ Oooooooh! Isn’t that just *wonderful*, doctor?”

A silence followed. Alletalen eventually broke it:

“You are Bydo. You must be.”

“You say I am.”

“How are you like this? And what are you doing here?”

The demon rose up once again, turned and sauntered away a few paces: “You’re the leader of the thing called ‘Bydo Labs’.”

“I am not.”

“Well, at least you’re the highest-ranking official within my reach. And I— as you declare— must be a Bydo. Given all that, I came here tonight to kill you, Doctor Alletalen.”

“How interesting.” The man slid his fingers into the desk drawer and felt for the cold, reassuring grip of his pistol.

The entity faced him again, but this time with a different face: it appeared as a man of about 40, bearing graying black hair suspended behind his head in an invisible ponytail. His teeth—albeit yellow—were well-formed and otherwise perfect. He grinned; unsightly dimples marred his tough leather face. The subtle lines of his jawbone were visible from just beneath his marble eyes and ran all the way down either side of his face—like a tattoo of crocodile’s tears—until they reached his fleshy lips. The creature stepped back out of the shadows, and now it was no longer naked: it wore a simple royal purple tunic and black slacks.

Antithesis pointed at the desk drawer bearing the scientist’s weapon. “I think that’s a rather crude method of assault, don’t you?” It spoke with a gruff yet strangely appealing voice: like smooth velvet ground down with a belt sander. “That weapon isn’t designed to deal with something like me: I doubt that it would do more to me than a bee’s sting would do to you.”

Alletalen yanked the handgun out of the drawer and leveled it at the demon:

“Did you know that some people happen to be allergic to bee stings? Anyway: I’m a man of science, and I like nothing better than to test hypotheses, Mister ‘Antithesis’!”

Antithesis smiled and circled back around the scientist. “Do you know why I asked you about ‘providence’ earlier? I asked you because— even though you don’t believe in it— it has landed on you. You see, my friend: I’m not going to kill you, not now that I know we have so much in common.”

“What are you talking about?”

The demon pointed to the scientist’s console with his chin. He held up Alletalen’s silver bracelet and jangled it between yellow fingernails.

“I’m not very skilled at manipulating your ‘computers’. Tch! Oh, give me a jet fighter’s cockpit and I could probably run it by rote, but not the kind of setup you have here. No siree! I was, however, smart enough to find all those files you’d hidden under that ridiculous heart icon on your desktop. And then, of course, there are these...” The creature gripped Alletalen’s book by the spine. Three hidden folders slipped out from between the pages and landed on the floor. Each portfolio bore the name of one of the members of the *Tears’ Shower Squadron*.

“What interest could you have in them?”

Antithesis shook his head: “I have no interest in them whatsoever.”

“So—”

“It’s *you* who should be interested— at least I think you will be— when I tell you that I’ve run into two of your little ‘imps’ recently. I’m talking about your creations, doctor, and not the scrawny humans that lead them around on leashes.”

Alletalen lowered his gun.

Antithesis wandered over to the man’s desk. “What an odd thing! It really is: you build a ravenous plague from the ground up— sparing no expense— and prepare to unleash the greatest biological weapon the universe has ever seen— short of the Bydo genome, of course. But when it comes to the subject of a delivery system you skimp on the details: those piles of flesh inside your Raidens are nothing but half-breed trash.” He

sneered at the man: “They’re a contemptible lot.” The sneer turned into a taunting smile: “And they have *such* poor manners, too...”

The scientist’s eyes widened: “*Echt?* You’ve seen them? You actually *interacted* with them?”

“They left an impression on me.”

Alletalen sank into a chair and stared at the floor. Antithesis picked up a framed picture on the desk: it was a photo of a child smiling happily at the camera. The creature brushed his brittle nails along the child’s face.

“How remarkable...” He cooed.

The scientist looked up: “What? And put that down!”

“I was only thinking about how similar his cheekbones are. The eyes are all wrong of course, and the hair, too: but the rest of his face is quite similar, indeed...”

“Similar to what?”

The demon met Alletalen’s gaze with a sidelong glance: “Similar to that little mongrel bastard living inside the shell you call *Platonic Love*.”

“What? Are you saying it appeared to you? And physically, too?”

Antithesis shrugged: “Of course not: the little imp isn’t human, after all. But the tyke seems to *behave* as if it is: it wants its ‘pilot’ to treat it as it were a little boy, in fact, but that’s really just a juvenile trick of the mind.”

“An illusion?”

He smiled: “Your brains are such simple things: underpowered, inflexible and so eager to accept whatever ‘reality’ is presented to them. They’re always clamoring for a stimulus, *any* kind of stimulus. It’s the simplest thing in the world to override your perception of reality. Hijacking a human mind is easier than burning calories; even an immature creature like that half-breed runt and his cohorts can do it!”

The scientist raised his pistol once more, but this time with less resolve:

“I’m going to ask my first question again, and I suggest that you answer it: *what* are you? What’s your nature? The Bydo are a collective consciousness: they operate on a different level of communication from human thought—”

“Yes, that’s true: we are quite superior.”

“How did you get this way? What happened to you? Was it your interaction with the Raiden-Hybrids? What kind of incarnation were you originally? And... and do you speak for the Great Communion?”

Antithesis rolled his head and scoffed: “Tch! The ‘Great Communion’— as you call it— speaks with one voice, and it says one word: ‘death’. No, I don’t speak for the others. I don’t need to.”

“You’re here of your own accord? You’re acting to fulfill your own desires, then.” Alletalen scratched his chin: “Remarkable! You’re not like the others at all: you have the capacity for autonomy: for selfishness—”

“No.” The demon cut him off: “‘Selfishness’ is pumping your dead grandchild’s DNA into a foolish experiment like those ugly abominations!”

The man’s upper lip quivered: “We needed a human template for Antipathy to work. We needed to infuse our samples with a human genome or else we’d have *no* control over the creatures’ genetic recombination.”

Antithesis shook his head. “Why do humans babble so when they’re caught in a lie? You could have used *any* human template, couldn’t you? But you chose your

offspring, didn't you? Tch! And you people have the gall to say that we 'Bydo' are the ones who are obsessed with procreation!" He smiled and wagged one finger. "Naughty, naughty, naughty."

"It was my *offspring's* offspring. The DNA I chose didn't matter: if you actually hacked my console then you know the flesh inside the Raidens has a short shelf-life: I designed them to be as weak and disorganized as possible."

"To use and— once spent— to discard like a condom wrapper. What an eeeeeevil scheme!" Antithesis cooed seductively and sank back down in the armchair. He tugged at his purple shirt. "But the road to heaven is paved with bad intentions, isn't it? That reprehensible act of yours could end up getting you closer to your 'dearly departed', because that's when you learned about Loverboy's little hallucination, right?"

"Loverboy?" Alletalen rubbed his temples. "You mean Justin Storm, don't you? Yes: there was that..."

The demon leaned over and cupped the scientist's chin. He gently tilted the man's face up until they were at eye-level.

"That gave you hope, didn't it? Perhaps those little imps became more than you anticipated, and as much as you secretly *hoped* they'd become? Well: do you think it's possible? Could it be that the *Platonic Love* bears the reincarnation of your 'little boy lost'?"

Alletalen leapt up and shied away from Antithesis' touch: "The Raiden Hybrids are no magical gateway at all! They're not built to 'reincarnate' anything, nor can they!"

"My apologies: I'm still having a little trouble with your language. Let's see: what's the right word then? How about 'reinvention'? That works: the *reinvention* of your grandchild is locked inside a metal sarcophagus, and that just burns you up, doesn't it?" Antithesis laughed again. "You're a negligent father, Alletalen: their education is being sorely neglected. Victor Frankenstein's monster learned everything he needed to know about humanity from just a few books, but meanwhile your little half-breeds have had total access to a *library* of information inside their chaperones' heads, and they're still a gaggle of weaklings!"

"Compared to what, eh? Just who are you that you can despise them so?"

"I'm not particularly categorizable..." Antithesis wandered to the parlor's far wall. "Just call me a wayward soul arriving late to the party. And it's a party that— I'm afraid to say— I 'crashed'." He smirked, then pointed at the debris on Alletalen's desk. "It's a pity, really. Ah, naughty, naughty, naughty me!"

"What? It was you who brought Evergreen down?"

"Yes, but it was unintentional." The demon shut his eyes and inhaled deeply. "Oh, I'm just a child of trillions, cast out from my father's house. I lost my way for a good while, too— maybe a thousand of your 'years', but that's a rough estimate. During my little sojourn I spent a whole lot of time going insane." He grinned: "But once I managed to find my way back to your neighborhood, I've spent that time getting myself sane again." He absently scratched his chest along the solar plexus. The fabric of his tunic stretched as his fingers ran across it, and Alletalen noticed a blemish along the creature's sternum: it appeared to be an upright cross pattern.

"A thousand years?"

"I'll admit, that's an estimate. It's based on a little poetry from me, and a *lot* of rounding. Let's just say that that the dimensional clocks don't run in synch with one

another. Ever since I've found my way back again things have been a little... well, rough: the Solar System's such a big place, after all, and I couldn't even tell my ass from an asteroid. I was weakening— less than a shadow of my former self— and burning my energy at a good clip. There was some nourishment to be had out in the cold of space, but precious little of it. I was afraid I was doomed to die..."

"And what changed that?"

Antithesis wandered over to a stately oak armoire beside the man's bookshelf. "I'm glad you asked that question. You see, I had no idea what to do or where to go, but then one day things took an interesting turn. I was sitting on the peak of a lonely mountain, looking out at an endless plain of rust-colored rocks and feasting on the long-dead remains of a colony of 'momeraths'— as you call them— when something very interesting happened: my 'ears' pricked up for the first time in a long while."

"What do you mean by that?"

"A kaleidoscope of color and sound washed over my body. It was delightful! I'd nearly given up hope of ever feeling that sensation again; it was like a river of honey caressing my limbs, and I immediately bolted out into the void to follow that river to its source. The closer I got, the surer I was that the 'Infected Rock' itself was the source, and so it was." The demon inched open the armoire door. "By then I was half-dead with hunger, and quite crazed, so I'll admit that my entrance wasn't very elegant. I suppose that might've been the end of my story, if not for the new friends I found soon after I nosedived into your planet's lovely soil..."

Antithesis pushed open the door and there, standing inside the oak cabinet, was a man with sandy blond hair, cold grey eyes, coffee-stained teeth and fingernails worn to nubs. The young man parted his teeth into a demonic grin to match Antithesis's.

"You?" Alletalen started. "I recognize you from my military reports: you are Kenneth McCaul!"

"More importantly, Bunic Alletalen, I'm a friend of this magnificent creature standing before you, and you can be his friend, too."

Antithesis inspected his own yellow nails. "Mister McCaul's very innovative signal drove me to this planet— and into the arms of his lovely little organization— like a moth to a flame. He provided me with assistance."

"He's very like a god, isn't he?" Kenneth motioned to Antithesis. "The pinnacle of evolution!"

"Or a very corrupt bastardization of it." Alletalen retorted.

"Mister Alletalen—"

Doctor."

"I know that, as a species, we're all riding towards some kind of a terrible, terrible fall, and that the Bydo are a great blessing for us! Our organization is all about exposing the truth about the Bydo Empire to the world. Those truths are embodied in individuals like him, as well as the children locked inside those ships that he's told me about—"

"Save your dramatic speeches, traitor. And they are *not* children."

"At their best they are a link: they can help bridge the chasm between humanity and the Great Communion. You should listen to our offer: Unity only wants to be your friend, and this wonderful creature wants to be your friend, too! Together we can build a tower of understanding: a tower to rise over heaven itself! Together, we can even challenge the reign of—"

Alletalen cut the scraggily young man off: “Why in God’s name would I want to befriend this monster before me?” The scientist raised his handgun: “Or you, for that matter?”

He pulled the trigger.

Kenneth McCaul’s care-worn face exploded in a shower of black blood. The body crumpled in a messy heap at the foot of the armoire. The scientist then leveled his weapon at Antithesis and shot him three times. Each shot sent the demon’s body lumbering backwards, and he eventually came to rest against the dark bookshelf.

All three shots landed true on Antithesis’s torso, and by the time Alletalen finished shooting the demon’s chest was exposed—naked—with the purple tunic inexplicably gone. The color of the monster’s torso wasn’t quite right: it was tanned white, but imbued with a venomous green tint, much like Clorox bleach. His right nipple was scorched—disfigured beyond the point of recognition—and a more widespread but less severe burn marred the area around his left nipple. But these blemishes were preexisting, and not the result of Alletalen’s slugs.

Of the bullets there was no trace, and absolutely no sign of damage to the demon’s mottled skin.

Antithesis smiled widely. His throat undulated in unnatural, impossible gyrations, as if he were a mother bird regurgitating a meal for his chicks. The demon parted his lips and revealed three disfigured slugs. They sat on his tongue in an orderly pile. He spat out the metal shards and wiped his chin.

“What a delightful toy.” He tittered.

“*Mijn God...*” Alletalen marveled. The gun trembled in his hands. He made as if he’d try again, but soon lowered the weapon. “You are *ongelooflijk...*”

“That word sounds nice, Doctor.” Antithesis scratched his chin. He sauntered back out of the shadows and towards the armoire. The tunic had inexplicably returned. “That’s a *great* sounding noise, as far as human vocalizations go: the perfect balance of menace and beauty in it. Too bad I’ve already chosen a name for myself...” He shrugged ruefully, and then looked down at the crumpled heap that was Kenneth Allie McCaul. “Oh: now look at that!”

Alletalen did, and to his shock he did not see the corpse of a scraggily-haired young man: all that remained was a slimy film. The goo was predominantly black with a sickly green tinge around the edges.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk...” The demon shook his head. “And I worked *so* hard on that broadcast. Naughty, naughty, naughty Alletalen...” He rested the tip of one black dress shoe against the puddle, and ever so slowly the syrup disappeared, as if Antithesis’s shoe were a sponge, and yet both the demon’s shoe and pant leg remained dry during the entire process.

Alletalen blinked in disbelief. “That *wasn’t* Mister McCaul?”

“No, of course not. But then again, yes it was.” The demon licked his lips as the puddle disappeared into his body. For one instant his facial features devolved into that twisted female imitation: lustful hunger burned through its eyes, and it was thoroughly inhuman. “You sophomoric apes call it an ‘Active-System Scan’, as if that’s even *close* to a good descriptor. To you it’s just another method of ‘data transfer’...” He stuck his hand in front of the scientist and, ever so slowly, the lines of his palm rearranged themselves to mimic McCaul’s own sneering face. The disembodied face bore a look of

disgust: he looked like a guest arriving at a party only to have the door slammed in his face. “I guess you didn’t know that in the hands of an individual like me it’s strong enough to broadcast conscious thought, too. That’s if you can even call your species’ hardwiring ‘conscious thought’ at all...”

For an instant Alletalen’s face bore a look that is seldom observed in a hardened man of science: that of absolute awe. He bit his tongue, though, and persisted with his defiance: “Do you insult your friend, then, *Mijnheer Antithese*?”

“I hold him in as high esteem as is possible with a human.” The demon laughed. “And no, that’s not saying much at all! But I do owe him much: if not for his curious little group’s signal-broadcast I would never have found the Infected Rock. I was dying out there in the cold of space.” He paced around the scientist ruefully: “Truth be told: I’m still dying.”

“What do you mean?”

Scampering paws sounded from the far side of the parlor. A brightly-colored golden retriever barged into the room. It entered through a pet-door built into the side of Alletalen’s sleeping berth.

“Diamond!” The scientist snapped at the canine as it scampered between the men. Antithesis regarded the pooch with giddy interest. Alletalen cringed in surprise as he saw the demon’s ‘new’ face: that of Flight Lieutenant Justin Storm. The thin, horse-drawn cheekbones and the spiky black hair on his head combined to form a dead-ringer for Storm’s callow face, although the monster’s vulgar green eyes still held all the attractiveness of cracked marbles.

“Woo-ho-ho! And who do we have here?” Antithesis knelt down and scratched Diamond’s fluffy mane. He took hold of the animal by its back, pulled it close to him and embraced the pooch, holding its head on his own bony shoulder. The ‘Justin-demon’ smiled contentedly, but that smile soon devolved into a toothy, venomous leer. At the same time the dog squirmed beneath his grasp. It started to growl.

The demon looked up at Alletalen: “That’s what I like about animals: they can sense things so much easier than you can.” He held the struggling dog even tighter. “Things like sights, sounds, smells. Why, even mortal danger...”

His arms sank down in one powerful twist: a sickening snap broke the silence of the parlor, and then the dog’s body slumped to the floor, its spine twisted back about itself. The dog’s nose was buried against the back of its own neck.

“Diamond! Oh, Diamond!” The man fell into his chair, limp with horror.

The Justin-demon stood up and ran a hand over his hairless chin. He stroked his current façade with a curious mixture of both pleasure and contempt.

“Mmmm. It’s funny: he has the face of a choirboy, doesn’t he?”

Alletalen merely sobbed into his hands. With no response to his observation, the demon continued:

“Loverboy, I mean. Nature must have a sense of humor, to use such an angelic face to hide such a *very* dark heart.” The monster looked down at the dead dog. He tilted his head: it was a jerky and awkward motion, as if his own neck were broken. “It’s very interesting to consider: when I think of all the innocent little lambs he could bring to slaughter, well... oooooh!” The demon’s body shivered with ecstasy: his hand nearly went below his navel, but he restrained himself.

Antithesis looked back at Dr. Alletalen with that leathery, older man's face. His black eyes were stern, and he pointed down at Diamond's corpse:

"That was for interrupting my broadcast: you probably took a month off my life with that stupid little stunt."

The scientist managed to speak after a long pause: "Why are you dying?"

"Ah, now you're interested in seeing my corpse, huh? Well, mister trigger-finger: I'm not going to tell you, not until we've come to an understanding and agreed to— what's that expression my friend McCaul used?— 'wash each other's backs', right?" Antithesis wandered in front of the fire.

"A *quid-pro-quo*?"

The entity turned around, bearing a naked female body once again. The creature stroked the side of its diseased flesh where its right nipple used to be. "Or a tit-for-tat, if you like!" She tittered gleefully. "And don't deny it: you're *gagging* for what I have to offer you."

"Namely what?"

"Raiden-Hybrid AGP. I'm offering you the *Platonic Love*, Alletalen. I can give you that which is currently impossible for you to possess. What would your friends in the 'Antipathy Committee' do if you made a move to seize that ship? Ah, but I'm so much more resourceful." The 'girl' leaned against the armchair. "I guarantee that they've never seen anything like me before."

The man's head lulled backwards: Alletalen felt like he was caught in some dark and cloying fog. He shook the cobwebs from his mind and worked through the entity's offer.

"You're saying you can guarantee—"

"I guarantee *nothing*: I'm saying that I'll deliver a shiny tomb to your doorstep. If you're able to pull anything worthwhile out of that pretty little coffin then so be it, and if you can't, then you can't. I'm not saying you can, and I'm not saying you can't."

The man shook his head: "Why should I agree to such an offer? It's insanity to pursue the R-H's like this! I'd be betraying the foundations of the Project itself, and for what? You offer me no guarantees: for all you've told me the flesh inside that Raiden is nothing more than a mockingbird mimicking the songs of its pilot! What an offer! You offer me *nothing*, Antithesis."

"You're wrong." She smiled. The demon tilted her head to level. "I bear great tidings, doctor-mine!" The girl-demon reached over to Alletalen's desk and plucked up his cigar box.

"Just what great favor do you think you're brining me, then?"

"Hope." She offered the man a Caribe from the cigar box, but he refused it. "And hope is a powerful aphrodisiac, isn't it?"

Alletalen stared at the floor for the longest time. He only spoke when the entity got to its feet and stood before him.

"What would you want in return? I cannot extend your life, if you really are dying: your physiology is far beyond my capabilities to understand, let alone treat."

"I'd sooner let a retarded ferret operate on me than a human, even one with your 'expertise'."

"Then are you looking for me to help Unity? I refuse to aid that sorry lot!"

“No, not directly. See, they rather like me— if you haven’t already guessed— and so a good deed done in my name is somewhat credited to them: all McCaul wants from you is to help me, and then *everybody* wins!”

“In return—”

“I help *you*, Alletalen. But now we’re just going in circles, aren’t we?” Antithesis sat on the desk and crossed his legs.

The scientist swallowed nervously. “Hypothetically, *Mijnheer Antithese*: what would this ‘deed’ entail?”

“You people at Bydo Labs: you buried something very wondrous— and *very* nasty— down in the depths of a place called ‘Lake Victoria’, didn’t you?” The demon’s teeth roiled with saliva; it gummed up the gaps in his teeth like saltwater taffy. “My little friends at Unity tell me that this was the very first branch of Bydo Labs, correct? You knew *nothing* about the things you were meddling with, and so you suffered the consequences.”

“That was not us: it was another generation of scientists—”

“But you left that wondrous thing down there: deep in the darkness below. It’s your nasty little secret, and it’s been dormant ever since.”

“You— you can’t expect me to reawaken it?”

“How else can I get to it?” Antithesis’s dead eyes roiled with yellow fire. “That’s the price, Bunic Alletalen. *That’s* the tit-for-tat, and I’m going to have to ask for cash up front...”

“Impossible!” The man leapt up from his chair.

“Difficult, perhaps. But if you don’t wanna play with me, Bunic, then I guess you can keep playing ‘war’ with your little friends in the ‘Committee’. I thought you might be looking for more than that, but maybe I misjudged you.” The monster waved his hand dismissively and turned to face the fireplace. “Shame about your little tot, though...”

“Impossible... to do right away...” Alletalen chewed on his lip until he could feel the salt of his blood. “It would take time.”

“That I don’t have.” Antithesis shook his head.

“There are alternatives to what you ask for! At least in the short run.”

“Short run?”

“If you’re after the thing we buried at Lake Victoria, then that means you’re looking for raw flesh—”

“Not just ‘flesh’...”

“I understand what you want, but could *ordinary* flesh tide you over?”

The demon paused, contemplating this negotiation. “Tide... me over? Perhaps.”

Alletalen discussed a temporary compromise with the entity: he could point Antithesis in the direction of a place that was wondrous in its own right, and laden with the material he needed.

It was a place called the Midnight Forest, situated upon an asteroid called Ceres, and Alletalen was willing to provide Antithesis with the asteroid’s orbital coordinates.

“Ooooh! Good faith, good faith!” The demon clapped with joy. It was such an unsettling display to see that leather-faced monster hop about like a giddy child. “I just *loooooove* good faith arrangements!” He spun on his heels and made for the door.

“Where are you going?” Alletalen followed the creature out.

“I’ll leave you to clean up little Diamond’s remains there: you should enjoy that.” When he turned to face the man he bore yet another face: it was one that Alletalen did not recognize.

“How will you leave?”

“The same way I came in.” He shrugged, and a lab security uniform slowly bubbled-up over his skin. He caressed his stubbled face. “Do you like it? My ‘inspiration’ for this look is floating in the water around that ‘Mount Olivier’ place our ship departed from.” Antithesis ran two fingers along his sternum, tracing a line around his solar plexus and openly toying with his diseased nipples. “That was the first human life I’ve ever taken, and it was *most* satisfying. Kinda like roasting an ant on a sidewalk.” He salivated with ecstatic pleasure.

Alletalen held back a surge of vomit in his throat. “Ants on a sidewalk? So you’ve done such a thing, have you? I find that most unlikely.”

“You could say I’ve have second-hand experience, dear doctor-mine.”

The entity got to the parlor door before Alletalen confronted him once again:

“Wait one moment: *if* I’m actually going to be complicit in your scheme then I deserve information.”

“You don’t, but you can have some, if you like.”

“You were born from the Great Communion, weren’t you? But then, you’ve obviously changed. I can see that you have your own identity as an individual, though I’m not sure how far it goes. You’ve aligned yourself with humans, and even though they’re humans that hate their own species, ‘human-Bydo’ cooperation is an oxymoron...”

“What’s your question, Alley-tin?”

“Who’s side are you on, Antithesis?”

He smiled, quite devilishly, and then spat on the floor with the practiced swagger of a labs security guard:

“That’s easy enough to answer: I’m on my own side, naturally.”

The creature disappeared out the door. Alletalen followed the phantom out, but the ship’s corridor was empty in all directions.

He couldn’t even begin to process the evening’s turn of events. The old scientist spent the rest of the night in a daze, wrapping up Diamond’s body in a plastic bag, all the while dreaming about the wonders waiting for him when he could finally *unwrap* the metal containers that were the Raiden-Hybrids: to shuck them like eggs.

And to pull out whatever little chicks lurked within.

