



### Dirt Beneath the Nails

Fifteen floors down, below the docking ring, below the cardinal struts of the base, beneath the frothy purple foam of the ocean, there was a door. The door was at the end of a hallway, accessible from an unassuming, dilapidated elevator. The hallway was empty. There were no noises except the ominous squeak of the metal passageway as it gently swayed in rhythm with the churning sea outside.

There was a label on the door. It bore a laser-etched design of a large heart symbol. The words 'Raiden-Hybrid Development Center' were embossed in the center. A drop of red liquid rested at the bottom of the heart; it was in the shape of a classic teardrop. In the design, wavy lines rose up from the ruddy crimson droplet.

Beneath the design there were three horizontal lines; they stood like blank spaces in a grisly game of hangman.

Scott Tabris was on the other side of that door. The young tech was wearing a pair of welder's goggles over his face. He wielded a high-power laser-drill as he stood on the top of the *Chaste Gazer*.

The damaged bird lay on the messy, rusted floor, its battered wings clamped down on either side with gigantic metal vices. The second skin of the ship, its auxiliary armor, barely clung to the battered Raiden. The gaping hole in its right wing was severe: a bubble of metal peeked out from the hole in the Raiden, congealed like clotted blood. A solid train of metal hung from the wound like an iron icicle.

With his teeth set together, Tabris fired a steady stream of blue power along the gaping hole in the *Gazer's* wing. After a good fifteen minutes of cutting he managed to slice through the metal stalactite. It fell to the floor with a resounding crash.

Sam Roont prowled over the top of the ship. "Good." He declared. "Now check all the other torn layers: cut away any other overgrown sections." The good doctor scratched his chin as he surveyed the *Gazer's* carcass; other veins of metal protruded from the ship all along its battered frame. He kicked up one flap of torn armor: beneath it

rested another streak of hafnium carbide metal. It looked like a bizarre sculpture: it resembled a giant frozen muscle. “What a busy little bee we’ve been...” he quietly mused. Then he yelled down to Tabris: “Don’t worry about any contamination: from what I can tell the ship’s is in absolute AW; it’s inert.” Roont smirked: the thing had returned to whence it came.

*‘Metal to metal, carbide, to carbide’: I like the sound of that...*

“This level of transubstantiation is absolutely unprecedented.” He proudly stated.

Tabris nodded, wiping his brow. “She couldn’t have survived the battle half as long as she did without this much impingement: all the damage to the airframe is terrible: I bet it’ll take over a week to make her air-worthy again.”

“Yes.” Roont dismissively nodded. “Little Miss CRTS really put her Raiden through the wringer.” He eyed the giant metal stalactite Tabris dislodged. “There’s much more alteration here than we’ve ever seen before.”

“I guess it wasn’t enough, though, right? Chenine was nearly killed in that crash.”

“She couldn’t keep her devotion up.” Roont shrugged. “Or she didn’t want to.”

Scott nodded quietly. He set the laser-drilled down and pulled his goggles off. His brown eyes were troubled. “But, then, she doesn’t really understand what she needs to do, does she?”

The good doctor eyed his assistant darkly. He pushed his glasses back up his nose and slid down the wing of the Raiden, his white lab coat flapping behind him as he descended. “The only thing she *needs* to do is survive.” He snapped. “All the rest is taken care of.” He moved closer to Tabris. “We’ve been over this, Scott, and you told me you understood things clearly. Has any of that changed?” He said these last three words with dark intonation.

Tabris shook his head adamantly. “No, doctor, of course not...” he declared.

“Good. Now see to the rest of the pruning. You can call up maintenance to collect the extra haf-car metal: we can use it to make more shells.” The young tech nodded emphatically and tromped to the other side of the Raiden, torch in hand.

But how emphatic was he, really? Roont questioned his assistant’s devotion. Tabris’ first loyalty, he knew, was to his own heart, just like any other young, deluded fool. He’d taken quite a fancy to Little Miss CRTS, and why not: the girl was built! But keeping secrets from his darling ladylove was a difficult task.

And what about keeping something like Antipathy from her, if he knew about it? That would be impossible.

Tabris was a rube; he was certainly nothing like the good doctor: a clinical, heroic, impartial man of science and reason. The Project was a lofty burden for the likes of himself and the subcommander, but lesser minds couldn’t possibly understand its brilliance.

Roont swung around the side of the *Gazer* and slipped into the cockpit. He plugged in an external power source and absently studied the flight data. The computer provided him with information about Chenine’s last flight, but the information was incomplete.

“Call-up computer,” Roont ordered, “Give me the Bydo Coefficient Test Numbers for the last flight.”

The monitor blinked with a dark yellow light and three horizontal lines pulsed on the screen. The computer was waiting for something before it processed the request.

“T.I.A.” The doctor absently said.

The three lines blinked in synch with each other and all the remaining ship’s data came to him.

“Excellent...” he said with a sadistic grin as he read the statistics. Roont swirled around in the pilot’s seat and, with one fell motion, kicked the busted chair to one side, sending it out of the cockpit with a snap.

He fumbled around the back of the cockpit with his gloved hands, feeling a myriad of plastic cords and cables. Finally he dug beneath them all and struck his hand against a metallic surface. Brushing all the cords away, Roont was left with one last cord, only *now* it wasn’t really a cord: it was solid metal and it gleamed brilliantly. On the tip of that curious cord was something liquid: it was dark red and crusty.

It was human blood.

Roont immediately went for his earpiece and dialed in a number.

“Yes?” Sven Wraith’s voice was emotionless.

“Chenine Chovert has successfully completed her mission: the exercise was a success.”

“Understood.” Wraith said, simply. Then the line went dead.

*Please, don’t get too excited, you icy son-of-a-bitch...*

Roont wasn’t the kind of person that got all giddy from every little piece of good news that made it to him, but at least he could still *feel* a little joy every now and then. To him, the nebulous subcommander was little more than a walking, talking bottle of lithium.

A loud buzzer sounded overhead: the freight elevator was descending.

“Put that tarp over CRTS.” Roont sternly ordered Tabris. The doctor absently chewed on a cigarette as dockworkers came down on the elevator with R-H-AGP in tow. The Raiden was completely covered in its own thick tarp, and Roont sternly ordered all the workers back up the elevator as soon as the *Platonic Love* was offloaded.

Once he and Tabris were alone Roont ripped back the plastic sheet.

“Good God above us.” He muttered.

Tabris heard Roont’s startled voice; it didn’t do much for his nerves. Roont was the stone-faced authority on the Hybrids, and whenever something scared the doctor this bad Scott’s first thought was to wet his pants and run like hell.

He controlled this instinctual cowardice and clambered atop the *Chaste Gazer*.

The good doctor was standing before the *Platonic Love*. Or at least, a vessel that *used* to be the *Platonic Love*. When the Raiden departed from the base it had been an awkward silver sphere.

But it was now a twisted arrow.

The hull of R-H-AGP had been utterly and completely destroyed, ripped apart by some vast internal force. The ship’s new shape was long and crude-looking, but sleek. It looked to Scott like the tip of a javelin. And this new hull, which had rent the old one apart as easily as someone husks corn, had all the appearance of hafnium-carbide.

“What the hell is this? What kind of incarnation could damage the Raiden like this?” Tabris asked, mystified.

Roont ran his hand along the gnarled, arrow-like hull. “This isn’t hull damage, you idiot.” He growled, his eyes intent. “This is a total conformational change. The Raiden altered itself, probably so it could pick up some extra speed, but this isn’t

supposed to be possible. It *shouldn't* be possible.” Roont turned to Tabris and demanded to know all the particulars of Justin’s activity during the battle, pressing Scott on every point. Tabris gave a detailed summary, ending with Justin’s madcap dash to rescue the crippled *Chaste Gazer*.

Afterwards, Roont simply stared at the twisted Raiden.

“What does it *mean*, doctor?” Tabris finally broke the silence.

“He wanted speed,” Roont spat, “and so it gave it to him.” He threw his gloves down on the filthy floor and sighed. “Mister AGP managed to pull off a *will*-enforced conformational change.”

“You mean Mi-, you mean *Justin* did this?” Scott sounded incredulous. “Come on, I mean, I don’t know a lot about flying a Raiden, but even I know that Storm is a pretty poor pilot. A bunch of Korang fighters at the mess hall were talking about him: how his techniques are juvenile and his handling is only held together by the link. How could he do something like that?”

Roont eyed his young assistant darkly. “As a matter of fact, Mister AGP *is* a piss-poor pilot, and so is Little Miss CRTS. I’ve *always* said it was a mistake to use those two instead of a couple of experienced Raiden fighters.”

Scott’s pilot-bashing was subdued at the mention of Chenine. “Well, then why do you use them?”

Roont looked at Scott with different eyes: he remembered his place, and his responsibility to the Project. He could indulge Tabris’ question at a superficial level, but no more than that. “It was an internal decision; they were hand-selected by Wraith because of certain abilities they possess.”

Scott scoffed. “What ‘abilities’ does Justin Storm have that makes him so valuable, anyway?”

“He’s a perfect fifth,” Roont answered, kicking the prostrate Raiden as he spoke.

Scott scratched his chafed legs; it was uncomfortable in the clean suit. “And that makes him a valuable asset?”

“That makes him dangerous.” Roont darkly growled, snapping the cigarette in his mouth in two as he spoke. He noticed Tabris staring at him. “Quit gawking and grab us another shell! I want this Raiden in the chemical-bath tonight, you understand? We’ll remould the exterior, get it back into shape, then we’ll clamp the shell over it as soon as it’s out.”

Scott quickly nodded and, being the simple tool he was, scrambled off to the other side of the room. There was a large bay door here, very black, with the same heart and smoldering teardrop design as the one outside. This was the ‘shell’ room.

“T.I.A.” Scott called to the leering door, like Ali Baba before his treasure cave. The gears ground, and the door opened. Tabris ordered the lights on, and giant floods swamped the massive bay.

There were two rows in this room, each holding perhaps a hundred ‘shells’, which sat in plastic clean-boxes like action figures in a toy shop. One row of ‘shells’ looked like giant opal origami cranes; the other row looked like awkward silver spheres.

The shells on the second row were emblazoned with the letters R-H-AGP. Below that, each had words scrawled into them in delicate calligraphy.

They read: *The Platonic Love*.

“Brace yourself, Chenine.” The doctor ordered.

On the other side of the Plexiglas wall the supine girl was assaulted with a blanket of green water. The viscous-looking brushes and instruments above her body descended to begin their work. For her part, Chenine looked like she was asleep.

The doctor oversaw the cleaning, her nurses dutifully manning their stations as the scrubbers went to work on the girl. A wispy tail of smoke curled up from the shadows behind the doctor. The cigar smoke irritated her eyes; it had a sweet, but pungent flavor to it.

She didn't reprimand the smoker.

On the other side of the glass, Chenine lay her head down to one side and blinked.

“Copasetic...” she mulled the word slowly.

“What was that?” The doctor intercommed the girl.

“Nothing.” The girl answered with a shake of the head.

A hand came out from the shadows and flicked the intercom to the ‘off’ position. “Have her vitals stabilized?” Sven Wraith asked.

“Yes.” She replied. “We're looking at detailed physical information now. Angela, bring that up, will you?” The nurse nodded and prompted her computer to collect detailed information on Chenine. Some of the instruments above the girl began poking and prodding her body.

“Hmm...” the doctor commented after a few minutes.

“What is it?” Wraith asked.

“It's nothing serious, sir. At least, I don't think it is. Angela: administer a pack of saline, double-standard concentration glucose.” She turned to the subcommander. “Her body fluids have been depleted. That's understandable, given her level of dehydration, but...”

“But what?” Wraith asked, genteelly pulling the cigar from his mouth before speaking.

“Her blood is a little ‘chunky’.”

“Chunky?”

“Yes. Her erythrocytes and leukocytes, that is, red and white blood cells, are available in normal quantity, but her serum levels are low.”

“Serum?”

“Blood plasma.” The doctor explained. “The cells are normally suspended in plasma, so when someone bleeds out they lose an equal amount of blood cells and blood serum, but from what I can tell Chenine's lost a fair amount of plasma, but not many blood cells.”

Wraith secreted another column of cigar smoke, saying nothing.

“It's unusual,” the doctor continued, “but you often see it in some treatment-resistant blood diseases. I've got no records of her having any pre-existing conditions; do you know of anything in her history that might account for this?”

Wraith flicked his wrist. “I don't know. I'll have to get back to you on that.”

“Well, in any event the saline will normalize her fluid volume.” She tapped Angela “I'm going to see to the other pilot now. Let me know of any changes in her condition.”

As the doctor left the room the RL called to her. “Doctor, if you'd be so kind, could you tell me what exactly blood plasma is composed of?”

“It’s a transporting fluid.” She answered. “It carries all the body’s nutrients, short of oxygen: things like hormones, fats, sugars-”

“Sugars? Like glucose, you mean?” Wraith’s manicured eyebrows flickered.

“Yes, that kind of thing.”

“Thank you, doctor,” he quickly responded, “that was most informative.” The RL turned to face the Plexiglas barrier, watching the scrubbers work on his Raiden pilot.

*So it’s vampirism, is it? Disgusting! What nasty birds we breed...* If it was true, if this was really the case, then one thing was crystal clear.

“She must have completed her mission...” he said with a curled lip.

“What was that, sir?” Nurse Angela asked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” He said absently as he turned to leave.

The charge nurse clucked her tongue worriedly as she surveyed her monitor.

“What, now?” Wraith growled with irritation as he stamped out his cigar on the glass barrier.

Angela leaned in closer to her screen. “This... is not exactly kosher.” She said slowly. Her screen showed a mess of tangles and squiggles; Wraith did not recognize the display.

“What is that?”

“It’s a real-time microscopic display of a tissue sample from Chenine.” She replied. “I’m scanning it at the nucleotide-level.”

“You mean her DNA?” Wraith asked, a scowl darkening his face.

“It’s standard operating procedure to perform a cursory exam of a patient’s genome after any interaction with an incarnation. The Bydo have the ability to corrupt a human body at the macroscopic and microscopic levels: they can damage the body as a whole or worm their way into the blueprints and attack from there; the result is the same. Our computers are programmed to screen-out any suspicious influences in the DNA, using what we know about Bydo cells to find any red flags.”

“And you’re saying that her genetic code is corrupted?”

“Well, no...” Angela shook her head, a puzzled look on her face, “but I might have a little red flag.”

“Details, girl, details...” Wraith growled, his fingers wrapped over the top of her chair.

She motioned to the screen, irritated by the RL’s snide attitude. “We have a database of information on Bydo cell behavior, so we compare that to whatever sample we’re examining.” She pushed a few buttons and the image zoomed in on the center of the display: there was a swirling mess of multi-colored dots strung together in a chain. “It looks like there’s some kind of random insertion here, near the tail of Chromosome 1,” she pointed.

“And does the pattern match anything in the Bydo database?” Wraith growled.

“Well, not exactly, but it *is* very similar, and this sequence looks like it’s been set directly into the chromosome via reverse transcription. As far as I know there’s only one type of organism that can do that. I’m a little concerned: we can’t discount the possibility that some kind of retroviral agent-”

Wraith was curtly dismissive. “If whatever you think is inside her genes doesn’t match up with your Bydo database then we’re *not* going to waste our time with it.” Wraith’s words steamrolled over Angela’s explanation; his tone was severe. “If it’s not a

Bydo-implanted defect, and if it's not affecting the girl in any way, we can safely ignore it in favor of more pressing issues."

"Well, it's true that it's not affecting her, but we don't know what kind of problems could come up if-

"Drop it, nurse." Wraith's eyes were fiery coals. "It's a waste of time. You said yourself that this isn't Bydo corruption. Now, please focus on getting my pilot out of that glorified car-wash in there!" He pointed past the window to Chenine, a definite air of finality in his words.

Angela agreed to this, though her face was skeptical. Just then the RL's earpiece squeaked violently.

"It's me." Sam Roont's voice echoed in his head.

"Yes?" Wraith said, softly, as he backed away from the charge nurse.

"Chenine Chovert has successfully completed her mission: the exercise was a success."

Wraith nodded slightly; this confirmed his initial suspicion regarding her plasma-robbled blood. "Understood," he replied, again very quietly.

The subcommander switched off his earpiece and turned to watch the scrubbers as they battered his female pilot.

Now was the time to sit back and wait.

*Did we bounce it off the rim, or did we hit nothing but net?* Only time would tell if they had done it or not. Human-Raiden contact was one thing: but success with Antipathy, well, that was another.

*And God help them if we did succeed.* He thought with a black grin.

They would know for sure quite soon: during the campaign to re-take Jupiter from that floating sea of evil that haunted Ganymede.

Out of the corner of his eye Wraith noticed Angela, the charge nurse, covertly saving Chenine's genetic information in a hidden subdirectory of her system: she was squirreling it away for later use. It was a small move, just a few simple flicks of her wrist, but Wraith had eyes like a hawk.

Unfortunately for those that crossed him, he also had talons, of a sort, and a predatory instinct, too.

*What is it in the human heart that makes people want to meddle in matters that don't concern them?*

No matter: he would deal with her in good time. But first he needed to see about getting some 'Gossamer' engines installed on his Raidens: engines with the ability to enter the skimming state, to reach near-light speeds. After all: it's a long way to Jupiter, and if his R-H's were going to star in this upcoming show, they'd need to go the distance.

*And nothing will stop them from going that distance, either...* Wraith glared at the charge nurse like a fearsome bird of prey.

