



### **Emergent Behavior**

The metal-capped Opie wormed its way down the street, gushing a purple train of propulsion exhaust behind it. The exhaust tail was massive; it coated the street below in a thick tarry sludge.

A bright streak of white light suddenly came down from the gaping hole of a nearby building, sailing through the sky and leaving a crude spark tail behind it. The shard of light hit the right rear flank of the incarnation, exploding in a massive cloud of light and noise. Windows on either side of the street shattered as an energy wave gushed out from the impact.

When the light and noise cleared, the Opie was still there. Its rear flank was still intact.

Justin spat a few choice curse words from his sniper's nest behind the building. He moved the *Love* away from the skyscraper as the Opie's automated cannons immediately retaliated, showering the damaged building with cannon fire.

"I'm repositioning." He called to his support staff. His limbs ached and a fresh coat of sweat simmered on his skin. That was the sixth round he'd fired, and it was starting to show. Each wave cannon charge he built up in his *Raiden* invariably affected Justin's body. The cockpit was layered with special insulating materials to reduce the cannon's effect on a human body, but there were limits to its usefulness. A layer of military-grade keratinocyte in the cockpit would completely protect a pilot, of course, but it would also make all the ship's scanners, communication systems, and maneuvering abilities go wonky.

“This isn’t getting us anywhere, Justin.” Laura stated the obvious. “There’s no gross damage to that thing at all.”

“I’ve got another trick up my sleeve, lieutenant.” He panted. “I’m not done with this thing yet.” He carefully placed his Raiden into position with another broken window. He watched the street, and waited for the Opie to lumber into view. Once he saw it he flipped the charger for his wave cannon. Sparks started swirling inside the cockpit as Justin’s force orb glowed yellow. “I’m gonna use my body to boost the power of the *Love’s* rounds.”

“You’re talking about the ‘organic fuse’ method?” Scott Tabris asked. “Well, I wouldn’t do that if I were in your condition...”

“All I’m losing is a few pounds of sweat and fat.” Justin rebuked him. “And I’m still being pumped full of fluids from the Raiden, so I’ll be fine.”

Justin heard Laura in the background ordering Jen Drake to monitor his vitals. It sounded like she was instructing Jen on how to read his EEG output. He smirked. *Seriously, their faith is unshakable.* He thought sarcastically.

He didn’t wait for Laura’s blessing. Justin sat up in his seat and tilted his head back. He instinctively crossed his fists over his chest and closed his eyes.

The ‘organic fuse’ method is just a really labor-intensive way of increasing the yield of a wave cannon blast. The physics behind it are fairly straightforward: a Raiden carries the charge that powers a wave cannon because of the electrical buildup between the denatured Bydo flesh in its innards and the micro-pulses of energy that are used to control it. When a pilot hits the switch and manually ‘charges’ the cannon he literally opens a gate, letting those charges flow freely from Raiden to force-orb, where the energy can be discharged in a projectile.

But a pilot can also use their body as a current-carrier, drawing the charge from one organic material (Bydo flesh) to another organic material (their body). Instead of merely ‘opening a gate’, the pilots are directly pulling energy from the Raiden for use in the force orb. It makes the wave cannon more powerful than normal, but wreaks havoc on the pilot’s body, especially during discharge. It takes much longer to charge, and the pilot needs a higher-order Sensations Link to do it, so the move is seldom used by regular Typers.

*And then there’s squeamishness,* Justin thought, *some pilots just don’t like to get too close to that Bydo flesh in their ships.* He smirked as he considered the squeamishness of some people in his classes back at the VR training program. True, you had to superficially interact with the junk, but it wasn’t like you were link-diving into the stuff or anything. Besides, denatured flesh was *denatured* flesh. Yes, technically the pilot is drawing energy from organic material, but it’s *not* actual living tissue.

Justin knew that none of the Raidens in the Allied Military used real, unaltered Bydo flesh in their designs. That would be crazy.

He drew in a sharp, pained breath as the charge reached critical-levels. His head arched further back and he pressed his fists even tighter against his chest. He thrust his mind back into the ship, not diving into the bowels of the machine but ‘reaching’ for that simmering electric pulse running through the system. His eyes suddenly shot open as he felt a sharp stabbing pain in his link prongs.

He opened his mouth and groaned softly. A few wiry spindles of electricity streaked between his upper and lower sets of teeth. His head throbbed and one of his legs

started involuntarily twitching. Every hair on his body stood erect. His sinuses began to burn; Justin quickly lost his sense of smell. The sweaty musk of his own animal scent was replaced with a septic nothingness as the electricity flowed.

The energy flowed, and flowed, and flowed, winding its way from the Raiden, through his body, and to the orb. Suddenly, all Justin's hairs relaxed and the orb on his ship's nose glowed white. It was a full-charge. Justin gritted his teeth: discharge was by far the hardest part of the fuse method.

He lined-up his nose with the Opie, which was hovering ignorantly on the other side of the building cover. He quickly brought his fists out, slamming them on either side of his main console, discharging the cannon.

The cannon went off, then came the 'cascade impulse': Justin had just opened a closed circuit. Every ounce of energy in the line between himself, his Raiden, and the orb rushed out all at one. The charge surged out through the force-orb, the residual energy from Justin's body ran to the orb, and the remaining power in the Raiden rushed through his body on its way out to the orb. It was like an electrical waterfall, hammering Justin's body as it forced its way past him.

"Geah!" He yelled as the cockpit blazed with white light. His rubbery black *Liefde*-class suit was designed to keep the charge running along his skin layers and avoid flowing through his internal organs. Most importantly, it kept the electricity away from his heart. The safeguard didn't keep the discharge from hurting like hell, though.

The round his Raiden released was a pinprick of plasma. It glowed much brighter and more violently than normal. The round sailed down from Justin's sniper nest and landed on the front of the Opie. The force of impact was enough to push the leviathan backwards a few feet. The entire street corner disappeared in a nova of light.

When the light cleared, the Opie was still moving forward, and it was still intact. Three of the monstrous cannons on its back were gone, vaporized in the blast, and one of its massive metal spikes swayed idly in the artificial windstorm created by the aftershocks.

Other than that, it was completely unfazed.

Justin panted, hanging his head low. His link devotion was up in the ether, so he didn't need to actually look outside to see the results of the blast.

"Son of a bitch..." he mumbled. Salty sweat was trickling into his eyes and over his chapped lips.

"I think that's enough, Justin." Laura called sympathetically.

"If you're worried about my vitals, you can give it a rest..." He panted in reply.

"I'm more concerned about Chenine than I am with your body," she sharply rejoined. "If you want to torture yourself like this, and for no good reason, then go for it, but in the meantime the *Gazer*—"

"—is out of my sphere of influence." Justin spat. "And *that's* Chenine's fault." He raised his head: his eyes were red and cloudy. He narrowed them into slits as he brought his Raiden to another sniping point. The *Platonic Love* hovered in mid-air behind a gutted building as Justin waited for the Opie to come back into view. "Chenine wanted to go it alone, and that's fine with me. Besides, I don't really have a choice at the moment, do I?"

Suddenly the Opie lumbered back into view. Justin sneered vindictively: he had a massive adrenaline-rush from the feedback in his Raiden. The 'organic fuse' had a

paradoxical effect on a person, draining them physically while greatly stimulating them mentally. It was like a lightning bolt raging through one's brain while a hoard of leeches sucked at one's skin.

Justin crossed his wrists over his chest and initiated another cannon charge. He poured his heart and soul into the drawing, making his link-devotion even higher.

His Impingement Factor, consequently, also began to rise, and as he sat in his chair, sweating and trembling like an infant with a fever, something began worming its way around Justin's right leg. He was far too absorbed in the link to notice. Because of his SL devotion he could feel the outer skin of the *Love* much more keenly than he could feel his own body. The thing at his feet was black and slender, like a power cable or a wire. But there was something unsettling about it, something it was doing that power cables and wires certainly don't do.

It was pulsing. It was throbbing like a living vein.

As Justin focused on charging the cannon it slid up between the gap in his flight suit and his boots. It brushed over his bare skin and paused, hovering, almost as if it were in deep contemplation. Then the tip of the tendrill narrowed into a razor-thin spike. Without hesitation, it began drilling into Justin's leg...

Chenine yelped in pain as a Tove landed on her starboard wing and sank its teeth into her opal armor. The *Chaste Gazer* spiraled through the air like a high-velocity bullet. She immediately leveled-out and brought her Raiden into a screaming loop. The force of the loop nearly knocked her out, but it also managed to shake the Tove from her wing. She came out of the loop right on the Tove's backside and, without time to fire her cannons, she used her Raiden to tear through the incarnation like a dull knife through stale bread. Black blood and innards matted the entire front of the *Chaste Gazer*; upon impact Chenine's head shot backwards as if she'd been punched. Warm, red blood suddenly gushed out of both her nostrils in a free-flow. Unlike the *Platonic Love*, the *Gazer* was not designed for that kind of physical combat. The link ensured that Chenine would share in her Raiden's pain.

"Fugg." She sputtered as she wiped the nosebleed off on one of her black gloves.

The Sixty-Nine Memorial Tower was one of the tallest buildings in Ultima True. It was erected in memory of all human lives lost during the first Bydo assault of 2069. It stood an imposing 900 stories; the bottom of the super-massive structure was wedged at least a thousand feet into the concrete base of the Ultima; even then the elegant building still needed several dozen flying buttresses to shore it up and keep it from crumbling under its own weight.

*It'd be pretty ironic if it were to fall today*, Chenine thought.

She brought her Raiden into a screaming ascent up the rows of flying buttresses that bolstered the main tower in place. She zigzagged around the large spires and miniature prominences of the structure. The overall design of the Memorial Tower bore an uncanny resemblance to a gothic church, which Chenine supposed was appropriate. Nowadays, in this modern world of alien invaders and technological advance, religion might be withering on the vine, but that didn't stop it from affecting humanity in subtle ways.

*We can stamp-out religious worship in our thoughts, but I guess it still has a nasty habit of surfacing in our unconscious minds. Who knows: maybe an irrational reliance on God is something we've been preprogrammed with.*

Chenine pushed all those pseudo-intellectual ramblings from her head and rocketed up the gigantic techno-cathedral. She was hurt, at least she *felt* hurt: her body ached and she suffered from a massive migraine, which stabbed at her forehead like an ice pick. Every inch of her suit-covered body was chafed and sweaty. Her muscles were on fire. She felt like a cigarette, not that she wanted to smoke at the moment, but she actually *felt* like a cigarette, like a wad of burning tobacco rolled-up in a skin-tight packaging.

The back of the *Gazer* shook as a round from a Tove's nipple-cannon glanced off the ship.

*And it looks like I might be smoked, too.* She allowed herself a small joke before plunging her mind down into her link. Chenine bit her lower lip hard enough to draw blood. Taking a chance, she released one of her incendiary bombs from a vertical position. It dropped straight down and clobbered the Tove on its head. In the ensuing explosion, the incarnation went-up like a firework.

A column of fire rose from the volatile carpet-bomb. The fireball hit Chenine's rear hard, sending the *Chaste Gazer* into a tailspin, which Chenine could only correct by diving deeper into her link; she didn't have the necessary expertise to manually stabilize herself. One of her wings slipped against a parapet of the Memorial Tower, slicing into the red-tinted windows of the building like a razor over veins. The tower bled a sparking shower of red-colored glass as Chenine tore across it.

Miraculously, she managed to regain control. The digits in one of her hands ached in response to the damage to her wing. She gripped her console tightly, trying not to focus on the false-damage to her fingertips.

Her canalphones crackled and hissed, jammed by a steady barrage of Active-System Scans. The Opie that landed at 7<sup>th</sup> Street must have been only one of many; there must be more than a legion of them in the area, and they were simply killing communications as they went. One message, however, did get through.

"This is the *Silver Halide*." A young and panicky voice called. "I need some support here, guys!" Chenine eavesdropped on the conversation between the young pilot and his Squadron Leader, the pilot of the *Golden Selection*. It looked like the kid had been cut-off from his team when the Toves started converging on the downtown area.

At the moment, the youth didn't sound too optimistic about his chances. "I'm taking fire from all sides. I need help, *now!*" Despite his pleas, the Precious Metals SL was not hopeful about his chances of reaching the *Halide* in time.

"Just keep your head screwed on, Kensu, and try to get out of sight." He ordered.

Chenine saw an opportunity. She honed in on their communication band and broke in on the conversation.

"This is the *Chaste Gazer*." She introduced herself. "Can I be of any assistance?"

There was a pause on the other end, as if neither the pilot of the *Halide* nor his SL knew how to handle Chenine's sudden appearance. "*Chaste Gazer*?" The SL asked, incredulous, "What did you say your call-sign was?"

"R-H-CRTS." She answered.

“There- there’s no designation like that in the Raiden fleet!” The unnerved pilot of the *Halide* declared. “Who *are* you?” His started panicking. “She’s not a Raiden pilot at all, is she? It’s a trick! It’s a Batesian, isn’t it? *Isn’t it?*”

Chenine rolled her eyes. “Do I *sound* like a Batesian Mimicker, *Halide?*”

The Squadron Leader appeared to be a little more informed. “Keep it cool, Kensu,” he called to his pilot, “her designation’s valid. What’s your 20, *Gazer?*”

Chenine relayed her position and vector. Kensu described his situation. “I had about fifteen Toves swarming me earlier. But now it’s- it’s like a legion, or more!”

Chenine considered this young Typer: he didn’t sound like your average combat-pilot. His nerves were too frayed, and he was way too high strung. “You should be able to hold your own for a little while, right? I mean, you *are* piloting an Excel, aren’t you?” She tried her best not to sound mean, but Chenine didn’t have time to coddle cowardly pilots.

“Negative, *Gazer*: the *Halide* is a Dancer.” Kensu’s Squadron Leader interjected.

“I thought that all the *Precious Metals* used Excels.”

“Kensu’s our data-miner.” The SL explained. Chenine tilted her head at this phrase: she didn’t know what it meant. When she didn’t respond, the SL elaborated: “You know: he collects up-close and in-depth data on incarnation activity, high-definition pictures and physical samples, that kind of thing, for the guys at the Bydo Labs to use. Doesn’t your unit have one?”

“No, we don’t. You, well... you could say that we’re a little too understaffed to have one.” Chenine replied. She still didn’t know exactly what a ‘data-miner’ was, but she could see the problem: the *Silver Halide* wouldn’t stand a chance against a legion of Toves if it was a mere Dancer.

*And in all fairness, that means that I won’t be able to hold my own either...* She considered.

“Are you a Striker?” Kensu asked, very hopeful, on the other end. “Can you handle that many bogies?”

“I’m...” she began slowly, “not exactly categorizable.” Chenine tilted her head as she considered the odds, the *overwhelming* odds, facing her.

And she considered her iron-clad orders from Sven Wraith.

*The Aryl wants glory, and he wants the Gazer to give it to him: up to, but not including, the point of dying.* Saving this data-miner, literally the eyes and ears of the Allied Military in this battle, should be sufficient.

“What’s your position?” Chenine demanded. “I’m going to intercept you now.”

Her leg began trembling again. Chenine brought a hand down to steady it. The sweaty, bleeding girl’s mind raced with the prospects of this battle. Despite the frigid calm on her face she was afraid, and adrenaline pumped through her body as she sent the *Gazer* into a nosedive and spiraled down, down, down to the streets below in search of the *Silver Halide*.

Her Impingement Factor, of course, was rising like a kite.

Chenine was too distracted to notice what was happening behind her. Slowly but surely her chair back was coming apart in two long, snakelike slits. The slits ran down either side of her chair, parallel to the longitudinal groove that held her Link Prongs in place.

Something was coming out of those holes. It was black, and it was pulsing...

There was something wrong with the Opie: it was moving forward like normal, but the front of its metal cap was charred and deformed, as if a giant smoldering boulder had crushed it.

Exhausted and bleary-eyed, Justin lined-up his Raiden for another sniper attack. He charged the round, his arms and legs trembling violently as he prepared for the brutal discharge. He cursed as he considered his aim: the nose of the *Platonic Love* quivered and shook wildly. He could not keep the ship level. Like a gun-toting sniper who aims his rifle for too long, Justin was losing his steadiness. His body was weak to the point that he had to use his link alone to steady the *Love*, but the Raiden bucked and shook with each beat of Justin's heart and with each cerebral 'hiccup' from his glucose-starved brain.

Closing his eyes, Justin wound down into the link and concentrated.

*Come on, damn it... come on... he coaxed himself. Concentrate... put your eyes on the birdie, you bastard...*

He could 'see' the Opie in his mind, through the 'eyes' of the Raiden. It was a grainy, jumbled image, shaking and weaving in the air as the *Platonic Love* trembled.

*Steady...* Justin's body was shaking even more than the Raiden. There was no way he could line-up an accurate shot.

As Justin shivered and struggled in his seat two cool, smooth hands slid docilely around his shaking shoulders. Dreamily, Justin felt the grip of a small pair of thumbs on his shoulder blades. The light touch of tiny, childlike fingers gripped his scapula. The touch was cold; it was soothing.

It felt nice, like water on his burning back.

All the air rushed out of Justin's lungs. He lazily craned his head back; a waterfall of sweat cascaded over his chin and down his exposed neck, but he didn't feel that sticky mess: Justin felt cool, and strangely calm.

When he opened his eyes, the *Love* was centered dead-on with the Opie.

Growling like an animal, Justin unleashed the wave cannon. Those lovely, cool fingers gripped his shoulders tightly as the cannon discharged; the hands held his body in place as he seized from the energy discharge. Justin's head shot backward as a million colors exploded in his brain. He struggled to breathe. A sudden spurt of deep crimson blood squirted out of his nose. The spray splashed across his main consoles.

The cannon round smashed into the damaged cap of the Opie, which suddenly exploded in a shower of metal and light. When the debris cleared, the Opie was left with a fifty-foot hole in its metallic frame. Thick purple smoke billowed out of the hole as if it were a chimney. Justin slumped in his seat; that mercifully cool pressure on his shoulders disappeared.

Justin glared at the pierced Opie with triumph in his eyes. He considered that lucky shot: the discharge was beyond intense. He'd never seized like that before, ever. He might have really hurt himself if those hands hadn't been there to stabilize him...

His bloodshot eyes flew open.

*Hands?*

Justin immediately cleared the cobwebs from his head. Once he pulled himself together, he screamed with horror and struggled in his seat. He raised his arms behind his head and flailed his hands wildly. He craned his neck: left, right, up, down, beneath his chair, searching everywhere for that pair of tiny, phantom limbs.

There was nothing to be found.

This haphazard search effort soon exhausted him, and Justin slumped over again, rapping his head sheepishly.

*God-damned link-effects...* he cursed his mental-failings: his body was so weak and drawn into the link that he was imagining things.

“What’s your status, Justin!?” Laura Hayle was practically yelling at him.

Justin was ready to answer, then he realized that his nose was still filled with blood. He quickly ripped-off his rhinoplastic-guard, allowing the thick fluid to drain freely so he could clear his sinuses.

“I had an aneurism.” He spat. “Can’t tell how bad, but I know that I burst a vessel somewhere...”

“And that means your cannon-shooting time is over.” Scott Tabris warned. “Unless you’d like to come home in a body bag.”

Justin held his head tenderly. “No arguments here.” He relented.

“Looks like you made a pretty big hole in that thing.” Laura observed. “Its Active-System Scan output just dropped by 20-percent. Whatever you put into that last cannon shot, it was a doozy. A dozen more shots like that and the O.P.I. might just take a dirt-nap.”

“How encouraging.” Justin smirked, spitting some mucous-laden blood from the corner of his mouth.

Suddenly there were several more blasts coming from the Opie. Justin sat up in his chair and watched as a progressive series of explosions landed on the incarnation’s hull. They were wave cannon blasts. And they were *strong* blasts.

“The Dragonslayers.” Justin mused hoarsely as he watched the Opie fall back from the force of the projectiles. “They’re coming up the opposite street. There’s your dozen shots, Lieutenant.”

The Opie turned ponderously on its axis, forgetting about trying to flush-out the *Platonic Love* in favor of facing its new assailants.

“Not to sound like a broken record, Justin, but I think maybe you should think about actually following your orders, now?” Laura demanded.

Justin tightened his seat harnesses, plastered his legs against the sides of the cockpit and prepped his engines. “Yes, yes...” he conceded. “I’ll catch up with the *Gazer* now.” He kicked his accelerator, bringing his Raiden up to its highest possible speed (which was pitifully slow compared to most other Raidens) and screamed down 7<sup>th</sup> Street, right past the besieged Opie. “Keep in mind,” he cautioned, “I don’t exactly know how I’m gonna *find* Chenine. I’m still getting too much AS-scan interference to receive any kindred alerts, so she should be pretty much invisible to me.”

“I don’t really care.” Laura grumbled at him. “Now that you’ve been ‘un-pinned’ your priority is to find the *Gazer* as soon as possible, you got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Justin sounded like a chastised schoolboy. He darkly considered his white-headed colleague and her brash actions. She was being reckless.

*She’s being reckless as hell.*

“I’ll do my best, but I think that smarmy little brat has made her own bed with this one.”

“What did you just say?” Scott Tabris barked at him.

“I said: be quiet so I can concentrate on finding Chenine’s reckless ass.”



In the cloudy murkiness of Ultima True a legion of Toves hunted two Raidens. They hunted the ships with merciless dedication.

The exact number of incarnations in a 'legion' depends on what kind of creature is being considered. A legion of Opies consists of only four units, whereas a legion of mass-produced 'spear-blobs' runs in the tens of thousands. It all depends on the strength of the incarnation, and the effort required by a Mass to send them out.

A legion of Toves, mathematically speaking, consists of 59 incarnations.

After thirty minutes of combat, Chenine managed to cut that number down to 30. That was a tremendous feat for a Dancer-clone, but it didn't come without costs.

The girl was trembling in her cockpit. The pale skin of her upper chest, the part that poked out of her suit from her slender clavicles on up, was a blanched white, almost as pale as her hair. Her eyes flittered dreamily in their sockets. She'd stopped sweating quite some time ago; the girl didn't have enough fluids left in her to perspire correctly. Her condition mirrored her Raiden's.

The *Chaste Gazer* was burned and slashed from the tip of its nose-cone all the way down to its tailfins. The ship's milky opal armor was gutted and avulsed in dozens of places. Its photonic cannons were overheated and useless, and Chenine was running low on carpet-bombs.

The *Silver Halide* flew in tandem with Chenine's Raiden. The young pilot called over to the girl with concern in his voice. "Um, are you all right over there?" He asked unsurely.

Chenine, her lips trembling, answered. "Why... do you think I'm not?" she managed in her quiet tone.

"Well, I can hear you breathing pretty hard, and you keep, well, groaning. I thought--"

"I'm *fine*." She assured him.

Chenine's first plan was to snatch-up the wayward *Halide* and clear a path for it to rejoin its squadron. The Toves had other ideas: they swarmed the pair in a tight circular formation, forcing Chenine into a close-quarters dogfight. Thousands of photonic cannon rounds and carpet-bombs later, she'd managed to make an opening for herself and the timid pilot of the *Halides* to take advantage of.

And now the pair were being pursued by over two-dozen snarling Toves, their nipple-cannons blazing and their spiky tails swishing menacingly behind them.

"Oh, man: we've really got to hustle." Kensu said. "Those bogies are gaining on us, fast"

Chenine watched the *Halide* zip in front of her as she struggled to draw another breath. The *Gazer's* armor was too gnarled and split for her to go hypersonic: she'd spin out and end up embedded in the side of a building. She had a real problem on her hands: Chenine couldn't hope to outrun the Toves or keep pace with the *Silver Halide*.

*What to do, now?* She thought pensively. Chenine took note of the scenery flying by her. She looked around for something, *anything*, that might offer some cover, or any use to them at all.

Then she suddenly remembered something very important: her ex-lover's job. It was close to her, and after wracking her brain for a moment she remembered the address.

*Mephisto Construction and Chemical Engineering...* She allowed a small grin to grace her quivering lips.

“Hey, ma’am,” the timid pilot said again, “did you hear me? We have to get moving.”

“Take Malthus Street down to Demeter Lane.” Chenine ordered. “You can probably find your squadron there. It isn’t far, just a couple dozen blocks. All you have to do is get up to Mach 5 and fly straight; you should be fine.”

“What about you?” he asked.

Chenine didn’t give him an answer. Instead she suddenly decelerated and banked down a narrow side street. It was little more than an alleyway. With the *Halides* accelerating and Chenine slowing to a crawl to enter the alley, the Toves naturally chose to pursue her.

Chenine drove as fast and as hard as she could, given the nearly crippled status of the *Chaste Gazer*. Her eyes were large and spacey. She was beyond pain; she had reached a wall, much like a long-distance runner who, in crippling agony, suddenly pushes through the hurt and experiences an endorphin rush.

She didn’t even notice that her shoulder-straps had been torn loose during the dogfight. Chenine’s lower chest was secured in her seat, but her upper body was free and unprotected. She was too distracted to realize this, and she also didn’t notice that she was perfectly cemented into her seat despite the lack of shoulder restraints. It was as if her upper back were somehow ‘screwed’ into her seat.

Behind her chair, on that lone monitor, her Impingement Factor showed-up as 2.3. That number, which was usually green, flashed with a ruddy yellow glow.

Cannon-fire danced all around her as she desperately weaved the *Gazer* through the alley. Chenine tried to sit-up in her seat; for the first time she realized that, for some reason, she couldn’t move her back, but she didn’t give it much thought. She saw a nondescript building up ahead in the distance and grinned like a devil, her parched lips spread cruelly. The word ‘Mephisto’ was chiseled in ruddy letters on the faux-rock façade of the structure.

All the buildings were dark down this alley. The power was out on the entire block and that was *very* good luck for Chenine. She knew that the building would have all its volatile contents locked deep inside, surrounded by high-security ‘plasma windows’. With the power out, all energy barriers in that high-risk building would be down, leaving the structure wide-open to an assault.

Chenine braced her body and unloaded her photonic cannon. The overheated gun protested noisily as it launched a sloppy spread of half-charged rounds. Chenine winced as a great burning sensation blistered-up in her crotch. The cannon beneath her cockpit sputtered, sparked, and then conked-out, a plume of black smoke billowing from the barrel.

The cannon was dead, but that didn’t matter anymore: it managed to send enough shots down the alley to obliterate the entire building front. The rounds decimate the façade of the Mephisto building, leaving a gaping hole where its face once stood.

Chenine gingerly banked her *Raiden* until she was flying on her side, wings pointed straight up and down. Her eyes intent, she waited until she was within 100 yards of the storefront. Once there she popped-out one of the *Gazer’s* incendiary bombs from the underside of the ship. The bomb flew in tandem with the *Raiden*, veering off to the

right as it was expelled from the bomb compartment. Chenine screamed past the Mephisto building. Her Raiden missed the charred metal frame of the storefront by inches. The Toves followed her past the building, snarling and shooting at her. They, too, missed hitting the building by inches.

Chenine's bomb, on the other hand, hurtled through the gaping hole in the building and disappeared into the darkness.

Two seconds later it exploded.

Half-a-second after that the entire first floor of the Mephisto Construction and Chemical Engineering Company was vaporized in a cloud of phosphoric light and noise.

As the *Chaste Gazer* hurtled past the building, bricks and debris scattering all around it, a violent shockwave slammed the Raiden, tearing much of its already shorn opal armor clean-off and banging the ship's thin-framed pilot around in her chair. The Toves behind her suffered much more terrible consequences.

The explosion roared through the alley like a river of fire. It exploded out a side street as the alley opened up onto a main thoroughfare. The *Chaste Gazer* was ejected from that blast like a bottle-rocket, its unprotected second-skin smoldering like a torch, but still intact. Chenine held her controls with a white-knuckled grip.

She was ejected from the inferno. Pieces of the slaughtered Toves erupted from the skewed volcano and landed on the ground all around the street. Smoldering heads, torsos, arms and legs fell in a nightmarish rain.

*59-to-zero: hooray for the home team...* Chenine thought whimsically. For the first time in quite awhile relief began to creep over her pale face.

Her breathing became more regular; she eased up on the controls and started relaxing her aching muscles. Chenine folded her hands neatly in place over her abdomen and closed her eyes. She felt cooler; she felt calmer. She slumped lazily in her seat; that odd pressure on her back seemed to evaporate. The girl licked her parched lips and let her head fall lazily against the seatback.

That's when all hell broke loose.

Three different alarm systems blared at once: the structural integrity alarm, the fuel-cell charge alarm and the engine status alarm all roared to life.

"Warning, warning: structural integrity has been compromised. Fuel-cell breach. Engine status: critical. Impingement Factor is down. Repeat: Impingement Factor is down. Repeat..." Every single light in Chenine's cabin went dark. The droning hum of her engines suddenly disappeared.

Chenine, her blue eyes wide, looked up from her seat as her Raiden dumbly drifted through the air. The *Chaste Gazer* was now a shiny, colorful, elegant rock. It fell down, down, down, listing ominously to the starboard. It careened straight towards a large office tower.

There was no ship power; therefore there was no emergency collision system.

Chenine remembered that old pilot's adage: 'no cabin foam: all broken bones'.

The office tower got bigger, and bigger, and bigger, until it consumed her view.

"Oh, my." She whispered quietly. Her face sunk into a quiet scowl.

The nose of the Raiden ripped through the window panes. In a shower of glass, metal and sparks the *Chaste Gazer* careened through cubicles and office spaces. The Raiden tumbled, rolled, and spun like a boulder as it cut a swath of destruction across the floor.

Finally it reached the other end of the building. The rear of the Raiden slammed into the windows. The *Gazer* burst through the panes and came to a very rough stop. The rear three-quarters of the ship dangled out the shattered panes. The ship teetered twenty floors above street-level in a precarious balance.

A steady train of wind flowed through the hole in the building between the wrecked *Gazer* and the office space. Dust and ash whipped around it like ghosts' tails. The cockpit section of the ship was still stuck in the ruined building, resting on top of some poor desk-jockey's filing cabinet. For the moment, everything was very still and quiet, but Chenine didn't emerge from beneath her crystal canopy.

In fact, there was no movement in the cockpit at all.

