



The Four-Thousandth Hole

I.

Mail to:
Captain Miles Moritz, SL
Base Neuquén: Command and Adjuncts Branch
Account # 797-15-1215

Courtesy:
Captain Samantha Rayne
Base-10: C & A Branch
Account # 5-18-15-19

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Do I have the honor of addressing the great Squadron-Leader of the much-vaunted *Saltatory-Conduction Squadron*? Be still my beating heart: I'll be sure to fawn all over your highly-respected ass for the rest of this correspondence.

Kidding, Mi: this is just your Sammy-Girl, and as you know I'm not a big fan of ass-fawning of any kind (or at least not most kinds...)

Sorry I took so long to get a message to you, but the **Raiden-Hybrid program** out here was just taken off *D-6* classification, if you can believe that, so I'm still not sure what I can say and what's an official no-no. That's why I decided to fire this message off across the public military channel: I'm feeling lazy, so I'll let the AM filters do all the censoring for me (let it never be said that I'm a good girl, Mi, just someone who's not overjoyed about the prospect of spending six weeks in the brig for leaking 'state secrets').

Speaking of secrets, rumor has it that there's a shitload of 'chatter' crossing the wire between bases: word is that Allied Command is getting spooked about some new anti-military group scurrying hither and yon. Do you think it's the successor to 'Parity'? Personally I hope those freaks *do* try to fuck around with the Allied Military some more: they'll make good canon fodder for my combat-buddies in SPAR to play with...

Anyway, because of the heightened security I'm not sure what'll get blocked and what will be let through at the moment. But if the auto-censors are doing their job they'll definitely stop me from saying things like '**my prong-reaction frequency is 140.85 MHz**'. Conversely, the filters shouldn't have a problem if I were to say something like 'my Aryl has bad breath'.

Okay, that's enough playing with the filters. I'd rather not get a visit from the MP's for taunting their computer, and I don't wanna pull you away from your 'busy schedule' for too long, so let me get on with this letter.

First thing's first, Mi: I miss you. I miss you damn terribly, in fact. Spade does too, by the way. It's pathetic: you should see how he rests his snout against my windowpanes all day (he hasn't really adjusted to the idea of living in a big-ass skyscraper in the Nash, yet). He gets all whiney whenever someone walks by the door, probably because he thinks it's gonna be you. I tell you, Mi, I'm damn fond of that pooch, but you should've taken him when I left for this assignment. After all, it was *your* friend in the genetics lab at Gouden Preek that forked him over to you. Dogs are a priceless commodity, guy, and I really hate to think of all the favors you called in on my account.

I know, I know. Right now we're both thinking the same thing: Cataclysm Day gifts like Spade are non-negotiable, especially when they're given from a guy to a girl, aren't they? (I'm not much for gender roles, you know, but I guess I'll play mine out in this case: the pooch stays with me, alright? ;-)

Well, I think I'll take up the rest of this letter by telling you all about the goings-ons at this inverted paint can they call 'Base-10'. You'll get a kick out of some of these observations, and others'll probably leave you scratching your head. In any event, by the time you're done reading this you'll probably be very happy that you didn't end up with this assignment.

It's strange here, Mi: very strange. That's a generous qualifier, too. But I'll let you judge for yourself. Let me give you a concise description of a few things I saw during my last standby shift. That should paint a pretty good picture for you, and then you'll see what I'm talking about. Anyway, think of this laundry list as a typical day in the life of the people at Base-10.

First off: the commute is a real bitch. The base is within 100 clicks of the Great City, but travel time is absolute hell. For starters, the wave-skims make all their passengers stop off at **an artificial island terminal called Perimeter 1-0**. From there it

would be a ten minute trip to the base, if only the skimmers ran on time. **Aryl Wraith** lets us use the C 'n A transports, but even those don't operate with what I'd call 'clockwork regularity'. After a total of two full hours travel I get to finally start my day. I'm the **third of three pilots** in the good old *Tears' Shower Squadron* (I can hear you snickering about that name even while I write this, so stop it. Actually, the name kinda grows on you after a while, so there :-)

I'm gradually settling down here, but I must say that my squadmates are questionable at best. The one with the most combat clout under her belt is a mousy little girl named **Chenine Chovert**: she's like no pilot I've ever met and, truth be told, she seems like she'd be more at home working in a nail salon than piloting a Raiden (actually, her ice cold demeanor might scare off the customers at a salon, but this tart also has a 'disarming' side to her personality: I couldn't say for sure, but I'll bet she's got the power to turn your gender into butter at will, if she chooses. You know the kind of girl I'm talking about...)

I can't really fault her for being such a frost-box, though: if I were named after a wine grape then I'd have a bug up my ass, too.

The other guy is a scrawny New Englander named Justin: he's got a pilot's temperament about him, but for some reason he's got a very 'green' feel. Of course the guy did manage to **drop an Opie all by himself** during 'Concerted Reaction', so who am I to judge? There's more than that, though. I don't know what to say about him: the guy's a milquetoast wallflower most of the time, but every now and then he trips me up a bit.

Take this example: a few days ago I checked in for my shift and found the guy up on the central strut of the base (**this place is built on seven full-sized struts**, so the central column is wicked tall). I won't tell you what he was doing up there, but suffice to say it was strange. Anyway, when he comes down he starts talking to me in his usual manner: soft-spoken, avoiding eye-contact, your basic pansy traits. But when we started talking about a certain person on our base all that changed. Now, obviously he had some kind of beef with this guy that he wanted to iron out, and I can understand that, but I keep thinking about his eyes...

I know you don't like me talking about my days in the Specialized Assault Regiment, but I'm going to. I need to yank a memory out of my noggin so I can properly explain what I'm talking about. Once, when I was in SPAR's rookie training program, myself and about a dozen other wannabe commandos were sent to the southern Himalayas to run a survival course. Part of that test was scaling the vertical face of the **Ultar Sar**, a god-forsaken mountain in the middle of nothing in the middle of nowhere. Hell, Mi: if the Earth has an asshole, then the **Ultar Sar** is a hemorrhoid on the button...

...but that's not the point I'm trying to make, here. I was lagging with my group on the first day of our ascent when I noticed a very interesting thing: there was a small group of IMG's to my left (if you didn't know, that's 'imported mountain goats': the ones that got relocated from the Gulf debris after '69). They were hanging out along a small

slope in the terrain beside me. I was mostly too busy clinging to the rocks to pay them any mind, but there's one thing about them that I'll never forget. At one point all the goats left the slope except for two: these guys just hung around grazing and being goats. Eventually I took a small break and hung from my carabiner, doing my best not to freeze to death. I was looking directly at the animals when it happened: for what I think is no good reason one of the goats suddenly glared in the direction of the other, and without hesitation rammed its head into the unsuspecting animal's side. I watched in shock as the damned thing went sailing off the slope and fell down into the fog (I broke the cardinal rule of mountaineering, too: 'never look down'). We'd been scaling this face all morning, Mi, and to say that it was a long way down is an understatement.

I looked back up at that first goat: the cold-blooded murderer. It never looked directly at me, but I could look into its eyes: there was some kind of, well, *coldness* in them (at least that's what I'd call it). The thing's pupils were dilated from the excitement of the moment, but the rest was just a heavy glaze; its eyes showed no distress. It was beyond 'untroubled', almost serene, even. A few minutes later it starts chewing on the earth again, and went back to being a goat. Its buddies tromped by later on, and it went off with them.

It went back to being 'just another goat', right?

I dunno what I'm trying to say, Mi, but sometimes this Justin guy creeps me out, that's all. He reminds me of that goat: a loose cannon that could 'go off' at the slightest provocation. And if he ever *does* go postal he's got a **twenty-two ton** weapon of Mass destruction at his hands, you know.

Okay, right now you're probably laughing at me for all the paranoid ideas I picked up in **SPAR's character-analysis program** (to tell you the truth, not a lot of that training really stuck with me, so there :-). Nevertheless, that's how I read the guy.

Tell you what: let's just forget about him, okay?

Then there's Command Operations: it's a friggin' cauldron! I try to stay out of that place as best I can. Our base CO is Ronald Faught, and does he ever have it in for **Aryl Wraith!** The Commander's a real hard-ass: he's got balls of steel and an overdeveloped sense of order (he actually made his staff arrange their workstations alphabetically...) In contrast, Wraith is more... well, *less* anal—I don't want to say that our Aryl's 'laid back', exactly: that'd be like saying a diamondback sunning itself on a rock is 'laid back'—but **Wraith** is certainly less an administrator. I get the impression that he'd much prefer the cockpit of a Raiden to the desk he now sits behind (who wouldn't, huh? ;) But he's got a gimp leg, and that's a reason for grounding if I ever saw one. He never talks about it (and, truthfully, I don't really know if he even *has* a leg there at all) but I assume the damage is a souvenir from his piloting career. All-in-all I'd say he was promoted too young; he probably had another good five years of piloting ahead of him if he hadn't been injured. Happiness is a warm gun, after all, and not one that's been holstered before its time. Anyway: you can just about cut the tension with a knife

whenever the pair's in Ops at the same time. They're like a deranged version of the Odd Couple.

Speaking of old-time media, I deleted that gangster flick you sent me. I don't do gangsters, Mi: only noir. And whatever you wanna say about this *Angels with Dirty Faces* movie I think it's hokey as hell (your precious James Cagney is a ham, no offense). I preferred *High Sierra*, but it had the same problem: any film where Bogey gets iced by the end just isn't for me (*Treasure of the Sierra Madre* aside, I suppose...) Watching a movie where Humphrey Bogart dies is like trying to watch the sun come up during a rainstorm: it's pointless, and there's really no call for it.

I told you before that my Raiden's called the *Platinum Heart*. Cool name, huh? You got the memo about what exactly makes the Hybrids 'hybrids', so I'll forgo the details, but suffice it to say this Raiden flies like any other, really. She's an Excel-clone, wicked powerful in the photonic cannon department and no slouch in maneuverability (she's not a Dancer, mind you, so I've had to adjust to the downgrade in propulsion, but I make do).

The biggest sticking point for me is the link.

I don't like Sensation-Links any more than you do, Mi, but it's something of a requirement for employment over here. The augmentation surgery was a snap, and I can use these new Pragma-class links well enough, but there are some things I don't have a hold of yet. I was told to expect things like hallucinations and some out-of-body weirdness (they call these things 'Limerence Effects') but lately I've been very troubled about something.

I do have hallucinations in the cockpit, Miles, but they don't happen 'infrequently': they happen *all the time*. And these aren't 'random' hallucinations, either: it's the same one! I can't make a lick of sense out of it: every time I climb into that Raiden I keep thinking that I see something in there with me! It looks like—

Well, I don't want to talk about it here. I'll tell you when you finally scrounge-up the time for a visit. Suffice to say I haven't brought this problem to the Aryl's attention, or anyone else's for that matter: I'm afraid they would yank me out of the cockpit if I did.

Hah! There's something I thought you'd never hear from me: I'm 'afraid' of something.

But the other pilots seem to do just fine with their links (one of them is a bona-fide Perfect Fifth, if you can believe that) so I can't very well bring the subject up with them. *Chenine* behaves as if everything is gravy with her Raiden, though lately Little Miss 'Brass Ring' is looking worn around the edges, physically. I've no idea why, but I can't vouch for the things she does in her off hours...

By the way, I've got a funny story about that nickname; be sure to ask me about it when you make it to the Nash.

The guy is our Perfect Fifth; he certainly doesn't appear to have any trouble dealing with his link either (and it's not just because he's a weird-ass nut-ball: **Justin Storm** isn't half as strange as any of the other 5ths I've met). Let me qualify that, though: he happens to be a religious, and that's fine with me. But this afternoon I ran into him in the docking bay and caught him praying the rosary in front of his Raiden (I'm not making this up: it was an honest-to-goodness rosary...). He was pacing around the ship like a hyena circling a carcass: he looked both eager and apprehensive at the same time.

I don't say this often, but I'll say it now: 'whatever'...

The guy who maintains our ships is another can of worms. Actually, let's just say that he *is* a worm. He might know a shitload about Raiden-Tech, but he can't seem to keep his hands *off* our female base personnel and *on* those ships where those hands belong. It looks like he's particularly taken with our girl Chovert, but he's been stepping up his 'advances' on me as well. He's not a serious problem for me, mind you, and trust me, you would hear about it if he ever crossed the line... I'm sure the Patagonia broadcasting network would publish his obituary for you.

Kidding, Mi! Well, half-kidding, maybe...

Then there's the base support staff. A little girl named **Laura Hayle runs the 'A-Team' upstairs**. She climbed the ranks fast, owing to the backwater (no pun intended) nature of this post: we don't really attract the 'best and brightest' of the AM, and the Commander has to take what he can get. I like her, though: she's actually a very good duty officer, and it looks like she knows how to run her team and set priorities.

The kid under her is some egotistical ass named **Scott Tabris**. I've only spoken a few words with him, and I can already tell that I hate him. He's just one of those people. Come to think of it, you know who he reminds me of? 'Fleshy-Ass Fischer'! You remember what a pill that son-of-a-bitch was. I have to deal with the runt because he's a 'special liaison' to our unit: the guy's got some schoolin' in Bydo-Tech, and for some reason our Aryl thinks that makes him valuable. I guess he kinda is, come to think of it, due to our scant resources. Beggars can't be choosers, I suppose.

I did feel sorry for him the other day though: I was coming down the R-H freight elevator about halfway through my shift when I noticed that he and the Bydo Labs doctor were arguing about something; I couldn't tell what because they were on the other side of a glass shield. **Tabris** was standing still, head bowed like a sulking puppy while the doctor berated him. I was moving right past the window when the doctor cuffed him one. He hit the poor little techie hard, too: *my* teeth rattled just from watching it. I damn near sprinted in there to break it all up, but then the doctor kicked the boy out of the room, sparing him from further abuse.

Now, I'd call that a biggie. The 'good doctor' could get his ass kicked off base for that kind of physical violence against a subordinate; people have been dishonorably discharged for less. While I'm not keen on bringing the issue up— given that I'd embarrass the JG— I've catalogued this incident in my noodle; it just might make good blackmail material someday. >:-)

I was called to Ops right before evening shift change. As I said before, this is something I dread. On the way in I passed right by what is possibly the most objectionable thing on Base-10 (and that's saying a lot): a pink-headed sprout named Jen Drake. Other than her hair, her body piercings, her dislike of military protocol and her sexual orientation, the worst thing I can see in the goth-tart is her almost autistic standoffishness. Everyone on base seems to tip-toe around her, too: they give her a fairly wide-berth. Come to think of it, Storm might be tight with her, so I'll have to ask him about that.

Actually when I passed her outside Command Ops she wasn't with Justin: she was with the Brass Ring. Drake was huddled up in a cubicle skimming the pages of a massive book (I'm only guessing, but I assume the subject-matter concerned either vampires, lesbians, or lesbian vampires). Little Miss Brass Ring was dozing in the corner; this appears to be her 'most favorettest' thing in the world, as your niece would say. The sloppy girl even had a split orange sitting in her lap, too. These *Liefde*-class suits we wear ain't exactly cheap, and I wonder what the Aryl would say if Chenine got a citric acid stain on hers. Drake was munching on an honest-to-goodness slice of kiwifruit. God knows where she got it, or even how she could afford it...

The Aryl issued orders to me inside his little office. This place reflects his dislike of bureaucracy: it's messy, dimly-lit and wholly un-welcoming. Apparently Wraith is getting ready to give our squadron more off-world time (that's a welcome change: the only squad member allowed outside Earth orbit in the past month is Storm, and his outing wasn't exactly 'productive'). Well, that would've been a rather pleasant end to an unpleasant day, but Commander Faught happened to burst in at that moment: evidently **the Aryl 'requisitioned' the use of one of the spare Korang bays for storage**. The Commander didn't look too kindly on this move, and especially of not being informed about it.

As I stood there watching the two men bark at each other— and thinking about all the other events of the day— I was reminded of an old story I heard when I was a kid. See, I've been waiting all week to send you a message (and have the opportunity to bitch nonstop for eight pages ;), but in the end all I may as well not: this complaining isn't going to do a lick of good.

The story goes like this: there was once a town, serene and moderately prosperous, whose roads were in terrible condition. There were so many potholes in the asphalt that a car would break its shocks after driving on them for just a few minutes. After a while people couldn't really go anywhere, and stuff couldn't get done. A certain councilman was enraged by the city's lack of attention to this problem, and so he

commissioned a grand survey project to physically count the number of potholes in the road, each and every one. He did this in order to hammer home his budgetary recommendations and to embarrass the lazy slobs over in the transportation department (*they* were the source of the problem after all, and not him) He got his number, around 4,000 or so, but that's not important. Naturally the town was eager to patch everything up so they could get around again. The only problem was that they couldn't.

See, the town's budget was bled dry by that expensive little survey project.

Is this a stupid story? Yes, but it's got a message: there's really no point in spending a lot of energy complaining about something, or cataloguing every little thing that's wrong if the effort doesn't go into actually *fixing* the problem. I'm a military girl, Mi, and I guess I've been spoiled by always getting assignments with 'traditional' colleagues. That said: things *are* broken at this base, whether the people here are gonna admit it or not, and my whining isn't a solution to anything.

The only question I have is this: how many more potholes do these people need to feel in the road before they 'get it'? Some good ol' *tension* on an AM base is nothing to write home about, but this place crosses the line into outright *dysfunction*. What I'm saying is the road feels awfully bumpy to me, and I wonder what it's going to take to get everyone on the same page. One of my squadmates had a talk with me recently and made me think about how the three of us can function better as a Raiden unit, but how can you force **48 people** to function better as a *base*? Who knows...

Oh, and that reminds me: could you try to scrounge up a copy of *In a Lonely Place* for me? I thought I'd be able to track down that flick in the Great City, but the central library here is woefully under-stocked as far as old noir goes; that was a swing and a miss for me. If you can find it in Neuquén's central library, then at least we'll be 'Bogey' for the course.

Sorry about that.

In closing, I'm not gonna pine my little heart out for you and dote on your absence with girly poetry: if you wanna know how much I miss you then you're gonna have to come down and see me (and here's a word of advice: make sure you're in good shape when you do; keep your strength up, 'cause you're gonna need it ;)

I'm not into long goodbyes, Mi, so... there you have it.

'Till the End of Time,

Sam.

