



### **In the Bloody Pool**

Luckily the pair were given priority clearance for the satellite's 'medium-ship' docking bay. It was a tight fit: Chenine had to navigate her elegant bird into the narrow base headfirst, after which Justin had to find some spare room with his much smaller and more compact ship.

"I hate space station docks." He confessed to Chenine as the pair went through their individual post-flight routines. The girl grunted her agreement into his canalphones.

"For the record, my final Impingement Factor is times 1.02". She stated.

Justin checked his own monitor. He was slightly surprised. "Huh. Mine's sitting at 1.10."

Chenine found this a lot less remarkable than he did. "Probably from some kind of feedback in one of your systems."

"A snapped power line?" He mused. "Too much energy in one spot, you think?"

"You *did* slam the ship a little hard last time around. If your systems are frazzled it would explain you not getting a warning about your coolant leak. Anyway, I'm powering down." Justin saw the lights on the *Chaste Gazer* go dim and Chenine open her cockpit and swing out of the opal craft. As she walked by his ship Justin smelled a subtle, floral scent. It was lilac, like that found in scented bar soaps.

That reminded him that his Sensation Link was still on. He was lucky that Chenine didn't wear a fragrant perfume: she could have killed him with a stronger odor. As it was, the subtle soap blended in mutely with her natural animal scent.

He shrugged ironically. *Oh well, at least I know what kind of flowers to get if I ever piss her off.*

Justin powered down his primary systems and sent a sharp, quick though through the link:

*Piss-off!*

The link shut down, and Justin's senses returned to normal. As always happened with the R-H's, the remaining ship systems went dark as well.

The two maintenance workers that met them were a surly duo. "Ah, ya poor babies!" One of them drawled as his partner checked under the *Love's* rear exhaust ports, "and here I thought you Typers were the badass end-all, be-all, too."

Justin scratched the back of his head. He was already a little self-conscious about his mechanical issues, and he sure didn't need any lip from a cheeky maintenance monkey. "Even Cadillacs break down every now and then, pal, so please just patch me up and we can be on our way."

"Eh," the grizzled dockmaster wiped his nose with a calloused, grease-stained hand, "and what about our scratch, then?"

"Scratch?" Justin shot the man a quizzical look.

"A-yeah," he said, with a twinkle in his skewed eyes, "uh, 'y know that we all work on the scale here, yeah?" Justin took the grubby man in: he was short with small, stocky arms and a gnarled set of teeth. His hair was a yellowed white, at least what remained of it. Justin could immediately tell that the man was 'Hibakusha', one of the survivors of the atomic attacks during the first Bydo Wars. Justin never had much interaction with any of them before, besides Pyotr Frieze, of course.

"Oh, yeah, scale payment..." Justin pulled himself from his ruminations. Epdin was a joint civilian-military project. The billing system between it and the regular military was rather complex.

"You can send the bill to Base-10, care of Aryl Sven Wraith." Chenine helpfully interjected.

The toothy mechanic glared at the girl for a moment, then shrugged and, with an unenthusiastic "eh", accepted this arrangement.

*Not that he has to accept anything...* Justin thought. *With one word to his CO we could get an order put on his ass to fix the Raiden. Scale payment or not, we could compel those grunts to do their jobs.* However this certainly wasn't the kind of thing Justin was apt to do. Neither, it appeared, was Chenine.

The girl set herself against one of the docking bay windows and began scratching something down on a grimy piece of paper using her sleek field-issue pen. She was shrouded in darkness, working by the cold starlight alone. He liked the fact that Chenine was averse to making a scene. Raiden-pilots were notorious for their Type-A personalities, but he reflected on how he and Chovert were different from this stereotypical mold.

He heard a squeaking noise from behind him: one of the motley deckhands was scrubbing down the soiled canopy of the *Chaste Gazer*. He rubbed a soapy foam onto the glass shield with his bare hands.

"Uh, you might want to throw some gloves on, there..." Justin quietly suggested.

The macho man laughed. "There's worse things in this world than a little jet coolant, pal." He said with a badass grin.

Chenine, not looking up from her idle paperwork, said coolly: "It's R-Type coolant, you know..."

"What about it, little girl?" the muscular, hairy gent bragged while scrubbing the crystal down. "I cleaned off a beat-up Korang a few days back: it was covered in coolant, too. And I scrubbed it bare-handed, even though *they* use those nasty fluorocarbons." He grinned with machismo. "Stung like hell, mind ya, but not a big deal."

"Hmm..." Chenine grunted without approval, again not looking up from her work. "That's neat. Well, *we* use mercury in our coolant." She looked over at him with a not-so-nice grin, "bet it doesn't really burn, does it?" Justin seldom saw the fair-haired

girl grin: it wasn't exactly pleasant in this context. She went back to her work without another word.

The macho mechanic looked once at the cockpit, then at his sponge, and his hands. He sighed long and hard, tossing the sponge aside. "Well, that's gonna be fifteen minutes of decontamination." He threw up his hands as he walked across the bay, muttering something about "God-damned Raiden pricks", with a few other choice phrases thrown in.

Justin couldn't help but smirk slightly. He wandered over to the pair of workers banging away on the *Platonic Love*. The surly dockmaster was lying on his back, pulling apart the lower frame of the giant silver sphere.

"Tch," he growled. "Odd design on this one: I can barely get the outer platelets off..." there was some banging, hammering and swearing, then the man slid out from beneath the hull (despite his physical shortcomings, he appeared to be quite nimble) and confronted Justin:

"There's no way to reach the inner valves!" He barked, a fresh grease stain on his nose. "Your underbelly's solid hafnium carbide: how the hell're we supposed to open the damn thing?"

"What?"

"Your hull!" He spat. "The whole outside's hafnium too, but at least *it* has breaks in the plates so I can access the interior panels, at least. But *those* panels don't even have a chink in 'em. So I ask 'ya again: how are we supposed to open it, eh?" He eyed Justin angrily.

"Uh," Justin scratched the back of his head unsurely, "I guess you don't, do you, if it is all haf-car, that is..." Truthfully, Justin didn't even know about that, it wasn't something he was told about in his initiation. It actually made him feel sort of special, for a moment at least. The only thing he was told about the *Love's* construction was that it could take "two beatings and a rape" without breaking a sweat (those were Scott Tabris' words). With a solid coating of hafnium-carbide, Justin could see why.

Of course, having that material in the ship's subcutaneous layer would keep things safe inside, but also make it *impossible* to actually get to any working parts, short of pulling the *Love* apart piece by piece. Additionally, the fact that Justin didn't even know about this made him look like an idiot. And the sneering dockmaster certainly thought that of him.

"They send people to us that don't even know their own ships..." he drawled with his gnarled teeth. There was derision in his gruff voice.

"Hey, you guys asked *us* to come and get the package for our base." Justin replied. "I'd say it's your responsibility to know the particulars of the ships you request to come up here."

The dockmaster's tough-faced assistant shook his head. "*Request* you guys? Maybe you're out of the loop, but stations *don't* request Raidens to do errands for them. You guys are way too high-maintenance for us to want to screw around with you voluntarily."

"No offense," the dockmaster sneered (with obvious offense intended), "but your higher-ups have heart attacks when any little thing goes wrong when your precious Raidens are in our docks. Heaven forbid if the foot ramps get scuffed, or the polished finish gets mucked-up; someone would likely get the axe!"

The trio argued about the cost-benefit ratio of Raiden usage for a few minutes. Finally Justin waved off their bleating.

“Forget it, alright?” He said with exasperation. He threw the *Love*’s canopy open and got into the cockpit.

“And what’re we doing here?” The dockmaster asked, whimsically. “Taking a trip? Wherever you’re going, it’ll be a pretty short trip with the ship leaking like an untrained puppy!”

“I’m going to activate my computer and make *it* fix the damned ship.”

The younger deckhand looked at him skeptically. “What kind of processor does your ship run? Even a high-end program won’t be able to fix your problem if it couldn’t even diagnose it in the first place.”

Justin shook his head as he flipped some switches. “I’ve got a psychokinetic link with the ship’s systems: I’m gonna try nudging the computer in the right direction.”

The old mechanic guffawed. “A Sensations Link? You only see those things with noobs in training craft, and of course in ships run by hardcore badasses with high opinions of themselves.” The man watched Justin activate his primary systems. He yelled up: “Which are you, anyway?”

Justin smiled. “Neither: I’m actually a noob with a high opinion of myself.” He tilted his head backwards and drew in a breath. The ship’s main systems activated at the same time as the sweet, docent chime of the Sensation Link sounded.

Justin began his submersion into the link as usual. He spent a few seconds adjusting his senses: feeling the cold metallic floor and smelling the dank odors of the bay. He picked Chenine’s soapy scent out of the mess of chemicals lingering in the hangar. Opening his eyes he saw her, still sitting against the window on the other side of the room. She was watching him now with a cool, even gaze. Within seconds she had gone back to scratching something on her ratty piece of paper, and her image started wavering and blurring. *Everything* was wavering and blurring. A ruddy red tint coated Justin’s vision. It was like everything he was watching was submerged in a bloody pool.

Then, he picked up his mind and drew himself backwards. For the first time, Justin dove into the murky, messy background of the link.

He slid into the messy machinery of the *Platonic Love*.

It was exhilarating. Justin had never played this game before: submerging himself this far into the ship, but the titillating thrill of it all drove him wild. He could *see* the ship’s systems, both physical and electronic, and he gently pushed and prodded with his mind, sending rippling tentacles of thought swimming through the glowing wires and polished metal of the *Platonic Love*. He floated through and around the vein-like pipes and thick, sinewy wires that resembled muscle tendons. One can describe this process with some accuracy, but you can’t fully understand a link-dive without experiencing it firsthand.

“Ooooh...” his lips pursed as his wide-open eyes stared vacantly in the outside world, seeing nothing before them, but everything in the internal world of his ship: Justin saw the problem, the break in the normal pulse and flow of the ship’s ‘body’. It stood out in his head like a blood clot would on an X-ray. He sent his mind into the ship’s underbelly and saw the severed coolant line: it was cut cleanly and hemorrhaging fluid

into the Raiden's underside. He looked around it, tasted the rank fluids gushing from it, and thought about it.

"It... can be rerouted... can't... it..." Justin spoke slowly and with an uneven, unnatural cadence. The pair of deckhands looked on with uneasy reservation as Justin sat, motionless and stone-faced, in his seat. He looked like a mild-mannered gargoyle sitting with his wide-open eyes and gaping mouth.

A slow grin spread across his blank face. "Ye-a-a-a-h..." Justin smoothly rolled the word with an almost sexual pleasure: he'd found the route needed to bypass the cut line: it was now a simple internal re-routing job (although Station Alpha's computer would have to lend some brainpower). Justin started slowly resurfacing, letting his mind wander up from the bowels of the ship, through the layers of cable and piping, all the while following his select group of auxiliary pipes to make sure that they *would* be a decent route for the coolant.

That was when he came across something rather odd: there was a pipe in the network with red-and-white colored banding on it (identifying it as part of the coolant system), but Justin looked through the rusty pipe with that lovely X-ray ability given to him by the link. The glistening sludge in the tube didn't look like coolant, and as he wound himself downward and 'brushed' against the pipe, he realized that it didn't smell like coolant.

*The good doctor will love to hear about all these little issues...* he mused.

"Defects...everywhere..." he slurred with his own voice.

Justin 'tasted' the mystery sludge with his mind, bracing himself for whatever foul taste would follow. He was flabbergasted when a bright, syrupy sweetness met his mental lips. He almost gagged from the extreme sugariness of the sludge.

"What... the hell..." he said quizzically. The sludge had piqued his interest, and he decided to investigate it briefly. He had to be careful: he'd already been in the link for several minutes, and it wouldn't do for him to linger too long. For one thing, his brain could end up scrambled like an egg. But he reasoned that a few extra minutes couldn't hurt.

Justin wafted through the ship's bowels, floating back into the rear of the craft. He passed through several layers of thick metal polymer as he followed the mysterious 'pipe of sweetness'. His head throbbed with a dull pain as he passed those sheets: the flat chunks of metal contained his Raiden's inert Bydo flesh, and the stuff was a nightmare for the link: it provided all kinds of interference, electrical *and* chemical.

He wormed through the plates and kept his 'nose' to the pipe, following as it snaked through the rear of the ship. As suddenly as he'd found it, the pipe abruptly stopped. It ended in a rusty distribution valve; the valve controlled the flow of that saccharine junk into a metal-plated region at the extreme rear of the craft. It was 'dark' in this part of the ship (Justin's link was extremely poor this far away from the cockpit). The metal plates formed an ovoid shell, approximately five meters tall and at least three meters wide.

Justin licked the plates with the tongue of his mind: it was solid hafnium-carbide. He was no engineer, but as near as he could figure, this was the engine shell. It *had* to be, anyway. It looked like a giant egg.

"Unnngh..." Justin growled. His link was failing fast.

*Broken coolant pipes... ducts that've stopped pumping what they should be pumping... miscellaneous crap gushing into the engine... what a mess.*

This was one mess that he could fix immediately: Justin reached around the distribution valve, looking for the circuits that controlled its flow. Until the ship could be overhauled, he was going to make damn sure that nothing bad was draining into his engine.

He found the wires that controlled the valve. Justin plied the circuitry with his mind until the distribution valve began to close. It was a tedious and slow process, but if he could fix at least *one* thing on this silver bucket, he would. The valve dutifully shut off. He felt inside the valve, his mental fingers on the rusty pipe as the steady pulse of liquid through the line slowed. It became thready and irregular, and then died to a miniscule trickle.

No more sugar in the gas tank, so to speak.

*That's one problem taken care of...* Justin thought. His link was dying fast, but he wanted to hold on long enough to ensure that the tricking stream would stop. He clung to the strong metal pipe with his mind and waited, listening to the steady hum of the ship systems. Things felt ominous and quiet this far back in the craft; he didn't enjoy being here one bit.

Then, all of a sudden, all hell broke loose.

He felt a force, like a sudden and sharp kick to the groin. His hold on the valve wiring was broken and the circuits fell back into their original positions. His entire mind snapped back front-and-center, like a ball on a rubber string. He was yanked back with an overwhelming force, watching in horror as the ship's insides rushed past him, like he was being dragged backwards on his stomach. The metal oval shell disappeared from his vision as he snapped back into his own head.

"Gheah!" Justin's physical body suddenly seized. His head shot backwards and his carotids bulged out of his neck. The raven-haired pilot's teeth ground uncontrollably and all his muscles spasmed. The grotesque contortions went on for a few seconds. Then Justin slumped in his seat, a fine layer of sweat sparkling on his face and in his underarms, tricking down his body in the uncomfortable black flight suit.

As soon as he remembered how to move his own muscles, he widened his eyes. His breaths were rapid and deep.

"Jesus Christ..." He wheezed.

Justin came out of the cockpit in a daze. The deckhands below, who were so surly and sarcastic minutes before, were now gaping up at the cockpit with something approaching terror.

He waved-off their gawking and their obligatory questions. He took some paper and scratched-out a crude schematic for re-routing his coolant pipes. Since his computer obviously couldn't handle the problem by itself, he asked permission to tap into Station Alpha's massive network and let Epdin's supercomputer handle the operation.

The old mechanic was pretty dubious about that, until Chenine looked up from her window seat and reminded him that, as Raiden pilots, they were entitled to whatever reasonable courtesy was necessary to keep their ships in flying order. The dockmaster wasn't about to fight them too hard about this: he appeared visibly shaken by what he'd seen Justin go through and he was obviously eager to get the pair of pilots off the station.

They *had* simply been unwanted guests, but now there was a definite creepiness factor thrown in with them, and the sooner they left, the better.

During the ship-to-station hook-up a well-dressed and expertly-groomed military grunt came into the bay with two junior officers in tow: they were carrying a large oblong box. It was the sensor-shielding technology, packaged in what appeared to be a silver coffin. Justin signed for the item and it was dutifully loaded into the tiny cargo hold of the *Chaste Gazer*.

After that there was nothing to do but wait for the *Platonic Love* to start talking to Station Alpha's computer. The supercomputer had Justin's schematic data, and as soon as the two operating systems started interacting, the data could be sent into the ship.

During this time Justin sat in the shadows of the bay, his knees to his chest against the large window. The starlight streamed across his long, stubble-ridden face. His face was uncannily like that of a dark horse's. He used his handheld comm. system to navigate through the airwaves; finally he found a working music channel and tuned-in, letting the songs drift through his canalphones and into his unnerved brain. Chenine still sat on her crate next to him. After several minutes she slid her pen back into her breast pocket and tossed the ratty paper aside.

She rested her lanky arms on her knees, her eyes glistening like diamonds in the light. "So, what happened?" she asked.

He didn't hear the question. It was only after a few seconds, when he glanced in her direction, that he saw her stark blue eyes staring at him. Those eyes were huge and round in the darkness. She looked strangely like she was a lady panther in the brush, coldly contemplating a strike on her prey.

The gaze startled him. Justin switched-off the feed to his earpieces. "What?"

She repeated the question, her expression unchanged.

Justin shook his head and ran one darkly tanned hand through his hair. "I dived. Dove. Divved; whatever you wanna call it."

"How far did you go?"

"Just around the coolant pipes, did a little exploring while I was at it. But not far."

"It was far enough, I guess." Chenine answered, looking back out the window.

"You seized."

"I did get a little stirred up." He admitted.

"You seized." She said again, shaking her silvery head ever so slightly.

"Maybe a little." He sighed. The pair sat in the shadows and didn't talk any more. The only noise in the cold maintenance bay was the whirring noise from the thick cables connecting the *Platonic Love* to the station's computer banks. Inside the cables, information flowed into Justin's ship from Station Alpha's computer.

No one saw it, and no one knew about it, but inside those thick plastic cables there was information flowing *out* of Justin's ship, as well, worming its way into the digital chaos of Epdin's systems.

"I owe you a drink, laddie." Kelso's chipper voice sounded across the line.

"You owe me seven, at last count, but I'd take just one, if I could get it out of you." Connor smirked. The *Principalities* flew in a tight delta-formation with its combat unit. Connor was in pretty good spirits today: his unit was preparing to leave for the Belt

again to do some more monotonous guard-duty, but given the Mass's behavior so far, it looked like he'd be getting some combat in today.

That always made him happy. The more targets he could kill the better: a good combat ranking would ensure him a prime spot in the attack formation when the Allied military finally decided to pick-up their balls and strike the Jupiter Mass.

"How was I supposed to know she was a colone!?" The red-bearded Scotsman called.

"The SJC logo on her attaché case might've been a clue..." Connor laughed. "I wonder if she was really as pissed as she looked?"

"We'll know eventually..." Kelso lamented. "I s'pose I'll be getting a friendly call from the Command Branch's henchmen."

"Or the Aryl will." Connor agreed.

"Aye, me!" Kelso guffawed. "That'd be even worse..."

The Raiden group accelerated and performed some tight emergency maneuvers. The afternoon sunlight danced over the gleaming birds. The Raidens frolicked over the flat grasslands in what looked like a playful dance. The routine maneuvers were lightning-quick and in perfect synch, demonstrating the naturally amazing reflexes of the Raiden pilots.

They accelerated out over the water, pushing speeds up to mach two. Connor brought the *Principalities* into a graceful dive and leveled-out with the rest of his group. His team leader's scratchy voice barked a gruff, militaristic command.

"*King's Mind* here" he identified himself, "all units hold course for 400 klicks, course is 20 degrees of North. Speed up to mach three-oh-eight"

That would carry them up the Firth of Forth, Connor mapped out in his head. That meant they'd be stopping off back home at Base-Sruighlea to refuel before heading out to the Belt.

Connor set his Raiden to autopilot and watched the sea go by down below. He was growing slightly restless, eager to get out and start something. The afternoon sun shone on his fiery red hair. He gazed out to port, and then to starboard.

His stern grey eyes set upon something on his right. Connor twisted in his seat to get a better look. The sun was blazing on this side, setting the crimson horizon aflame. Heat waves zipped by his ship's starboard, courtesy of the Raiden flying in formation on his right.

The heat waves zoomed by Connor's ship like a second sea, level with his ship. The wavy ripples parted in an odd pattern beside the *Principalities*. It was a funny sight, and his eyes played tricks on him. Connor almost thought there was something there. He felt like a desert dweller falling for a mirage.

*Too many flight hours spent practicing and not doing... he lamented. Makes a man see something anywhere, and out of nothing. I need a good, strong fight...*

He glanced out the canopy on his left and watched Kelso's ship, the mighty *Dominions*, dance through the air. The old man was a pretty keen military mind in his own right, but he was far less enthusiastic about battle than Connor.

His eyes caught on to another small fact as he watched Kelso's ship fly: the ship in front of *him* was putting out a fine, strong heat wave as well, and *those* ripples parted in an odd pattern around the *Dominions*, also.



Connor swiveled back to his right, banging his muscular knee against the main console as he did so. He squinted into the sun, scrutinizing the rippling heat waves beside him. They were parting and weaving just like the waves around Kelso's ship, as if there was something obstructing them, something making them part around it.

Something moving in tandem with Connor's ship.

Connor blinked once, then twice. He turned, very slowly, front-and-center. Few things could make him feel the shiver in his spine that he felt at this moment. He drew a breath and brought up his spectrum scanners. He adjusted them until the sensors were set to scan the starboard side of his ship.

*Plink... plink...*

Two drops of sweat landed on the console. Connor wiped his damp brow and set his teeth together. He *never* felt this way; this was an emotion that he had all but banished from his psyche. Connor Trent didn't know the *meaning* of the word terror: he hadn't felt it since he was a lad, since the time of his first battles.

All the same, that emotion was back. Connor slowly raised his palm and, with his breath held, activated the deep spectral scan. The picturesque sunset came up on his monitor as a discolored, sparkly image. The sun looked black on the color-altered scan.

That is, what he could see of the sun. It was almost fully blocked by something.

Connor saw the shape of that something, and his stomach clenched.

It was quite big, it was quite close, and it was quite alive.

He bit his lip and slowly, calmly, brought his fingers to a little red button next to his console: the general alert switch. It was the kind of switch that rookies accidentally pressed on their first day in the air, much to the ire and anger of their elders.

And it was the kind of switch a veteran pilot pressed when they were faced with something like Connor was staring at now, when they felt the emotion that was seizing him at this moment: fear. His vision became wavy; it was red and cloudy as he flipped the switch, like he was wading through a pool of blood.

He wasn't, really. Not at the moment, but he probably would be, soon.

The Station Alpha dockmaster and his assistant waved the *Chaste Gazer* out of the docking bay. It was far from easy, and Chenine inadvertently bumped the wall of the bay with one wing as she pulled out. The contact left a large serrated gash in the steel plates of the docking bay, and a tiny scratch on the *Gazer's* opal armor.

The dockmaster flung up his arms in annoyance as his assistant watched the pair of Raidens hurtle away, the white light of their afterburners flickering. "Grandstanding fools, the lot of them!" The stumpy old man barked.

"What do you think he meant about us *asking* them up here?" The younger deckhand asked. "I was talking to Captain Sabre in the elevator, and she was complaining about how those Typers' home base didn't just *ask* to let the Raidens come up, they *demand*ed that we let them come here."

The grizzled old-timer waved the youth off as he hobbled to his workbench, set up against the rear window of the bay. "Arrogance and insecurity, just like any and all 'heroes' that history has to offer..." he stopped and searched his bench, then the floor around the bay and finally he retrieved that ratty piece of paper from beside the window.

"Ah, here it is..." he cooed. Then his beady eyes widened as he scanned the paper. "Hey! Who the hell scratched-in all the answers to my Sudoku puzzle!?"

The trip back home was uneventful. The pair of Raiden Hybrids descended to Earth in a slow, easy dive. They careened across the sky, flying over pale grasslands, then out across the purple-hued seas. Justin tried to enjoy the flight, but he was wary of his diving experience. He kept his mind guarded, pulled back from the Sensations Link, like a child who'd burned his hand on a stove, and didn't want to be burned twice. The distance he put between his noggin and the ship's systems affected his flying: his console controls were a little different to operate: he found himself under-correcting in flight and then overcompensating for the errors. He was used to his mental will providing a 'smooth edge' to his flying, telling the on-board computer what he wanted to do much more keenly than his hands could alone.

Sensation Links were reviled as unnecessary and grandiose embellishments on a ship, but Justin was quick to discover how easily one could become addicted to them.

His fellow pilot didn't fail to notice this. "*Gazer to Love*:" Chenine called to complain, "what's going on over there? You're making me nervous..."

*Nervous for herself...* he thought cynically. *She wouldn't be half as concerned with my flying if I weren't in point-position, then there'd be no danger to her ass...*

Despite his current foul temperament, he wanted to get Chenine's thoughts on his experience.

"Sorry," he replied, "I'm kinda flying with my Link half-cocked..."

"Half-cocked?" He imagined Chenine tilting her head slightly, like she always did.

"Well, it has to do with that thing, from earlier."

There was a pause. "You mean you're gun-shy because you were overconfident up in Alpha and gave yourself a seizure?"

"Because *something* gave me a seizure." He retorted with a growl. "Look, have you ever dived into your system?"

"Dove."

"What?"

"It's dove."

"Thank you," he sighed. "Now, have you?"

"Well, I've never *needed* to," she mused. "and I've never really wanted to, particularly."

"You've never been curious to see up your ship's skirt, so to speak?"

"As long as the *Gazer* works, that's good enough for me." She added, "as a matter of fact, it's always worked perfectly for me. I've never needed to diagnose any in-flight problems with it before."

"That's another thing," Justin interjected. "I thought the R-H's were supposed to be expertly tuned. Not only does the *Love* have a busted coolant rod, there's another pipe in my systems that's pumping... I dunno, evaporated antifreeze, or something."

"Antifreeze?"

"Well, it was sweet to taste. In the Link, anyway..."

"Are you sure you were sensing things accurately?" she asked. It was just like her to doubt his account.

"Pretty sure."

"Well, you could go yell at Tabris, or something." She suggested.

“With problems this serious, I think I might need to go directly to Roont.”

“Hmmm... That’s an idea,” Chenine’s voice was soft and dark. Justin noticed the change in tone, from her characteristic lack of emotion to subtle anger. He asked her about it.

“It’s nothing,” she replied evasively. “I need to tune my instruments,” she said (she was lying, Justin knew), “shouldn’t you be doing your approach report?” Without another word, she signed-off the channel.

“Of course, your highness...” He growled into the dead air. Justin sighed and scratched the back of his head. He was irritated by Chenine’s lack of curiosity or concern. He put the matter in the back of his head: forget about all the maintenance crap and let the Bydo Labs doctor deal with it.

*Nothing’s more fun than passing the buck...* he grinned.

Suddenly a flashing light blinked on his console: he realized that he was drifting downward, getting too close to the water below and that in a few seconds he’d be violating the Protocol for Marine Defense.

He corrected his course, with no shortage of irritation at himself. Justin shook his head as he realized that he simply couldn’t keep this kind of flying up: he had no choice but to invest a little more brainpower into his Sensation Link.

With a sudden chill he noticed something else, too: his ship *wasn’t* drifting downward because of his piloting errors. He checked his main systems’ power status and was alarmed to find them at critical.

The *Platonic Love* was shutting down.

“Holy shit...” he cursed softly. Justin scrambled, checking every single power system and gauge, as protocol demanded in this situation. He needed to find the problem, and now.

*Total power: 68 percent... Fuel Cell: adequate... Resource Usage: 33 percent possible yield...*

Justin cursed again: he couldn’t find the problem. All the numbers said that his *Raiden* should be operating normally, but his console was darkening and his main systems were becoming unresponsive.

It was powering down...

“Christ, Christ, Christ...” he spat, scrounging like mad to find a problem, *any* problem, anywhere.

*Fuel line: intact... General ship status: nominal...*

“What the hell!?” He barked, scrambling for other statistics.

*Engine status: intact / operable. Pragma-Class Sensations Link: 7 percent devotion... coolant reserves: adequate...*

“Something... anything...” he panicked. Justin was now just blindly looking for *some* problem, no matter how trivial. He grabbed the monitor behind his seat and checked the Impingement Factor.

The screen was flashing yellow, and read simply: “Impingement Factor: n/a”

*No help there, either...* he shook his head, angry with himself that he would check such a trivial statistic that couldn’t cause something like a total systems failure, no matter *what* the number was.

Justin yanked-back fully on his controls, doing all he could to keep the *Love* level, but it soon started dropping, slowly and ominously.

“Goddamnit!” He yelled. He bit his lip and dug his mind into the Sensation Link with force, mentally kicking the ship like a cowboy digging spurs into a horse, trying to push every ounce of effort into keeping the *Love* airborne.

He pushed... and pushed... and pushed...

Two things started happening, both of them unseen by Justin, who was closing his eyes in rapt concentration as sweat poured down his cheeks. First, the statistic for the “Pragma-Class Sensations Link” started rising rapidly, as was to be expected since his effort, or “devotion” to the Link, was rising like a kite. Second, that little monitor behind his seat, the one ranking his “Impingement Factor”, stopped flashing yellow and started to provide a real number in place of the ‘n/a’ error message.

He pushed... and pushed... and pushed...

“*Gazer to Love...*” Chenine wearily called into his canalphones. “Quit deviating from course: it’s annoying.”

“I *can’t*, damnit! I-” Justin stopped suddenly, opening his eyes and looking out his cockpit. The *Platonic Love* was screaming upward at a good click. His consoles were lit as usual, and every system was compliant and responsive.

“You what?” Chenine questioned, her voice laced with exasperation.

“Nothing...” Justin said sheepishly as he leveled-off. “Never mind.” Justin reclined in his seat and brushed the sweat from his brow.

*This whole day has been a God-damned comedy of errors...* he thought.

Justin felt like a used towel. “I shouldn’t have even rolled out of bed, today.” He lamented.

“Hmm.” Chenine answered without sympathy. “Isn’t it about time for that approach report of yours?”

“Yeah...” Justin said, softly. Two close calls in one day, and now he was being pressed by the little princess to give his report.

*She’s a great help*, he thought bitterly.

Justin cut the feed to Chenine’s ship and activated his black box. After a pause, to collect his nerves and thoughts, he started speaking, beginning with his trademark phrase:

“Well, I’m spacesick again, and dead tired, but it looks like the mission to Epdin is coming to a close.”

He briefly mentioned all the particulars of their trip, leaving out the close-call during his link-dive, as well as this recent unexplained systems failure. For one thing, announcing it to a potentially packed Ops room would be an embarrassing blemish on the R-H program (as well as upon Justin himself). Additionally, Justin knew that Aryl Wraith was not keen on letting anyone who wasn’t directly involved in the Hybrid program know about its dirty laundry, even the command staff at Base-10.

He switched-off his box and nestled into his seat. They were two hours out, thanks to the orbital speed of Station Alpha during their stay (why they couldn’t have put those satellites in geosynchronous orbit, he’d never know). The sun was getting lower in the sky, and Justin could look forward to a good 11 hours of standby at the base. Chenine, that lucky little lady, would be able to go home.

There was a small ‘ping’ noise ringing from his console. Justin checked it. “Chenine,” he called, “are you getting these energy readings?”

The girl grunted her assent into his canalphones. "I'm picking up plasma-type discharges from somewhere mark oh-1-5 ahead, but you're the one with the super sensors." She reminded him.

"Hmmm." Justin focused his scan on that region. "My computer just gave me a 'kindred' alert: I think someone's firing a photonic cannon... maybe a bunch of cannons, actually."

"And you got a 'kindred' alert?" She asked. "So that means we're talking Raiden-grade cannons?"

"Yeah," Justin agreed. "I'm getting an image now: I think there's a battle-group out there. Their ships are... hmmm..." he paused. "They're not in any formation at all... looks like they're, I dunno, dancing around."

"Dancing around?"

"Dancing and shooting."

Chenine clicked her tongue (that really annoyed the hell out of Justin). "Their call-sign is for Base-Sruighlea." She said as the data came to her. "I think they're part of the 'Salt-o-Scots' Squadron."

Justin was at a loss for explanations. "So, what, we've got a bunch of drunken Scotsmen flying around in R-Types, then?"

"Well, are there any targets out there, or anything else at *all*, for that matter?"

"Targets?" Justin smirked. "No, of course not." They would *know* if there were any new bogeys in from the Mass, and they certainly wouldn't have gotten this far undetected. "My spec-detectors are only reading the ships out there. I dunno *what* they're doing..."

But Justin remembered the Sphinx-demons, and how easily *they* seemed to penetrate Earth's available defenses. He tried to shake that thought from his mind. "Maybe it's some kind of training exercise, or something... but still..."

"I've heard that there are units out there that like to play with live-fire when they do training acrobatics..." the girl responded dubiously. Justin wasn't about to base his decision about the current situation on Chenine's knowledge of other Raiden units: she knew just as much as he did about the culture and goings-on's of a traditional Raiden group, which was next to nothing.

"What do we want to do, then?" Chenine asked.

Justin weighed his options. "I'll call the Aryl." He decided. "He can give us the communication code for that 'Salty-Scots' unit, or whatever they call themselves, and then we can ask them personally."

Justin terminated communication with the *Chaste Gazer* and, breaking his flight protocol, activated long-range communication. "Call-up computer: direct link to Base-10, please. Authorization is Storm, 12-15-22-5."



T I A