



Longitudinal Reflections

For three days the energy output of the Galilean Mass fell. What had once been a bright and malevolent beacon of power now barely even registered on any scan. Even the Active-System scans from the military's battle-cruisers at the staging-area near Jupiter started to lose track of it. The Mass's evil light seemed to die in the darkness of the gas giant's orbit.

At 0715 hours Greenwich Mean Time the Galilean Mass finally dropped off all Allied Military scans. Its outer skin was all but inert: its AW-Factor had peaked.

Then, at 0920 hours, all sensors and listening devices around the Jovian moons were bombarded by a sudden burst of raw energy and light: the incarnation wave had been unleashed.

By 1015 hours the first wave of Bydo creatures hit the outer perimeter of the Asteroid Belt. A full 70-percent of the skimming demons were knocked off their trans-dimensional highways by the Belt's poisons. Of those affected, nearly half hurtled helplessly through the frozen void of the Belt and, screaming and writhing, bled out their vile black blood and died like ants in a sea of insecticide.

All the rest either roared past the belt without batting an eye, or fell out of 'skimland' but survived long enough to blitz through the main concentration of Thantos Tails. Twenty Korang units and twelve full Raiden squadrons were waiting to greet them.

What followed would be called, mundanely, the '32nd Battle of the Belt'. The Allied Military was well-prepared for the assault, having expected the incarnation wave for some time. Once a Bydo Core's AW-Factor started rising, it followed a predictable course to a wave-discharge. It was as expected as a sunrise, or better yet, a supernova.

In all, about six-thousand incarnations made it through the Belt's blockade. Six-thousand points of ungodly yellow light streaked through the void of space and, screaming through the solar system unopposed, reached the Earth orbital.

By 1133 hours, the incarnations reached the outer limits of Epdin.

The horror that happened next is surreal. The front line of Bydo demons dropped out of their skimming states and began descending into the exosphere. At this point the

call was made and Epdin's main satellite array powered-up. Great, frightening blasts of light exploded from the superstructures, hitting and rebounding off the thousands of floating pillars and columns of the network. Within milliseconds a trillion beams of terrible, vicious light exploded around the planet like a bizarre, incomprehensible spider's web.

Few people could resist taking a magnifying glass to an ant or a roly-polly as a kid. It's one of those curious, innocent horrors inflicted on mindless insects by rosy-cheeked children everywhere. Now imagine not one ant, but a colony, thousands strong. And imagine not one magnifying lens, but a *million* shards of glass sending just as many deadly rays of raw energy down on those hapless insects below.

Salvador Dali would've loved to try his hand at painting the results of this clash. Legion upon legion of the incarnations disappeared in the lethal, yet strangely beautiful and holy light of the Earth Perimeter-Defense Network.

At 1200 hours there was a critical error in one of Epdin's computer processors: one power-relay station was brought offline and stopped collecting solar energy for use in the network. Immediately a thirty-mile hole was formed in the 'Epdin-o-Sphere', effectively breaking the spider's web.

At 1217 hours a second computer error caused a massive power-surge in the malfunctioning relay station. The energy built-up and destroyed the relay station in a massive eruption. All the spent energy discharged in a brutal electromagnetic pulse, which fell to Earth as a red-tinged bolt of lightning.

The EMP lightning landed at a point directly below the gaping hole in Epdin's energy-web. It hit an area called The Gulf.

It landed near a city called Nash Ultima.

The muffled pings of the general-alarm system echoed from far away. There was chaos outside the dingy locker room, and many footfalls echoed on the metallic floor outside.

Justin was sitting on a drab, rusty bench, alone in the dank room. His lower torso and legs were zipped-up in his tight *Liefde*-class flight-suit while the rubbery 'top' of his suit hung behind his bare back, connected to the bottom-half by some stitching just above his coccyx.

Justin's eyes were closed, and the only noise he heard apart from the muffled bleating of the base-alarm was the calm and steady *drip... drip... drip...* of water into one of the locker room's busted sinks.

He opened his eyes. They shone like a pair of bleak emeralds in the ratty room. Justin opened his right hand, revealing a thin silver necklace. The pendant dangling from the end was a tiny, simple cross.

"My hairs are counted... my toes numbered." He said defiantly into the darkness as he draped the pendant around his neck.

Then the door of the locker room rattled open, squeaking on the hinges. The blare of the sirens exponentially increased, and the alternating red-and-yellow warning lights from outside blazed across Justin's face, making him squint as his eyes adjusted.

The form in the doorway was too obscured by the light for Justin to make it out clearly, but from its thin frame and petite standing, he could easily tell who it was.

Chenine's arms were crossed and her legs set apart in a disinterested, informal pose. Her outline was extremely sleek and streamlined (more the product of her own skin-tight flight suit than any muscle-toning on her part). As his eyes adjusted, Justin could barely make-out the faint red heart outline set into the fabric of her black suit, trailing impiously around her crotch. The two upper bows of the heart swooped near the line of her umbilicus, the bottom tip disappeared as the design trailed between her legs. It was the personalized design for the pilot of the *Chaste Gazer*. Justin shook his head as he thought about that sexually-themed design: someone in the uniform department had a crude sense of humor.

"It's time." She said quietly, unemotionally.

Justin smirked as he stared down at the floor. "You know, last time I checked you've got two X-chromosomes in your genes, and you're supposed to knock before you enter the little boys' room." He looked up at her. "I could've been indecent."

Chenine shook her head. "Not my problem. You're late for the briefing: the Aryl's already waiting..." she paused as she noticed Justin's face for the first time: his left eye was marred by a deep black bruise; it circled the rim of his orbit with an unhealthy tint, making him look like a skinny zombie. A rhinoplastic-guard graced his nose. He sat before her, bare-chested with his arms off to either side, gripping the bench with both hands. A sickly purple bruise stood-out on his bare right side like a cancerous welt.

Justin noticed her looking and quickly brought the top of his suit around his chest and zipped it up at the back.

"You... look like hell." She said unsympathetically, as if she were reading aloud from a restaurant menu.

"Yeah," Justin acknowledged as he cinched the knots on his boots and secured the strap on his digital aviator's watch. "I took a tumble down a flight of stairs at World's End station." He said evasively. He took one last look around to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything, and then got to his feet. "...clumsy, huh?" He said awkwardly.

"Mmm." Chenine barely responded. She was doing everything she could to look impatient and bored, short of tapping her foot.

The pair dashed through a crowd of scrambling base staff and conventional fleet pilots. The duo looked like two lanky black crows in the midst of the other pilots, who all wore simple brown suits. They pushed their way past the mob and squeezed into a freight elevator.

It was packed with a gaggle of Command Ops staff, engineers, maintenance workers and other pilots. A loud siren was continually blaring over everyone's heads.

As if we didn't already know there was an emergency... Justin scowled.

The doors started to shut with a loud squeak. Pressed together in that sardine-can of an elevator, Chenine gave Justin a probing look with her pale blue eyes: one of them had to override the elevator's course.

Justin pretended not to notice her glance. Sometimes he was a true coward at heart, and right now he didn't want to be the one to piss off everyone in the lift. Chenine sighed with quiet exasperation and, as the doors slammed shut, called out over the noise of all the other passengers:

"Call-up computer: cancel current elevator route. Express-move to Docking Bay: Eastern end, R-Ring." There were a few light groans and sarcastic exclamations from

some of the elevator's occupants. Everyone expected these two black-clad 'walking-gods' to re-route the elevator, as was their right to do under the circumstances, but that didn't mean they had to like it. "Authorization is Chovert: 311-892-0-119" The white-headed girl finished.

As the elevator screamed down to the bowels of Base-10 the pilots' canalphones crackled and hissed. Sven Wraith spoke calmly and quietly into their ears. They could hear him quite well despite the chaotic noises all around them.

"Storm. Chovert."

"Yes, Aryl." The pair responded in synch, and in the faintest of whispers, their molar implants sending their voices to the RL with perfect clarity.

"As you're probably already aware, the Earth Perimeter-Defense Network failed within the last hour..."

"And at the worst possible place, too..." Justin whispered with frustration.

"Do *not* interrupt me, pilot!" The RL barked, his scratchy voice harsh with anger.

"I- I'm sorry, Aryl..." Chastised, Justin said this with a red-face, in his normal-volume voice. Several of the elevator passengers gave him odd looks, which made him blush even more.

Chenine kept her eyes closed but shook her head ever so slightly.

Wraith continued. "The location of the actual *hole* in the system isn't as worrisome as the other error from our friends in the sky: one of their orbiting plants blew itself apart and sent an EMP shockwave raining down from the sky. It swept across the Greater Gulf area. Naturally the hardware at Olivier and this Base weren't affected, given the military-grade keratinocyte in the exoskeletons of our respective buildings..."

"...but the City..." Chenine guessed, flicking her eyes open very slightly as she whispered.

"Just so." Wraith responded. "From our initial estimates, Nash Ultima is running at about 33 percent capacity; their power stations along the Western Wastes are all dead and, most importantly-"

"...their shielding-system is offline, isn't it?" Chenine finished.

"Mmm... I'm afraid their shielding-device is a rather delicate piece of equipment. Without an electrical protection substance surrounding it, like reinforced keratinocyte, the things just fall apart when they're hit with that much electrical interference."

"So, bottom line is, not only can the bogeys stream into this area, they can actually 'see' the City?" Justin asked.

"Bottom line is," Wraith growled, "if a suitable defense can't be mounted, and *soon*, the Great City at Nash Ultima won't be around by dinner time."

"Christ." Justin spat with his voice at regular-volume. Chenine just looked over to one side with her half-open eyes. Those milky eyes bled a thin veil of concern, but that was the only trace of emotion that could be gleaned from her posture.

The pilots exited the cramped elevator at the R-side of the docking ring. They sprinted over to the final lift that would take them down to the bay floors. They rode in silence, the only noises the steady blaring of the base alarm system and the rickety squeal of the cargo elevator as it descended on rusty hinges.

Chenine stood, feet together and hands folded neatly in front of her, with a ponderous, tortured look in her eyes.

“Talk to me.” She suddenly said.

Justin was leaning against the back of the lift; he seemed startled to hear his colleague’s docent voice. “What?” He asked, craning his head towards her. “Talk? About what?”

“Anything,” Chenine said. “It... it doesn’t matter. Just talk,” she shook her head as she pulled a small bottle from her satchel pocket, “please...” She shook a chalky white pill from the bottle and gulped it down. “How’d you get into the Allied Military? When did you enlist?”

Justin was baffled by Chenine’s sudden chattiness, but she appeared desperate to listen to someone talk, so he complied. “Well...” he began broadly, “I joined-up at a recruiting station back in the New England Territories. I’d been in college up there but...” he paused, considering the girl with a light glance, “but I decided to take a break from that.”

“A break?” She said, her eyes closed as she faced forward.

“Yeah, I enlisted with their aeronautics division, figuring I’d get assigned to one of the cargo supply routes. You know, nothing glamorous, but I flew civilian aircraft fairly often back in New England, and I thought I’d be useful to the A.M. in that capacity.”

Justin looked over at Chenine again, to gauge whether or not he was boring her yet, but the girl remained still as a statue with her eyes closed. He continued. “Well, they enrolled me in the aeronautic-applications program with that career in mind, but of course I ended up passing my Moro-Plantar Exam, so I was re-assigned to the VR training program. I guess the rest is history, so to speak...” there was more to this story than he was telling, but Justin didn’t go into it: he’d been forbidden from discussing the details of his ascendancy to the Raiden program with anyone, even with Chenine. Those orders came from Wraith himself.

“That’s it in a nutshell... well, what about you?” Justin asked weakly. After nearly a month of working side-by-side, the pair had never really talked about themselves like this, and Justin found it to be an awkward experience.

“Why’d you accept your R-H commission?” She ignored his query, nearly cutting Justin off with her rapid-fire questioning. She appeared to be fishing, just to keep the raven-haired man talking.

Whatever... he thought, with genuine confusion.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Justin retorted. “I never dreamed that I’d be given command of an actual offensive, combat-capable craft, let alone an R-Type ship. It’s great.”

“But the classification, and all the surgeries, augmentations, and the iron-tight regimen: why is it worth it, to you? *Is* it even worth it to you?”

Justin shrugged. “I guess I... well, I don’t know. I hate the Bydo, unconditionally. I’ve always hated them. Humans have always tried to grow, we try to better ourselves and be smart about our development, not that we’ve always gotten it right. But the Bydo don’t bother ‘developing’; they just grow, like a fungus or something. We explore: they invade. As far as I know, humans are the only true ‘light’ in the universe. You know: growth with grace, not just blind adaptation to change and conquest of all the eye can see.” He was now speaking with an almost reverent patriotism. “I hate the Bydo, but I love humanity.” He finished.

Chenine’s eyes opened into razor-thin slits at this. “You love ‘humanity’?”

“Yeah, sure.” He replied.

“But you can’t just love ‘humanity’...” she countered, her head tilted cutely to one side. “You can love a person, but I don’t think you can just say that you love all people, right?”

“Why not?”

“That... that thinking doesn’t have any meaning. It’s the kind of statement you’d expect to hear from some neutral observer, like someone who’s not human *or* Bydo. They’re words that a total outsider would use, or something. It just sounds like abstract nonsense to me.” She shrugged.

Justin looked like he was about to say something to counter Chenine’s argument, but then he just rested his elbows on the handrails and stared down at his black boots. He looked over at Chenine, her back turned to him, and contemplated the seam in her suit, which trailed along her spine as if it were a longitudinal line for her body. She’d wanted him to ‘talk’, and yet now she was mocking the content of his words. Sometimes he really hated her. He rested his head on the cold metal back of the lift. “Like a ‘total outsider’, huh? I guess sometimes you have to admire the Bydo’s ability to adapt...”

“Hmm?” Chenine asked softly.

“Nothing. Never mind.” He said tersely.

Justin considered his fellow Typer. Chenine was undeniably sexy, even a blind man could feel the electricity pulsing around her body, but she was, to Justin, a complete enigma. He looked again at her slim back and the unsightly seam of her suit, her ‘line of longitude’. He sure didn’t need a map to picture her underlying physical assets, but Justin figured that he’d need a fucking team of cartographers to understand Chenine’s noodle.

Then he switched from trying to understand the girl to simply resenting her again.

After a few seconds of silence, Chenine briefly looked over at Justin. Her face said that she regretted her previous words. She appeared uncertain what to say next.

“I’m...” she began quietly, “I’m sorry if I-”

“Forget it.” Justin waved her off. He smirked good-naturedly and ran a hand through his hair. “It’s nothing, really. You’re probably right when you called it ‘abstract nonsense’ Sometimes I really enjoy spouting nonsense. It’s an annoying little hobby of mine...”

His grin and his affable mannerisms were all totally fake. Chenine could tell, he knew, but she didn’t seem to care. In any event, she appeared to have her fill of conversation for the moment, and the pair rode down to the Raiden mooring floors in silence.

The duo were thrust into bedlam as soon as the freight elevator landed on the mooring floor.

“Prep those pilots and get their asses into those ships: now!” Justin looked up and saw the bright flash of Sam Roont’s eyeglasses high above them on the superior floor. A nurse swooped in front of the pair and accosted them with two small pink vials.

“Enhancin.” She told them.

“I’m actually good on mine.” Justin said, shaking his head.

“Combat precaution.” Sven Wraith appeared behind them quite unexpectedly.

“Drink it.” He waited for them to down the shining pink fluid, then put a hand on each of their backs and pushed them forward into a throng of deckhands and techs. They

swarmed around Justin and Chenine, pulling the pair apart as they led them through the bay. With Roont and the docking bay staff in the superior bay above them, the large mooring area felt like a big, grim arena, and he and Chenine seemed to be a spectacle for the masses.

Despite the tension in his body as he prepared for the imminent battle, Justin could find some humor in the scene. *If I'd known that we'd be doing the 'Christians to the lions' thing I could have flown-out to get 'em a pussycat for the occasion...*

"Set out the prongs on their thoracic spikes!" Roont called from upon high.

"Woah, hey..." Justin raised his hands and looked up at Roont, then back across the crowd of techs at Wraith. "Is that really necessary?"

The RL absently scratched his clean-cut chin. "We're leaving nothing to chance in this engagement. The good doctor is insisting on perfect connectivity with your links, to offset any chance for errors to creep into the fight. After all, there's still residual EMP activity in the affected area." He paused. "I am sorry, but you're going to need to allow this."

Chenine bit her lip. Her eyes flickered with quiet alarm, but she turned her back to the techs around her and bowed her head to allow them full-access to her back: with her head forward her silvery locks were out of the way.

Don't electromagnetic pulses fade away right after they discharge? Justin thought, but he nonetheless positioned his back towards the techs around him.

The techs, girded in plastic light-green clean suits, produced several odd-looking wands and held them at specific places along the pilots' backs, about two inches from their bodies. Justin's breathing quickened.

One of the techs, a gruff and cruel-looking man, began the countdown in a deep, booming voice. "Set charges!" The wands suddenly blazed with a cold electrical light. Sparks danced off their tips. Wraith approached both pilots from behind and set in an electrical frequency for the wands. The codes were Justin and Chenine's personal 'prong-reaction' frequencies, and the information was classified to an ungodly degree.

The cruel-lipped tech barked: "Countdown to discharge: in seven... six... five... four... three..."

Justin scrunched his fists and shut his eyes tightly.

Chenine's lips parted in a limp, submissive gape.

"...two, one... *discharge!*"

Blue fire exploded from the tips of every wand. Justin screamed in pain as his muscles spasmed. His body bucked involuntarily and his back arched to an extreme degree. Raw colors exploded in his head. Crude smells filled his mental sinuses.

"Augh!" He cried again as one dozen tiny spikes suddenly burst from his skin, cutting through his suit as if it were Saran-wrap. The spikes ran down his back along his spinal column, like a bizarre collection of 12-gauge syringe needles. The locations of the spikes corresponded to the natural spiny protrusions of Justin's thoracic vertebrae.

He fell to his knees, panting through grinding teeth. Two techs attempted to help him back to his feet, but Justin pulled away from them.

"Get your fuckin' hands *off me!*" He roared.

Chenine gasped, as if all the air had been knocked out of her, then she arched her back and screamed. She fell forward and landed on her face, completely prone on the

cold metal floor. Twelve metallic thoracic spikes jutted from her back as well. Two techs helped her back to her feet.

The nebulous Wraith didn't bat an eye, or even flinch, as his pilots were subjected to this agony. If he felt any compassion for them at all, it was buried deep within him.

That's not to say he *didn't* feel any compassion, though.

Sam Roont stood with his arms crossed over his chest, a small and unhealthy smirk on his sweat-caked face.

"You're a sadistic pig, you know that?" The lady doctor spat from behind him. The pair watched as Justin and Chenine's Link Prongs were exposed.

"It's all quite necessary for the operation, I assure you, my lady." Roont threw the woman a lascivious look. He was chewing on the end of an unlit cigarette. "Besides, as I recall, *you* were the one who oversaw the surgery to implant those Prongs, isn't that right?"

The lady crossed her own arms and gave Roont a very dark look. "I oppose *all* augmentation on moral and medical grounds, but my opinions don't carry much weight in the chain of command. The military has a way of making us violate the Hippocratic Oath on a fairly regular basis..."

"You of all people should know that Hippocrates wrote that little laundry-list to preserve the quality of human life. Well, that's exactly what we're doing here, in the long run. With ships as potentially powerful as the R-H's stand to be, the poor Bydo don't have a chance."

"So you think you're a hero? Building the biggest guns, huh? Are you sure it's not just to compensate for your masculine inadequacies?"

Roont flashed the feisty woman a look that said he desperately wanted to smack her, but restrained his impulses and watched the pilots as they were loaded into their respective ships. He picked out his assistant, Scott Tabris, down on the floor, helping Little Miss CRTS clamber into the cockpit of the *Chaste Gazer*. With a boyish blush, he pushed the thin girl up onto the railing with one hand at the small of her back and another one hesitantly supporting her buttocks.

Watch yourself around that 'government property', my little friend... he sneered.

Roont considered the RL's orders, making both pilots have their Link Prongs extended. That was an unnecessary move.

You're a real cool customer, Wraith, I'll give you that.

The good doctor had been very specific in his orders. Chenine was the first test subject, and therefore *only* Chenine needed her Prongs extended for this exercise. He'd injected the little trollop with the final round of serums just yesterday. But here (and Roont could only assume that it was to allay suspicion) Wraith had ordered *both* pilots to extend their Prongs.

You magnificent hard-ass, you... he smirked as he considered the steel-eyed RL. *You're far more sadistic than I could ever be...*

Sweat dripped down Laura Hayle's forehead as she shot through the logistics program on her computer like a cheetah, her fingers dancing around the touch-screen monitor with almost superhuman speed.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah... set the third group of corvettes for launch in seven minutes, you got that? *Seven*. They’ll go out after the fifth Korang group leaves from bay K-33.”

Quartermaster Plinshine came up on one of her monitors. “Lieutenant, the fifth K-group hasn’t even *started* to leave its bay, yet.” He complained with his nasal whine.

“Rrgh! Why the heck *not*?” She asked while motioning for Jen, who was manning her usual post beside the Lieutenant.

“They’re slinging-out those Raidens, and the exit point of K-33 blocks the launch tunnels of bays R-A and R-B.”

“Well, geez, Donald: did you ask the duty-officer at the Raiden bays to hold-off on their launch until we can get the Korangs out?”

Plinshine’s screechy voice was laced with sarcasm. “Do *you* want to ask them?” The pimple-marked Quartermaster shook his head, eyeing her with frustration through his coke-bottle glasses.

Laura sighed. “No, of course not... forget it. Just make sure all the other bays are ready for launch as soon as the R-H’s clear, okay?”

“Hmm.” He grunted as his picture flashed off the screen.

“Jen,” Laura turned to the girl with intent eyes, “bring-up the detailed schematics on Nash Ultima, the in-depth ones with all the restricted areas marked on it. Feed it to the other workstations and get started on mapping possible staging areas and combat-lines for our deployments.”

Jen rifled through her systems until she found the classified blueprints of the Great City. “I need level-4 access to see that file...”

Laura, still blazing though her computer like a woman possessed, flitted her eyes towards the large panoramic window of Ops. “Commander, sir, could I request a little declassification, please?”

Ron Faught was staring out across the water, watching a constant stream of Korangs, corvettes and fixed-wing fighters stream outward from the base, as if they formed their very own line of longitude across the planet. He felt a large ripple of militaristic pride course through his old, battle-scarred veins. He turned his head towards Laura, his wrinkled eyes almost totally obscured by his sharp-brimmed uniform hat. “Call-up computer: release all locks on any and all schematics for the Great City at Nash Ultima... Commander’s prerogative.” He drawled in his grandfatherly voice.

“Thank you, sir.” Hayle answered as she continued blazing though her systems.

There was electricity in Ops. Everyone from the privates shuttling information between departments and workstations all the way up to the senior command staff was on edge. This was the second combat-scenario that Base-10 had seen recently, and while the base *itself* wouldn’t be an active participant, the mood was still very tense.

Scott Tabris sprung from the Ops elevator and bounded into the hot-zone. He slid over to Lieutenant Hayle’s workstation.

“Hello, all. Hello, lieutenant, hello Jenny...” he teased Jen, who flashed him a hateful glance. He turned back to Laura. “What can I do for you, lieutenant?”

“Just slip an IV of pure-grain Arabica coffee into my wrist, and we’ll be good to go...” Laura mumbled as she frantically coordinated the remaining ship-launches.

“Wow...” Scott exclaimed as he looked out the panorama window. The base-fleet was streaming out from under them off into the horizon in a strong, shimmering line. The

orange fire of their engines danced on the purple waters of the Gulf like the tails of fireflies.

Scott pressed his face to the glass, watching as the large fleet roared beneath him in a surreal line.

“Enjoying the view?”

“Oh, yeah...” Tabris nodded absently, not looking away from the great moving mass.

“Quite a sight, huh?”

“Absolutely...” he said with a grin, looking over to his left side. He jumped in surprise as Commander Faught’s beady, hardened eyes burned through him like lasers.

“Then perhaps you’ll be good enough to get to work and help keep those soldiers in the air?” He growled.

Tabris jumped back from the window like a startled cat and practically dove into his seat.

“Smooth, ‘Scotty’...” Jen chortled as she worked on the fleet deployment orders. Scott reciprocated with his own dark stare, but he didn’t say anything as he pulled-up his computer monitor and logged into his station.

“Ugh...” Laura lay back in her chair, pulling some stray blond hairs away from her face. “That’s the last of them. Everyone’s set to go.”

“Excellent, Lieutenant.” Faught turned to compliment his senior duty-officer. His eyes narrowed into wrinkly slits as Sven Wraith hobbled into the hot-zone of Ops.

“Ready to rock and roll?” He quipped with a wide grin. “It’s a lovely day for a holocaust of fire, isn’t it?” He balanced his left hand on an ensign’s chair and twirled his black cane once around his right hand.

He was in a good mood. None of the techs or staff in Ops acknowledged his spontaneous break in character. From their own experience they knew that Wraith could be like a playful cougar with its prey: he sometimes liked to fool around with his staff before snapping their heads off. It was just one of his tricks to put people off-guard.

Laura Hayle was the only one to crack a warm smile at his mood.

The Commander most certainly did not smirk at Wraith’s lighthearted antics. In fact, their very first argument of the day broke out within thirty seconds of Wraith’s arrival at Ops.

“I owe you a pack of bubblegum...” Laura whispered softly to Jen as the old commander and the younger RL bickered. After the heated exchange, Wraith hobbled over to Laura’s workstation.

“Pleasant day to you, Hayle.”

“Subcommander, sir.” She stood and saluted. Wraith ordered her at ease with a wave of his white-gloved hand.

“Lieutenant, for this engagement you’re going to be in charge of direct radio support for the Tears’ Shower Squadron. Is that understood?”

Laura hesitantly protested. “Uh, sir, I’m supposed to handle the-”

“Precision targeting for the artillery strikes.” He interrupted. “I know. I’ve ‘borrowed’ you from your Commander, temporarily.”

“Why?” She asked, forgetting that it was quite out of turn *to* ask.

“I’m not in the habit of overly praising base staff, so let me just say that you’re the most qualified person in Ops to provide their logistical support.”

Out of modesty, Laura didn't react to this statement. *Well, not to be immodest, but I'm a friggin' cheetah with the consoles, however...* "won't there be a hole in artillery logistics if I--"

"I've whored myself out to the Commander to head-up that task, Lieutenant." He leaned forward. "It's the price I pay for getting the best duty-officer available to work for my pilots, so I'd appreciate your full-attention to the task, is that understood?"

Laura blinked. "Of course, sir..." she replied, with another salute.

Wraith walked off a few paces and looked out the window at the moving base-fleet. As impressive as Miss Hayle's prowess might be at logistics, he frankly didn't give a damn. He could handle the task of directly supporting his pilots just as well as Laura could. The truth was he was nervous. He was *damn* nervous. The wheel had been spun, the die cast, and whatever other trite cliché one could think of. The only question left was this: would both ships survive this? And, less importantly, but still germane: would both *pilots* survive this? As tough as Wraith's nerves were, he couldn't bear to be front-and-center for the event. He couldn't stand the pressure of the play-by-play.

The situation was quite simple for him. If the ships returned home at the end of the day, he would puff away at Caribes for the rest of the night. Hell, he'd even invite that ass Roont over for a smoke-session; his joy would be too great to be tempered even by the good doctor's immense ego. Conversely, of course, if the Raidens were killed-off in the battle, he was a dead man. 'Johnny' would roll on Wraith's scheming, and his little independent conspiracy against Epdin, to save his own skin.

One can't blame him, of course...

And the Committee, he knew, would never tolerate such 'independence' in him, their humble gimp of an operative.

Ron Faught coughed loudly and positioned himself imposingly in the center of Command Ops. The white light of the afternoon sun danced around his immaculately-pressed uniform and square-shouldered, bulldog profile. The light, and the pose, seemed to take ten years off the Commander's age.

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen, let's settle down, here." His steady voice easily carried across the entirety of Ops. "Times like these I remember a little advice that was given to me many years ago. Not that my scars and wrinkles don't already do a good job, but I would be dating myself if I told you all exactly when I was given this advice. All I'll say is that it was back during the Arabian Wars, when men still fought each other, instead of a mindless hoard of monsters. Back then the greatest enemy to this miserable little pebble of a planet was the willful and deliberate darkness in the hearts of men, not the mindless aggression of an alien Mass."

Sven sighed and rested his leg against a table. "We could be here awhile..." Laura looked back at him, stunned to hear the RL's sarcastic voice from behind her; it was loud enough to startle her but probably soft enough to go unnoticed by the Commander.

"The times have changed. Many things have changed since those days, but that piece of advice I was given all that time ago holds true even today. As a fresh-faced recruit in the New NATO Guard, in a foxhole amid all those sandstorms that burned my skin and the dark desert nights when the ground was colder than a grave, an old timer in the force told me this: 'Your enemy will fear you for three reasons: because you have the courage to face your opponent, the ability to stare them down, and the resolve to finish the job.'"

His bushy white moustache twitched as he spoke. “That was the roadmap to victory over a human opponent. But rest assured: those three cardinal principles can strike fear into the hearts of those *things* out there as well, if we exercise judicious planning and sound judgment-”

“Five.” Wraith blatantly interrupted, one hand on the communication-device in his left ear.

Faught set his ancient eyes on the RL. If his black pupils were gun barrels, he’d certainly have shot him. “What was that, subcommander?” he growled.

“There are five things they should fear from us. Of course those three things you mentioned are all good and well...”

“And just what would you like to add, Wraith?” He snarled.

The RL didn’t say anything for a few seconds, he just smirked with satisfaction. Then, quite suddenly, Ops began to rumble and, with the chaotic shock of a sonic boom, the *Chaste Gazer* and *Platonic Love* exploded past the building on either side.

“The R-H’s, of course.” Wraith smirked, two fingers extended towards the grizzled Commander as techs and support staff scrambled to keep their papers from falling off the rumbling tables.

The room stopped shaking, and the rumbling, which was like the roar of a fright-train, ceased. The Raiden-Hybrids screamed over the water, flying far above the disciplined line of the base-fleet. Fire flared from their engines in two elegant blue streaks. If the ships in the base-fleet were sedate, blinking fireflies, then the Raidens were certainly something else. They were more vicious, ominous creatures: dragonflies with long tails.

Together with the rest of Base-10’s forces, Justin and Chenine rocketed out towards the Great City at Nash Ultima, chasing the setting sun like a pair of playful birds, dancing into the hands of fate.

