



### **Naked From the Nest**

The morning sun blazed on the horizon like a cold diamond; white light danced playfully on the warm sea. Chenine Chovert pursed her lips, lounging motionless in the cockpit of her ship.

“This is the *Chaste Gazer*. It is 0618 hours on the seventeenth of May. Raiden status: nominal. Fuel cell: nominal. Absolute power: 83 percent.” Chenine reached around behind her seat and consulted a lone monitor set apart from all others. Her milky blue eyes glinted lazily in the dark cockpit. “Impingement Factor is times 1.08”

The pilot lay back in her seat, fully reclined. She was very nearly supine, and even though her legs were pinned uncomfortably between her seat and the ship’s consoles Chenine made no move to adjust her position. It was pointless: the cockpit was far too small, and the pilot’s space far too cramped, for any measure of comfort. She wasn’t complaining, and in all fairness she didn’t really care, either, but it was an observation.

The silver-haired pilot narrowed her eyes and shielded her face from the rising sun, which was beginning to stream in through the slits of her side panels. She had covered the baseline statistics for the ship, now it was time to send off her approach report to the silent, listening ears at Base-10 as they scanned her frequency from across two hundred miles of blue water.

“The operation to the station at Mount Olivier was accomplished at 1830 hours yesterday. The twenty excess fuel cell chargers from our base were exchanged for the items we had requested. I have the shipping and exchange manifests onboard.” Her voice

was even and monotonous. Before she could continue, a curt voice filled the cockpit and cut her off:

“This is Base-10 command, senior branch. What is the status of the cargo?”

“The items we have requested are-”

“This frequency is scrambled and secure, Miss Chovert, there’s no need for euphemisms.” This was a new voice, scratchy and steeped in impatience. An invisible smile graced Chenine’s lips: that would be the base’s RL: Sven Wraith himself. She pictured him, sitting in his command office with a cigarette in hand; a haze of smoke hanging around him like an aura.

“Understood, sir.” She docilely replied. “As requested, I’m carrying the five type-B control rods on board in their liquid gel housing units-”

Sven’s voice was on top of hers. “What’s condition of those housing units?”

“They can contain the matter in the rods for about another 195 minutes.”

A slight pause. “No more than that?”

Now it was Chenine’s turn to pause. She rechecked her cargo monitor. “I don’t think so,” she emotionlessly opined. “at least, that’s what the quartermaster told me.”

There was a longer pause on the air. Chenine was now sitting up. It was against protocol for an R-Type ship to be contacted directly from its base on return (that was the reason for the pilots’ approach reports), but the breach of protocol didn’t concern this pilot. In fact, Chenine was usually unfazed by irregularity, or surprises. She thought they were interesting. Her eyes were just as sleepy now as they had been minutes ago.

Finally a decision came from the base. Another voice, a female technician at command ops, came on the line: “Pilot, increase your thrust by 70 percent and expect clearance for docking bay R-B, inferior level, that’s R-B, on your arrival.”

She cocked her head, ever so slightly. “My current altitude is 100 feet above sea level. If I drive the ship that hard I’ll generate shockwave damage to the surface. I recommend-”

Wraith was back on the line. “Forget that nonsense. You’re exempt from the protocols for marine-life defense for the moment. The priority is speedy arrival. Now: *accelerate*, Chenine.”

She didn’t say anything. The sun’s rising light swam over the ocean, streaming into the cockpit and bathing her slim face in radiant whiteness. She tapped a couple of panels on her main monitor. A ruddy red flash illuminated the screen. Chenine’s vision momentarily blurred and her stomach did a little somersault. Then everything was as before, except now she was moving at a ludicrous rate of speed.

Chenine reclined in her chair again and closed her eyes. Her RL’s impatience and curtness were relatively normal, but that sense of urgency he displayed was not. Nor was it normal for command ops to break their radio silence on her approach, violating protocol.

But if Chenine had any curiosity about such things, it was minimal at best. As it was, she commented on the occurrence with a single word and returned to her light doze.

“Interesting...” she said as she folded her arms across her midsection and closed her eyes.

Sven Wraith, the RL of Base-10, was sitting in his office, cigarette in hand, with a haze of smoke surrounding him like an aura.

Outside in command ops Lieutenant Laura Hayle was on the line with the pilot of the *Chaste Gazer*. Wraith called to her: “Tell Miss Chovert to approach at the *Love’s* docking station and inform the receiving crews to collect the cargo there. They can put the *Love’s* replacement rod into it immediately.”

“And what about the remaining cargo, sir?” the lieutenant asked.

Wraith shook his head. “The crew has prescribed orders for the rest of the cargo. Don’t concern yourself with it” he said simply, and with a note of finality.

It was hot and unbearably muggy in Base-10’s docking ring. It was always hot and muggy in this Spartan, metal hull, but in the R-section it was always the worst. The base’s R-Type units were housed far away from the general fleet that comprised the bulk of Base-10’s force, in a little-used section, and it seemed that the air conditioning units were accordingly poor.

Justin Storm stared out the small docking ring window, gazing longingly at the salty sea water on the horizon. He marveled at how quickly the sea had recovered. Right after the Bydo’s Great Assault the ocean had looked like a dead field of graphite, but now, only 20 years after the False Moon’s impact, the oceans were becoming blue again. Of course the water was still unfit for humans, of all creatures. He thought of the station’s desalinization plant, which was of course not working.

Then he thought about the 450 gallons of freshwater that was due from the *Chaste Gazer*. He kept staring at the still seawater outside. Justin was comically reminded of a grade-school rhyme:

*Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink...*

Suddenly there was a quick flash by the window, followed by a tremendous shockwave blast; it rattled Justin’s teeth even as it traveled through the thick armor plating of the ring. Justin’s ears rang for several seconds after it had passed.

“Holy God,” he steadied himself on a railing as the noise died down. “What the hell was *that*?”

Behind him a small, bearded man had been hammering on a rusty pipe, other pipe pieces lay scattered around him. He had the appearance of a dwarf, or maybe even a gnome. His looks were comical, but with his serious, hard-lined face, few people would express that sentiment to him directly. He answered Justin’s question without looking up. “That’ll be Chenine coming home.”

Justin looked incredulous. “The *Gazer*? Pyotr, you’re telling me *that* was Chenine ‘coming home’? You mean that friggin’ blur?”

The old mechanic sighed, as if addressing a small child. “Okay, to specify: that was Chenine coming home like a bat out of hell...”

“How the hell can you be sure?”

The gnomish man looked hard at Justin with biting eyes through his thin spectacles. “I’ve worked on tuning that ship’s engines for longer than you’ve been a certified pilot, Mister Storm,” he spat, “and that’s how I know.”

Justin conceded the point. “She’s gotta be carrying some precious cargo to be hauling like that. I couldn’t guess how fast that was...”

“Mach times 2.5” Pyotr said matter-of-factly. “and would you like to know the rate of deceleration?”

Justin shook his head in annoyance. It was always impossible to know if Pyotr Frieze was bullshitting or not. Since coming to Base-10, Justin had learned that it was best to accept Pyotr's judgment in technical matters, usually because he was right.

"I tell you, there's less salt in the ocean than oomph in those engines of yours."

"Hmmm." Justin agreed, absentmindedly. Then his thoughts were drawn back to one very important subject: water. He jumped up from the railing and hopped over to the transfer carriage, nestled against the back wall of the ring. "Chenine's bringing some real, high-quality H<sub>2</sub>O from Mount Olivier: you wanna hit it?"

Not looking up from his work, Pyotr shook his head. "Us veterans of Base-10 do just fine with the stuff that comes out of the synthetics plant: it's just you newbie babies that need the other stuff. Besides, these god-damned fuel tubes are in a terrible mess, and I can't even start refitting the *Gazer* without fixing them first."

"Suit yourself." He replied curtly and took the transfer carriage down to docking bay R-A. After finding that bay empty he scratched his head before suddenly brightening.

*She's gone to my docking bay: that means there's something special in her cargo for the Love...*

"Computer, let's go to bay R-B."

Fifteen floors above the docking ring, in Central Ops, there were warning lights flashing and a loud buzzer ringing. The relative calm of the command station was replaced with the fast-paced buzz of emergency protocol.

"Laura, cut those noises off." Sven ordered as he limped onto the control deck from his adjoining office. The alarms ceased, and the only noises in ops were the scrambling of technicians, the mad clicking of dexterous fingers on control panels, and the steady 'thump... thump... thump' of Sven's black cane as he approached Laura Hayle's workstation.

"What's the situation, Lieutenant?"

"We just got peppered with an active-system scan. Base-4 got it 14 minutes ago, and Mount Olivier reports the same phenomenon 33 minutes ago."

Wraith's steely lower jaw clenched, but his eyes remained stoic. "Why didn't we get this information from the other bases sooner?"

Another technician from across the room replied: "Sir, the scan is moving from 45 degrees NNE, from the direction of the other two bases; it was obscuring transmission of their radio signals before it hit us."

"And now it's moved past us, on out into the open ocean." Lieutenant Hayle finished.

Sven leaned down near Laura, his cane nearly entangled in her long blond locks. "What is the organization strength of the signal?"

Hayle looked behind her, startled that RL Wraith would approach her so closely, or at least not expecting it. Wraith's soft voice implied that he expected a soft response from her. "Sir, I'm extrapolating a source... the origin is located within 5 AU of the solar center. Direction... is 36 degrees planar, mark naught..." Laura's blue eyes blazed with concentration as she studied her monitor. "The source is unspecified, but it's coming from somewhere in the area of the Jovian moons."

"Jupiter..." the technician to Laura's right added with awe. "Could they really appear that close?"

“What is the *organization* of the signal, lieutenant?” Sven repeated impatiently.

“Particle scatter is 2,000 parts per million; refinement is low. It’s pretty wide and disorganized, sir. The focus of that scan was nearly nil.”

“Hmph.” Sven grunted, thinking quietly to himself.

Lieutenant Hayle was far less stoic than the RL. *What’s there to think about? That’s an active-system scan from a pinpoint source. Organized or not, there’s only one thing that could hit us like this... The RL has got to know what this is...*

“Cancel alert status and maintain nominal base conditions.” Sven ordered.

“...Sir...?” Hayle asked, incredulous.

“You heard me, Lieutenant.”

“Shouldn’t we put the primary engagement fleet on standby. I mean, they’re still out in the Lone Islands, and the target could be planning to come in hot. It’s possible that they could even be moving on-”

Sven looked at her dangerously. “That signal is pathetically wide-ranged, girl, and weak. Assuming we have contact with a target, we don’t need to wet ourselves. It gains *nothing* from that scan. All it’s done is confirmed that we humans are still here on Earth, *and* it’s given its location away in the meantime. We’ll keep channels open and accept orders from the joint superior command. *They* will call for us, if needed.”

“*Wraith!*” A loud voice bellowed from behind. Base Commander Ron Faught pushed his way past busy technicians to confront the RL.

Sven smiled to himself. This was just one of the unpleasantries of his assignment. He purposely kept odd hours at Command Ops to avoid the bombastic commander.

“Wraith, you’re completely out of your God-damned mind if you’re thinking about keeping the base at normal status after that kind of activity.” The 60-something commander sneered at the RL over his bushy white moustache. “Seems I can’t leave this place for a minute without you slithering into things that don’t concern you...”

“Again, assuming we have contact with a target, and we are not under *direct* attack, Commander, a first-alert status requires our joint concurrence.”

“The hell it does, Wraith. We’ve got the bulk of our forces out at Isla Lian, and they *need* to be recalled.” Faught was visibly irate at Sven’s attitude, as well as his ice-cold demeanor. The Commander was of an old-school military mind, using calm when appropriate, and rage when needed. But the RL was a totally different story. Wraith was *never* angry, nor was he ever visibly pleased or even seen to grin while in Command Ops. His casual detachment and rigid, snakelike stubbornness were only some of the reasons that Faught distrusted and disliked the base’s Raiden-Leader.

Wraith didn’t even turn to face Faught. “Commander, until a direct threat to the station presents itself, or until superior command orders you to act, the base Raiden-Leader has joint say in raising the alert level: and I say cooler heads will prevail.”

“And just what in God’s name is your basis for refusing a general alert? A blind man can see that the Bydo are knocking on the door!” This was the first time ‘that word’ had been used in the control room. Its effect was chilling: a sudden silence filled the bustling Ops room.

The RL turned to face the commander. Even leaning on his pale black cane Sven Wraith was an imposing presence. The cane should have conveyed vulnerability in the 32-year-old RL, but it did not. His face, with a jagged white scar down the left side, was stern and severe. He exuded no sign of vulnerability, or of warmth. But he was also not

frightening; there was no sign of intense cruelty in him that might put someone on their guard.

Wraith was most dangerous when he was underestimated.

He was more appeasing now. "Sir, if they're at Jupiter then they've got a ways to go to get here. They're going to spread out as they approach, and the defense groupings at the Belt will likely *not* be sufficient. Our forces will be of no use just blindly closing in at the Base. Isla Lian is a more practical standby point for your fleet; it's centralized so they can easily be sent anywhere quickly. Give the situation time, and we'll see what the target has planned for us."

Faught bristled his moustache and sneered, towering over Wraith. The tension in the room was thicker than blood. Wraith was technically correct as far as protocol was concerned; he *could* quash the deployment orders, and Faught knew it.

*God-damned RL's... them and the damn Raidens they control. They'll be the death of us yet...*

Faught leaned in to Wraith. "I'm ordering my fighters to Secondary Alert status. If we get a whiff of anything crossing the Belt and even approaching our *hemisphere* I'm bringing the very hand of God back to this area, understood?"

Wraith was unemotional. "That's your prerogative." He began tottering away to his office. "...and probably a good idea, if it comes to that..."

Faught's sneer intensified. *To hell with them all, RL's and Raidens...*

There was a male technician in Ops, sitting two consoles down from Laura Hayle. He had watched the two men covertly, and he was far more uneasy with the situation.

*...That scan... Dr. Roont... Is it possible that the Bydo could actually be looking for them?*

Docking station R-B was now open to the elements of the morning sea. The main metal canopy was retracted, and down on the inferior portion of the deck the *Chaste Gazer* was being pulled in by sleek metal cranes.

The *Gazer* was in many ways a typical-looking Raiden-class spaceship: she had a length of just under 50 meters and a tip-to-tip wingspan of 35 meters. The entire outside of the streamlined craft had a pearl-like finish, with some milky impurity that made it look like a giant carved opal. As with most R-Types, there was room in the small, thin cockpit for only one pilot (the pilots commonly joked that Raidens can quite comfortably seat a person, as long as one has no legs, shoulders or balls).

Chenine was two-for-three on that score, and she rather looked forward to stretching her spine on the outside of the docking ring. The sun was still rising on the horizon, and she thought she might enjoy watching that.

She was gathering-up her equipment and set her hands on the canopy release hatch when something strange flooded her senses: her nostrils flared as she smelled some kind of sulphurous burning, the taste of citric acid invaded her tongue, and intense vertigo suddenly seized her stomach.

The cockpit lit up with alarm lights and random systems began activating and deactivating. Although docked, the *Chaste Gazer* was still fully on and operational, so Chenine still had a low-level sensational link with the ship's systems. She sank in her seat as she visualized the disturbance.

Before her eyes she saw a trillion specks of light blasting through the cockpit canopy. A wall of red-tinted light passed through the front of the ship, over the instrument panels, up Chenine's legs and over her midsection, bathing her and the dark cockpit with malevolent, invisible light. It passed up her chest and head, and then vanished as it reached the rear of the ship.

It disappeared as it moved on, out into the ocean.

Stunned (but still composed), Chenine didn't react as the canopy hissed and cool, fresh air flooded the cockpit. Several strong hands were lifting the mother-of-pearl canopy lid off the cockpit. A docking ring technician poked his head into the craft, sweat beading on his head.

"Hey, pilot: you all right in there?" He called. Chenine waved him off and nodded, groggily.

"Miss Chovert!" another voice squeaked from the deck below.

Chenine leaned lazily out of the cockpit and looked down at the mooring deck, a full 15 meters below her. Donald Plinshine, the bay coordinator, was staring up at her with his Coke-bottle glasses glinting and that ever-present clipboard in his hand.

"Why didn't you release the canopy-drop on your ship?" His nasally voice permeated the large bay. "Was there a problem with the equipment?"

"...no." she replied, dazed.

While supervising the lowering of the *Gazer* onto the mooring deck, Donald consulted his pad. "We got some... kinda strange readings from your ship a second ago. Any idea what it was, Miss Chovert?"

Chenine held the side of the *Gazer* tightly as she came down to ground-level, half of her still inside the cockpit.

"It was something... interesting..." was all she managed. After that point, she proceeded to throw-up all over the side of that pretty opal ship, and it took two steady hands on either side of her to get her off the bay floor and to the toilet, where she continued vomiting for some time.

RL Wraith was reclined in his chair, locked securely in his office. The only source of light was from his small desk lamp, which cast eerie shadows over the mountains of semi-ordered paperwork and forms that were strewn about his office.

"It's really no good pissing Ronnie off like that, you know." An anonymous voice crackled from Wraith's speakerphone. "You don't want to needlessly antagonize the man. After all, he is the Base Commander..."

"It's not antagonism, it's confrontation, and I thought confrontation was part of the job when I signed on. Was I really so wrong?" Wraith sighed, exhaling a mouthful of cigar smoke into the hazy room. It was a Carib, the only kind of cigar he smoked and one of the few perks of an RL's salary.

"It's not part of the job when it just pisses people off and doesn't get us any nearer to our objectives..."

"As a matter of fact," Wraith broke in while stamping out his cigar in a glass ashtray, "I *am* advancing our aims."

*You're just being too dense to see it, 'Johnny'.*

Sven had sent a scrambled communication to his contact 'Johnny' after limping off the bridge (with Commander Faught burning a hole in the back of his head with two

angry eyes). Fifteen minutes later Sven activated his scanner and searched a sea of radio waves until he found his contact's signal. After three security buffers and a heavy scrambling of the channel, Johnny's voice came through the line as a scratchy echo.

Wraith found that annoying, but ultimately necessary.

Now he had to walk his contact through the current crisis. "I assume you've gotten word of the active-system scan that hit us from the Galilean moons, correct?"

For a moment there was silence on the line. Finally, "did those scans land heavily in your area?"

"They were light as rain and as unfocused as our illustrious joint command..."

Wraith dryly replied.

"So?"

"The scan ran from Base-4 up into the Olivier Mountain Facility, then across the Gulf to us at Base-10. After that the scan went out into the open sea..."

"Again: so?" Johnny was impatient, but now his scratchy voice was edgy: he knew Sven well enough to know that the RL didn't waste time with idle chatter.

"The scan died-off seven minutes ago, almost immediately *after* hitting Base-10."

An ominous silence followed. "Has there been any activity directed elsewhere in the hemisphere since then?"

"You know there hasn't been."

A small blowing noise came from Johnny's end of the line. It could have been the exhalation of cigar smoke, a whistle of surprise, or both.

Wraith tired of waiting. "You know what that means, of course?"

"It means that they've found what they're looking for..." Johnny replied.

"I'd say they found what they were looking for about seven minutes before breaking off that scan. Yes, indeed, and that means that in about, oh, seven hours or so, Base-10 will probably be assaulted by an advance unit."

"So they found you out, found *us* out, even when using such a weak scan..."

Johnny was chewing on something (again, either a cigar or maybe a pen).

Wraith kicked back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. "The signals put out by the R-H's are ridiculously intense, even when their Impingement Factors are low."

"They're *supposed* to be," Johnny retorted, "but are we really ready for an engagement now? The project is behind schedule, and all the tests on the current pil-, I mean subjects, are still at a theoretical level..."

"Then we'll advance the tests to a practical level." Wraith snapped. "The superior joint command isn't going to let our test ships putter around in this God-forsaken rust bucket forever. Lord knows they'll cut the plug on our new arrival, too, unless we give them some 'eye-candy'. They want results, and we need data..." Sven calmed down and lit a second cigar. "I'm putting all my chips on this one, but it's not much of a gamble. It's fortuitous, really: the Bydo start connecting the dots and track us down, and that gives us an opportunity to shine."

Johnny sighed philosophically. "How does that saying of yours go: 'so now we send our joys and hopes out, naked from the nest'?"

"Something like that."

"The R-H's... are you sure they're prepared?"



“Yes.” Wraith said simply. “The *Love* has been out of commission for a while now, but with the replacement rod we can go ahead and reintroduce the Force Orb to the ship.”

“And the *Gazer*?”

“It’s fine.”

“Humph. Well, speaking of our new arrival, what’s the current status of the *Heart*?”

“Its force control rods came in on the *Gazer* today. Plus, the infusion of the outer skin was successful.” Sven paused, remembering something. “You know, we initiated primary activation of the unit last week...”

Johnny clicked his tongue. “I see... that could explain the current predicament...”

“It is a possibility.” Sven agreed.

“The *Heart*, the way it’s made, it must be like a God-damned homing beacon for them. What about terminal activation?”

“We’re holding off on that until you can give me a subject.”

Johnny was hesitant. “Give us some time on that.”

“Why?” Wraith asked suspiciously. Johnny had previously told him that a new pilot had been found. Wraith disliked changes in plans, and was distrustful of people who made them.

“We’re being more careful with pilot selection this time around due to... you know, the nature of the ship. Ainsworth wants to have input on that decision directly.”

Sven’s lips tightened. He said nothing, and made no snide comments. That name silenced all argument from him. Finally he said: “Enough chit-chat: give me a go or no-go on this, now. Either I allow that geriatric cowboy to retract his fleet and cover our asses, or we can take this opportunity to show joint command the fruits of our labor. This is our golden opportunity to dazzle those fools and get the time we desire, the time we *need*, to complete our project.”

The other line remained silent for a long time. There were the usual scratchy sounds of the secured channel: hisses, pops and miscellaneous static. Then suddenly the noises all stopped.

The line was dead.

Sven leaned back, content with the silent approval of his cagey contact. Wraith thought back to his encounter with Commander Faught with dark revulsion. The pompous ass had assured the RL that he would release the ‘hand of God’ against the enemy.

He grinned, uncharacteristically. *Hand of God, indeed. I’ll show him God’s Fist...*

Justin leaned against a pillar in bay R-B, trying to act casual as he watched the docking crews pull cargo out of the *Chaste Gazer*. His black eyes glowed brightly as he watched them pull out a long cylindrical tube filled with bubbling water. The water surrounded a long black spike resting in the inner section of the tube. It was a control rod for his ship (to replace the one he’d lost on his last outing). With it he would finally be combat-worthy again.

*Not that we’ve ever been allowed to see much combat, though...*

His eyebrows furrowed as he watched the technicians remove four more rods and quickly cart them away. He scratched his head (which he often did) and thought about

those other rods. *He* was good on control rods now, and Chenine didn't need any, either, so why all the extras?

At that point something else distracted him: the large water tanks on the back of the *Gazer's* cargo drop. As the extra rods were carted off, Justin slinked over to the tanks and ran his hand over the underside of one until he felt the tough plastic nozzle.

*Pay dirt!* He thought with a grin.

A resounding 'whack' noise filled the docking ring as Donald Plinshine's ever-present clipboard made contact with Justin's wrist. "Gah!" he cried as he recoiled, more in shock than pain, but still with a little bit of both.

"The cost of that water is way above your pay-grade, pilot." Donald's nasally whine was never more irritating.

Justin sighed. "C'mon, Plinshine. I'm just looking to wet my whistle a little bit. It's no big deal."

"So are all the other recent arrivals here, and *they* can't drink liquids from the synthetics plant either."

"So what's a guy to do? They're still hammering away at that outdated rust-bin they call a desalinization plant, and in the meantime the station newbies are dying of thirst."

"Don't be so dramatic." Donald scoffed as he began checking the serial numbers on the bins.

"Okay, *I'm* dying of thirst."

"Then either learn to drink from the synthetics plant or else *get in line.*" Donald pushed past Justin and ran across the bay, barking shrill, nasally orders to an unfortunate pair of technicians guiding the *Gazer* back into the air.

Justin gave up. *Friggin' anal-retentive, bureaucratic wanker...*

He looked around the bay for the *Gazer's* pilot and didn't see her. "Hey, Plinshine: where's Chenine?"

"She's not feeling well. Probably in the bathroom."

"Is she sick?"

"She *was* sick... and all *over* the ship exterior." Donald shook his head. "We got some weird readings from the *Gazer* as it taxied into the bay, but she hasn't told us about any problems she's run into yet."

Justin pursed his lips and shrugged, heading off towards the lower decks. As he walked through the bay door the *Chaste Gazer* cast an eerie shadow from behind him as it was dragged through the air by heavy metal chains. He turned to watch the pearl-colored behemoth swing up and out of sight, heading for bay R-A, its home dock. On the crane, it had the unsettling appearance of a large dinosaur's skull, dangling in some dark museum.

*Creepy...* he thought to himself.

Laura Hayle popped the top on a can of cola and drank deeply. With one hand she held the soda, with the other she manned her console, pulling up status reports from other bases in the Gulf area.

"Nooo..." came a voice from her left.

Lieutenant Hayle studied some incoming data.

"Not that either..." the voice continued.

Laura checked the status of the Base-10 fleet. All currently occupied docking bays came up on her monitor in a live feed, with a notable exception: two of the squares on the monitor, marked R-A and R-B, were blacked out, as they always were...

“What the hell?”

Laura sipped her soda and stuck her stylus pen behind her ear.

“*Goddamnit!*” The technician on Hayle’s left threw down her pen and thrust back in her chair, frustrated.

“Problems, Jen?” Laura asked sweetly.

Jen Drake glared at the lieutenant darkly. The purple-haired technician was gnashing her teeth, the bubblegum in her mouth was smeared on her lower lip like cheap lipstick.

“This is bullshit!” she almost spat out the gum with her anger. “I can’t even analyze the data from that signal. I don’t understand all this Bydo-communications crap! How can I get a source pinpoint with readings like *this?*”

“You need to increase the spectrum of your scan,” Hayle explained. “This kind of signal isn’t like our concentrated radio waves.”

“Yeah,” the technician next to Jen added, “the Bydo can send signals in a way that we don’t fully understand; they take advantage of the inter-dimensional friction. They use the boundary between *our* dimension and their dark little home as a current to carry their signals.”

“You need to boost your gain and set your spectrum viewer to match the signal echo you’ll find in the seawater outside; that water will retain traces of that active-system scan a lot longer than anything around the base.”

Grumbling, Jen made the adjustments on her monitor and sulkily continued her analysis.

Laura decided to test the waters with the new technician. Jen Drake was one of the new arrivals from the last crop of recruits and she didn’t know much about her (besides the fact that she had one hell of a temper).

“So, Jen... you’re background is in laser spectroscopy, right?”

“Yeah, and it’s pretty damn worthless for this kind of stuff.” She replied testily.

“How’d you end up in base command operations?”

Jen scoffed. “With all the ramped up security and defenses lately, the brass have been drafting people left and right who can work the new system stations. That means gutting all the university research centers, including mine.” She blew a big pink bubble as she typed; after it burst she expertly licked the remains off her upper lip. “The truth is I was sent here because I know how to type.”

Hayle grinned. “Well, there’s got to be more to it than that...”

Jen swiveled her monitor towards Laura and tapped the screen with her stylus. “I think I’ve got a source pinpointed, but I can’t interpret this whole data set: it’s broadcasting from somewhere on the surface of Ganymede, right?”

Hayle scanned Jen’s monitor with her big blue eyes. “Well... yeah, according to this it’s actually in orbit, about 43 kilometers above the surface, but otherwise your analysis is good...”

*Pretty damn good, in fact...* Laura thought. “How did you extrapolate the source so quickly?”

Jen shook her head while she fine-tuned the analysis. “*That’s* the simple part for me, it’s reading all this Bydo crap and analyzing all the readouts correctly that screws me over. The only useable skill I have from spectroscopy is filtering power: I can find any target and pull it from the trash its hiding in, as long as I *know* what I’m looking for.”

“Signal to noise.” Laura nodded. “Send the data to my station and I’ll confirm the analysis and send it off to the station at Olivier.” Laura said. Apparently, green as she was, Jen had talent, and possible a good amount of it, too. “You might end up being more useful around here than you think, Jen.”

The gum-chewing girl shrugged, “I’d be a hell of a lot more useful if I had an actual *background* in this field...” she raised her head slightly. “I know that I’ve got what it takes to graduate from the Bydo Labs, but I don’t want to research those... things.” She shuddered. “My talents are better spent elsewhere, and no offense, Lieutenant, but I really don’t want to be here.”

*Egotistical, but not without potential...* Laura smiled.

“Lieutenant,” the sharp voice of Commander Faught startled Laura, who automatically jumped up and snapped to attention.

“Yes, sir.” She said.

“What’s the update from our listening post in the Asteroid Belt?”

“Nothing yet, sir, but if the target source sends any skimmers at us, we’re liable to only get a two-minute warning before the enemies begin hitting the Belt.”

The hard-nosed Commander nodded, hands folded neatly behind him. “Very good.” As he walked off, he said, “Lieutenant,”

“Yes, sir?”

“Please inform the Private that no chewing gum is permitted at Ops.” he said emotionlessly as he walked off.

Jen, still working on her analysis, rolled her eyes (*ballsy!* Laura thought) and swallowed the bubblegum. The Lieutenant had to smile.

“And, Lieutenant...” Faught added.

“Sir?”

“No beverages allowed during alert status.”

This time it was Jen who smiled.

“*We’re lo-o-o-o-st in space, and the ti-i-i-i-me is our own...*” The Steve Miller Band blared between Justin’s ears. He was curled-up against a wall in an anonymous corridor in the lower decks, knees against his chest. The light was dim here, and the crusty white walls were septic and uninteresting. There were no noises except for the tinny drone of the music from his canalphones.

A flushing sound came from across the hall in the women’s restroom. After that came the sound of running water. Chenine emerged from the bathroom; her face now had its usual color. Her hair, which was usually left down over her ears, was pulled back behind her head (the most suitable place for hair when one is vomiting into a toilet). She stopped walking after a few steps, her pale eyes looking quizzically at Justin.

He smiled anemically. “I heard you hit a little in-flight turbulence.”

Chenine didn’t say anything.

“...anyway, thanks for the control rod.” Justin’s voice oscillated uncomfortably as he stood up.

“It wasn’t my call to pick it up from Mount Olivier; you should go thank the Aryl for that decision.”

He shrugged. “I really try to avoid direct contact with the Aryl as much as possible.”

“Hmm...” Chenine shook her head and started walking down the corridor.

“Wait a second.” Justin hurried to catch up.

“Let’s walk and talk.” She said, not with impatience, but unemotionally.

“Fair enough...” Justin caught up. “What do you think about those extra rods you were carrying: spares for the *Gazer* and *Love*?”

“That’s possible...” Chenine agreed.

Staring at the floor, Justin hesitantly brought up the other possibility. “...or maybe it’s raw material for another R-H, another Raiden?”

“I did have the same thought.” Chenine admitted with a nod.

“Hmmm...” Justin replied. He knew that Chovert was not the most talkative pilot in the world, but today she was even less so. They walked in silence for a time, and then Justin remembered:

“Oh, by the way, what *did* happen with your ship? Plinshine seemed pretty anxious over the trouble you had.”

“He did?”

“Well, mostly I think he was concerned with the *Gazer*’s leather interior.”

Chenine smiled faintly in a self-deprecating light. She didn’t answer for a few seconds. “I think we should go get in touch with Bridge Command.”

“Why?”

“Because I think something might be coming...” she said, almost in a whisper.

“What was that?”

The silver-haired pilot shook her head again, “never mind.”

While Justin and Chenine were conversing (if you could call it that) Dr. Sean Roont was busy working on Justin’s ship.

He had spent the better part of 45 minutes watching Pyotr Frieze check and re-check the mechanical systems. He chewed on an unlit cigarette (he was trying to quit) as the old mechanic gave the ship a twice-over. He looked down below the scaffolding and watched as the *Chaste Gazer* was taken away from the inferior deck of bay R-B to its home in bay R-A. He chucked his cigarette at the milky spaceship as it was dragged through the air just feet below him. It glanced off the cockpit canopy and fell 60 meters down to the mooring floor below.

“Now that wasn’t very nice, was it?” Pyotr chided. “That’s a whory bitch of a ship, to be sure, but you should still give it some respect.”

*A ship probably deserves respect... Roont thought, but these... things just don’t qualify...*

“How much longer, Pyotr?”

“It’s all yours, whenever you want it, sir.”

The Doctor nodded. “Thanks for the effort.” He tapped his fingers lightly on top of the transparent cylinder the housed the Type-B control rod. “And now, you know about the regulations...”

“Hmmm.” Pyotr curtly answered. “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t like to stick around, even if I could...” The old man wiped some grease on his overalls and moved for the superior bay’s giant metal door. Despite his advanced age, he still moved better than the likes of Sven Wraith. “See you around, Doc.”

Roont waited until Pyotr was well past the superior bay’s door. “Call-up computer.” He said sternly, and waited for the dual beep of the bay’s speakers: the sound of the computer’s receptivity to command.

“Close-off the entrance to docking bay R-B: superior level. Seal this area according to level 2 quarantine procedure.” Gears ground as the huge bay door slammed shut; giant metal bars moved beneath Roont’s feet, under the scaffolding, until the mooring floor of the inferior bay was eclipsed. Then airlocks hissed like giant snakes, completing the job. Ruddy red lights flashed on, the only light in the now totally sealed room.

Roont stared at the tube in front of him, one meter tall, filled with that bubbling blue liquid. He started talking, not to himself, but to the computer recording system, which activated automatically whenever a lockdown was initiated in the bay.

“Let it be known, the time is... 0930 hours, May 17<sup>th</sup>. Lockdown of bay R-B has been initiated for insertion of a Type-B control rod into R-Type unit R-H-AGP. This is Dr. Sean Roont, of Bydo Labs, acting in my capacity as senior maintenance director of the R-H series of Raidens.”

Inside the dark tube the foaming bubbles were increasing. The jet-black spike in the center looked strange and ominous inside the thick glass casing. Something in the tube was humming, and there was a faint pulsing sound as well.

*Be patient, you bastard...* Roont thought. The doctor walked over to the wall opposite where the ship was secured and retrieved a large, bulky hazmat suit. He was a reasonably fit man, but sliding into the suit was such a chore that he was doused in sweat by the time he’d wriggled into the unwieldy garment.

Roont wiped-off the front of his facemask and knelt down (which was difficult to do in the suit). He looked into the tube, staring into it with his hard, dark eyes. “Well, shall we begin?” He sneered into the dark glass chrysalis.

A normal person might have been disturbed by the sight of that tube. As a hardened scientist, Roont was not in the least bit phased. All the same, it was an eerie sight, because amid that mess of bubbles and watery foam, something was moving.



T I A