



### **The Scent of an Apple**

Connor's heart rose with patriotic fervor as he rounded a corner to see a group of twelve Strikers swarming an Opie. The monstrous leviathan was bleeding from countless wounds to its body and its purple exhaust tail was sputtering and losing color. It was peppering the Striker team with a train of weak cannon fire, but that artillery was no match for the Strikers' plasma-shielded hulls.

"Hallo out there!" The genial Scotsman called. "You're the Dragonslayers, right? Well, there's certainly nothin' like a sunset battle with a dragon, is there?"

A dry, arrogant voice responded. "This is the *St. George's Cross*; you've wandered into a *closed* engagement, pilot. I'm going to have to ask you to vacate the area immediately: you might get hurt here, and we can't guarantee your safety, I'm afraid."

"Tch." Connor scowled. "Don't worry about that; maybe I can guarantee *yours*."

This time an arrogant sounding woman came on the line. "Little boys in Excels should know their limitations. Why not leave this fight to the professionals? Don't worry, the big boys and girls have everything under control, alright?"

"Oh, come on now, bonnie," he rebuked her. "There's a reason they call us 'Excels'. And don't you know that size doesn't matter? It's experience that wins the day. You know: it's all about how well one can 'discharge their cannon'..."

"Wow. That's very original." She chided. "How many times have I heard a man say that? And every time I've heard that line it's come from either an Irishman or a Scot. I guess you Gay-lics would have the experience to know about that sorta stuff, wouldn't you?"

"Is ciùrrail sibh!" Connor barked, unable to suppress a grin. "You're viscous!" He rather liked this little back-and-forth. "Well, I can certainly tell that you've never met the 'Salt-o-Scots', have you, miss- er..."

"*Silene's Girdle*." She said. "Now, Salty, if you don't mind, we're all a little busy over here."

Connor was still grinning as he watched the Dragonslayers shower the Opie with their photonic cannons.

*Foolhardy brats*, he thought. The feud between Excels and Strikers was legendary in Raiden culture. Friction had existed between the two groups ever since the first Excel came off its production line five years ago. Connor was eager to show up these arrogant brawlers, but he didn't begrudge them their pride. They were Typers, and that meant they were his kin.

They were soldiers, like Connor and the mates in his squadron. They surely didn't deserve his contempt. These guys weren't anything like that sorry sack of crap he'd slugged back at Southland: that miserable excuse for a Typer from the new program.

Connor's face fell a bit as he remembered that black-suited Raiden pilot from Southland. In point of fact, he regretted what he'd done to the lad, but he didn't regret the sentiments he'd expressed. For all he cared that whiney little louse, his *Bucolic Love* (or whatever he called it) and his whole damned Squadron could go straight to Dimension 26. Connor wouldn't miss him, or his program.

Neither would real soldiers such as these.

Connor brought the *Principalities* into an idle hover on the sidelines of the battle. "Call-up computer," he ordered, "perform an analysis of the target."

He slouched in his seat while the computer worked. Connor got a bunch of heat-signature scans and ultraviolet readouts. One of those thermal scans showed a huge plume of heat rising from a certain spot on the Opie's metal cap.

"Sguir!" He yelled reflexively as he saw that spot. The computer picked up on Connor's tone of voice more than it did his dialect, and abruptly stopped the scan. "Bring up a normal view, will ya?" The external cameras honed in on the Opie's injury: Connor was staring into a pitch-black hole in the Opie's outer armor. It was at least 50-feet wide. "That's a hell of a dent. How far does it go?"

"Specify length or depth." The computer obtusely asked.

"Depth, ya ken? Damn bucket 'o bolts..." he grumbled.

The computer was silent for a few seconds, then: "The injury appears to extend from the epidermal armor down to the first Adipose layer."

"The *Adipose*?" Connor confirmed, awestruck. "Then we're talking about damage right down to the subdermal shield. That's incredible." That wound was nearly a through-and-through: it was a window to the messy innards of the Opie. It looked like the work of a charged rail-gun round. That kind of hardware was too big for Raidens to use. The only place Connor had ever seen that kind of hardware was when they were mounted to battleships.

*But I haven't seen any battleships in the area, though.* Whether he saw them or not, that was the only answer: this thing had been fried to the bone. With a sadistic grin, Connor replayed a phrase in his head:

The wound was 'a *window* to the messy innards'...

His grin widened. "Hallo out there: Team Dragon?"

The *St. George's Cross* answered, this time with marked hostility in the SL's voice. "What is it now, *Principalities*?"

"Well, I was just wondering: I suppose that you Dragon-guys are all familiar with the story of bonny Saint George and the Dragon, yes? Isn't that right, Miss *Silene's Girdle*?"

"Yeah, of course we're familiar with it." She spit back at him. "And we know that it takes a lot more power to drop a dragon than you Excel-boys have."

“Well, it only took St. George a little faith,” Connor quipped, throwing his engines into gear, “but what I really wanna know is this: are you also familiar with the story of Jonah and the Whale?” With one deft movement Connor kicked his Raiden into gear and sailed down like a bolt of lightning, aiming straight for the gaping hole in the Opie.

“God curse it all: cease fire!” The *St. George’s Cross* called to his comrades. “What the hell are you doing, man!?” He screamed at Connor.

Connor, his shoulders bent low over his controls, snickered to himself. “This doorway is a little too narrow for you brutes, but don’t worry: the little boys have everything under control.” The strong-eyed Scotsman banked the *Principalities* around a barrage of cannon-fire as he maneuvered the ship right into the hole, one wing scraping noisily against the uneven entrance. “Just leave this fight to the professionals!”

The *Principalities* glided out of the sunlight and into the eerie darkness of the incarnation’s gut.

As soon as Connor crossed the outer metal skin his scanners and communication systems cut out, the latter giving him a big mess of static. No doubt the Dragonslayers’ SL was still yelling at him; luckily Connor didn’t have to listen. He switched on his external floodlights and brought the *Principalities* into a crawling hover. The force orb on his Raiden’s nose was glowing like a miniature sun. The great orange sphere was a floodlight in its own right. He spiraled down a narrow corridor of blasted metal. The walls of this gaping wound were graced with giant gashes, as if a river of fast-moving lava had caved it out.

As a young boy Connor had been fascinated with ghost stories. He’d spent many a late-night hour huddled beneath his sheets in bed, a handy flashlight by his side and a dense book of the macabre at hand. He loved those spooky tales of cursed grounds and haunted houses, but even as a little child Connor was never scared by the descriptions of zombies, ghosts or monsters. The only thing that could ever send a shiver down his spine was the unknown. That’s the one thing that provokes a universal fear in humans. Connor never had an ounce of fear for the stereotypical book monster as it lumbered into view, but he would find himself glancing over his own shoulder every now and then as he read about the demons lurking in the mist, growling in the darkness, hidden out of view. Back in the Scottish Crown Territories, at his boyhood home, he lived adjacent to a sprawling apple orchard. During the nights, when the fog rolled in from the moors to the north, the orchard became a creepy sea of darkness. The young Connor often wondered what sinister evil could lurk there, unseen amongst the dark tree branches and the fair scent of apples.

That thought would make him shiver a bit.

Now he was thrust into the unknown again. His high beams reflected off different layers of the Opie’s armor as he descended into the bowels of the incarnation. The *Principalities* passed the metal-plated outer layer, the corneum armor, and dropped a few feet down to the spinosum crust. This was where things started to get disturbing.

Beneath the metal hull of the Opie there was a mesh of spiny filaments and prongs jutting out from the deeper, darker internal layers. The spines pulsed and swayed around like blind earthworms. This was the Opie’s grand ‘slaughterhouse’, the place where spent cells got pushed up out of the core below and turned into a metal-like armor through a fearsome process of cellular petrification.

*From an organic cell to a dead piece of metal with all the strength of hafnium-carbide.* It wasn't enough for the Bydo's cells to be all-powerful in life: they had to retain some manner of ferocity even in death. For the Bydo, nothing ever went to waste.

Connor's Raiden descended through that living briar patch. A few stray spikes wandered close to the *Principalities*, but as soon as they brushed against the Raiden's iron-colored hull they recoiled, as if in horror. The living Bydo flesh of the spikes could sense the altered, denatured Bydo material in Connor's ship. Like oil and water, the two didn't mix, and the *real* Bydo flesh of the Opie avoided Connor's Raiden as if it were the plague.

The *Principalities* descended down below the macabre nest of spikes. Beneath the sunless forest he reached the adipose section, a rich collection of tissue and veins. The tissue held the incarnation's chemical and mineral reserves, while the veins carried its tarry black 'blood'. The syrupy blood wasn't used to transport chemicals and minerals to the incarnation's organic parts (the body cells themselves could worm their way into the core and provide direct nourishment). Rather, the motor-oil like blood was used to nourish the machine components of the incarnation's body: the Opie's 'Bydo-tech'.

At the base of the first adipose layer Connor reached a dead-end of charred tissue: it was the extent of the blast. To go any further, he'd have to dig. With steady hands, Connor worked the controls of his 'utility rod'. A slender silver pole jutted from the top of Connor's Raiden. At his command it extended forward, past the nose of the *Principalities* and beyond the ship's force orb.

"Call-up computer: select laser cutter. Set power to, oh, let's say 'diamond-cutter.'" He ordered with a cavalier flair in his voice.

The tip of the rod glowed bright red. There was a gentle hum before a crimson beam shot out from the rod. The laser sliced into the fatty adipose tissue with ease. Smoke and flames belched from the slit tissue as Connor drew the beam very slowly around the pulsing membrane of skin with surgical precision. After a few minutes of cutting Connor managed to carve a crude circular hole in the layer.

Beneath the adipose layer was the bony shell and, deep in the darkness beneath that, the core casing. Connor sneered as his floodlights fell on the black, charred-looking maze of bones and metal beneath the pulsing fat above him. He felt like a grave-robber, or a tomb raider. The superstructure of the Opie lurched and shuddered in the air, sensing Connor's tapeworm-like invasion of its body.

Connor steadied the *Principalities* as he felt the Opie's spasms. *Not that I wouldn't enjoy ripping apart all this junk piece-by-piece, but I'm in a bit of a hurry...*

Connor aimed the nose of the *Principalities* straight down. He brought his fist straight forward and slammed his palm against the orb-release switch. The control rods on the Raiden's nose suddenly retracted with a swift hiss. With no rods to contain the power of the orb it abruptly shot away from the Raiden as quickly as possible. The orb was made of living Bydo flesh, so it shared the incarnations' natural revulsion for the denatured flesh inside Connor's Raiden.

Like a repulsed magnet the glowing sphere hurtled away from Connor, spiraling down into the darkness, shattering the Opie's gigantic bones and blood vessels as it went. The flying orb finally came to an abrupt rest in the thick metal hull of the core casing.

"Retract!" Connor barked. At the sound of his voice the four control rods snapped back into place; the force orb shot back up from the well of darkness like a supersonic

yo-yo. It slammed into the control rods and hovered, gentle and sedate, on the nose of the *Principalities*.

There was a large gash in the black casing below him; the force orb had knocked an entire metal panel off the ovoid shell. The Opie's hellish core was now exposed.

After a few tense seconds there was a hollow, rumbling noise rising from beneath that shell. Something was moving down there. Connor sat-up in his seat and flipped the safeties on his wave-cannon. Light filled the cabin as all his hairs jumped to attention.

The rumbling down below got louder.

Connor bit his lip as his skin tingled from the energy of the charge. The power danced all around him. His eyes widened into saucers as he looked back down at the shell casing: something was oozing from the hole in the egg. It was deep purple, almost black, with no defined shape or form. It wormed around like a snake, then it shuddered and shimmered under the *Principalities*' floodlights.

When it solidified again, it was in the unmistakable form of a severed hand.

The speakers on the *Principalities* started acting-up: strange noises flooded the cockpit. Random beeps and bird-like chirps filled Connor's ears.

Then, all his hairs settled back into place, and his force-orb's color solidified.

The dark ooze suddenly lunged for the *Principalities*.

"Die!" Connor screamed as he discharged the cannon. The wave blast streaked through the darkness, cut through the phantom hand as if it were a train of smoke, then disappeared into that tiny hole in the core casing. There was a deep booming noise as the wave round struck something deep inside.

Connor grinned with savage pride, then his grin faded a bit. He quickly realized what he'd just done.

*A-yeah: time to go...* he thought. Connor banked the *Principalities* and jammed down his accelerator.

A sudden explosion rose from the incarnation's core: it sounded like a deep belch. Whatever unimaginable hell was lurking in that core casing, it had just been scrambled like an egg.

*...and incarnations don't do too well when their 'eggs' have been scrambled.*

"Time to go!" The Scotsman repeated out loud.

A column of fire squirted out of the hole in the core shell. Within seconds the entire casing blew apart in a dark purple inferno. With the core dead, the rest of the Opie was not long for this world.

"*Time to go!*" He yelled again as he kicked the *Principalities* into overdrive.

All around him Bydo flesh exploded and burned.

The hole in the Opie's outer armor blasted itself apart from the force of the internal explosions. A black train of smoke and fire shot up into the sky. The *Principalities* rode that wave of fire to safety.

"Buaidh!" Connor screamed with boyish glee. He laughed joyously. "Haha! Nemo me impune lacessit! Whaddaya think of *that*, Team Dragon? Put that in your tailpipes and *smoke it!* Haha!"

The *Silene's Girdle* came on the line, its pilot grumbling. "Of all the idiotic acts I've ever seen... you know, size *still* matters, Salty, but sometimes blind recklessness can work too. Just don't expect *me* to show up at your funeral, though. If that's the way you're used to operating I can tell that you won't be around for too long.

“There’s a difference between blind recklessness and having a pair of balls.”

“The bigger your balls, the easier it is for someone to grab you by them, Salty.”

“Tch!” He shook his head, a deep grin still gracing his face. “I’ll take that as a compliment, coming from a bunch of Strikers!” Connor smirked as he brought the *Principalities* screaming up into the air. He let the battle-scarred Raiden drift over the city’s skyline in a lazy, triumphant loop-de-loop, the setting sun glinting radiantly off its iron hull.

The *St. George’s Cross* lead the Dragonslayers in a bloody coup-de-gras against the Opie. Explosions went off frequently beneath the leviathan’s skin. Several pieces of its outer armor exploded in geysers of fire and fractured vents of steam. The Opie, unable to fly away or maintain its altitude, glided down towards the city streets and, with sloth-like laziness, crash-landed on the tough asphalt. Two of its heads were severed and destroyed in the crash; its large middle head dumbly craned around and writhed in pain as the Dragonslayers hovered before it, savaging it with their wave cannons and photonic rounds.

Suddenly the bulging ‘eyes’ of the head exploded like mushy watermelons. A bright stream of cannon-fire burst out from the head. The cannon rounds flew amongst the line of Dragonslayers.

“Last ditch attacks coming up!” The *Silene’s Girdle* declared as one round pelted her hull. “Let’s decapitate this son-of-a-bitch!” She readied her wave cannon for a final attack, but the SL interrupted her.

“Negative!” The *St. George’s Cross* ordered. “Hold your damn fire: those aren’t Bydo-grade cannon rounds.”

As soon as he said this the Opie’s head fell apart from all the intense cannon fire coming from its gullet. The head sloughed off the skull like melted skin and parted into two almost even pieces. With the core dead, the Opie could no longer maintain its cellular rigidity. The two halves of the head oozed apart like jell-o, forming a messy slit that was curiously similar in appearance to female genitalia.

A red-colored Raiden burst through the sludge with all the power of an explosive birth. The ship, covered in black blood and goo, slid across the mushy remnants of the Opie’s head. It rode a mountain of slush down to street-level like a toboggan where it slowly came to rest. The Dragonslayers surrounded this curious ship; they hovered menacingly around it as the cockpit’s hatch slowly came off and the canopy slid open.

The pilot, clad in a bulky red spacesuit, stepped out of the cockpit and planted her feet on the outer railing of the ship. She casually unbuckled her helmet and tossed it back into the cockpit.

Samantha Rayne stared at the line of Strikers before her, a small grin on her face. The Raidens’ floodlights reflected off her copper-colored eyes as the wind from their exhaust blew her dirty-blond hair wildly around her shoulders. The freckle-faced girl saluted the Strikers professionally.

“Hi, there, comrades. Do you guys need some kind of help, or something?” She yelled over the drone of their engines.

The Dragonslayers powered-down their photonic cannons and put their weapon systems on standby. The squad was dumbstruck for the moment. Finally the pilot of the

*Silene's Girdle*, blinking in surprise, spoke. "Talk about 'Jonah and the Whale'" she said with awe in her voice.

"No, they're not *exactly* like giant lizards..." Justin spoke into his molar implants. "A Tove is... I dunno, *quasi-reptilian*."

"And I still don't quite get your meaning." Jen replied.

"Ugh." Justin mopped his face with frustration. "Well, look: you're just gonna have to go down to the data-library when you get off-duty and research them because there's not a lot more I can tell you."

"I'm not *that* interested: I'm only a little curious about how they look in person."

"Look, have you ever read *Through the Looking Glass*?" Laura was sinking into a very foul mood, and she was quite terse with her subordinate.

"Huh? No." Jen said.

"Then you can't really picture a Tove, short of researching it, so just drop the issue so we can focus on finding the *Chaste Gazer*, kay?"

"Hmph." Jen impishly replied. "Excuse me, but I'm not really into children's lit., to tell the truth."

The Lieutenant's voice was icy: "You actually think that book is for children?" she growled. Justin could feel the bitter edge in Hayle's voice: she was getting more and more tense as the minutes ticked by; during all this time Justin could find neither hide nor hair of Chenine or her Raiden.

At this point Ultima True was a gigantic graveyard. Dust from the damaged buildings swirled and eddied in the sky. Hundreds, maybe thousands of the fallen's corpses littered the grounds and protruded dumbly from ruined buildings. Downtown was damaged beyond belief, but at this point the city was quite salvageable.

Looking at all those dead carcasses and damage, Justin started to get a little bit worried about the pilot of the *Chaste Gazer*.

"Stupid little bitch..." He growled quietly.

"Hey, you know I don't appreciate the way you're talking about Miss Chovert: you need to either learn to respect her or apply for a transfer to another program, you got it, Storm?" Scott Tabris declared adamantly.

"Shesh, cut him some slack, Scotty." Jen whispered angrily at Tabris. The feisty little private was less self-absorbed than Scott, and she could likely detect the concern hidden behind Justin's bitter words.

Justin could tell that Scott cared an awful lot for Chenine. Naturally he also cared *about* her wellbeing. His concern was blinding him. He couldn't pick-up on Justin's attitude: maybe, deep down inside, Justin didn't really care for that silver-haired girl, but that didn't mean he couldn't care *about* her.

"Money shot!" Laura's voice was again bright and perky.

*That's a 180-degree turnaround... Someone must've slipped her a can of cola, or something.* Justin smirked.

"Hey, check your monitors 'cause we're getting almost perfect resolution back here. The interference from the Active-System Scan in your area is nearly zero."

Justin confirmed this. "Wow. You're right: looks like everything *is* clear. I guess that Opie back on 7<sup>th</sup> Street must have gotten itself pawned."

"The Dragonslayers work fast." Tabris surmised.

“Well don’t forget my contribution to the cause.” Justin added. “And I may have really hurt myself putting that hole in the damn thing. Speaking of which, I might need the doctor to check my aneurism when I get back, you know, to make sure I don’t drop dead in the next few days.”

“Heh,” Tabris smugly grunted. “Come on, Storm. Let’s be honest: I wouldn’t call your attack on that O.P.I. a ‘contribution’ to anything. You barely made a dent in it.”

Justin rolled his eyes. “All this undue praise is making me blush.” He growled at the junior lieutenant.

“We’re getting a fix on the *Gazer*...” Jen interjected, “but it’s weird.”

“‘Weird’ how?” Justin said as he began his own scan of the area.

“Well, I think I’m getting the underlying signature of Chenine’s ship, but I’m not actually getting a kindred alert.”

“That’s impossible.” Laura rebuked her. “The only way you could get a signature without an accompanying kindred alert is if, I don’t know, I guess if every power system in the *Gazer* was down.”

“And that can’t happen... because... hmm.” Justin’s words trailed off.

“What was that Justin?” Laura asked.

Justin used the *Platonic Love*’s powerful scanners to track down the *Chaste Gazer*’s signature. The trail ended very abruptly. It disappeared near an office building.

“Lieutenant,” Justin asked, “do you have access to any cameras around these coordinates?” Justin sent Laura the location of the building. The Lieutenant searched for street cameras in the area that were still intact. She finally got a hold of one and sent images to the *Platonic Love*.

“There you go; it’s the only camera I can find.” The live feed showed up on Justin’s monitor.

“Excellent.” He muttered as he used his console to manipulate the tiny street cam. He swiveled it around until he found the right building. Then he craned it upwards as far as it would go.

“What’s this about?” Laura finally asked.

“Well, I tracked Chenine’s signature to that area. I’m en route now, but I can’t really tell if she’s there or not. Plus, I’m still not getting any kindred alerts.”

“Any active combat in the area?” Tabris asked with a nervous lump in his throat.

“Nah. The whole place is a cemetery. Nothing but corpses and gutted skyscrapers as far as the eye can...” Justin stopped talking when the little street camera reached its zenith: there was something sticking out of the office tower windows. He narrowed his eyes. Within seconds he recognized the very familiar shape of that impaled object.

“Mother of God.” Justin spat.

“What’s going on, Justin?” Laura said, perplexed.

“Support:” he barked commandingly. “are you still not picking up *any* kindred alerts?”

“No, but what are you-”

Justin didn’t wait for her response. “Pilot down.” He growled as he brought the *Platonic Love* up to full speed. The ship spat a thick blue flame from its rear as the overdrive engines engaged. “Base-10, I repeat: pilot down.” The color of Justin’s transparent monitors changed from a sedate orange into a dull red tint as he spoke those words. It was part of the Raiden emergency system. His black box would begin recording



and broadcasting all his words directly to Base-10's archives. "Chen-" he caught himself, remembering protocol. Proper names were a no-no during emergency recordings. The emergency channel was unencrypted and could possibly be picked-up by civilians. "The *Chaste Gazer* is down. I repeat: the *Chaste Gazer's* down."

"Goddamnit." Laura didn't miss a beat. "Hold, *Love...*" She struggled to interpret the data relayed from Justin's Raiden. The air was dead as the Lieutenant poured through the sensor information, trying to piece together Chenine's situation. The only noise in Justin's cockpit was the sputtering hum of his overdrive engines and a wobbly noise as his awkward Raiden quivered through the air at high speed.

Laura was certainly taking her sweet time with the data. Justin drew his teeth around his lower lip as he waited for her to draw conclusions: to tell him whether his colleague was coming home on a stretcher or in a body bag. His impatience finally crested. "Damn it, Lieutenant!" He barked. "What's the deal? Are we talking about a rescue or recovery operation here?"

"The pilot *is* alive," Laura tersely said, more to quiet Justin than to provide practical information. "But the *Gazer* is..."

"What is it?" Justin demanded.

"She's putting out zero power."

"That's not possible. Even when it's offline a Raiden always puts out a latent electrical impulse-"

"*Don't* lecture me on Raiden-tech, pilot." Laura rebuked him. "I'm a command-level operator, so I've taken all the basic classes in aviation-tech, you know. I know this kind of thing's not supposed to happen to a Raiden, but it *is*. It's very strange: I've never actually heard of an R-Type ship flatlining like this. It's weird, like the ship's created its own Autistic-Withdrawal Factor or something."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Well, that's just an analogy. The flesh inside a Raiden is pretty much dead, so it can't really control its energy output like a Bydo Mass can. I'm thinking that there's probably a massive system failure in the *Gazer's* computer, or something like that; what do you think, Scott?"

Tabris, who was supposedly the group's foremost expert on the R-H's, remained silent. His silence could mean that he didn't have anything to add to the conversation, but in fact he did have some interesting information to offer. However, by choice as much as by duty, he didn't offer any of it up.

The junior lieutenant did present one piece of frightful information. "Hey: if the *Gazer's* systems are dead then that means Miss Ch- I mean the pilot's emergency collision system is down. So her foam cushioning-"

"-didn't deploy." Justin finished with a knowing nod. "Damn it. Then she went through that crash with only her seatbelts to protect her. Hell: she might be in pieces for all we know."

"All I can say is that there *are* human vitals in the Raiden. I can't tell how weak or strong they are." Laura said.

"There's another problem, if you're interested." Jen broke in.

"Not really, private: my cup kinda overfloweth at the moment..." Justin growled.

"The *Chaste Gazer's* on pretty shaky ground. From what I'm seeing it looks like the level it's on is, well..."

“-not structurally sound.” Laura finished with a very worried lilt in her voice. “Listen, Jus-” she caught herself, “Pilot: from what we can tell the *Gazer’s* sitting about 20 floors up...”

Tabris laid out the scenario. “If that Raiden slips through the window and falls that far down *without* a working emergency collision system-”

“The impact would be catastrophic.” Justin grimly surmised. The *Gazer* could easily survive a 20-story freefall with a few deep dents, but without collision foam in the cockpit that fall would break every single bone in Chenine’s body. If that girl was still in reasonably good shape now, she wouldn’t be in a few minutes.

Justin gripped his controls and dug his mind into the link, grinding his will into the Raiden like a spur to a horse.

*Move, you ugly little piece of crap!* He coaxed the ship.

An anonymous Striker churned through the air with its wave cannon fully charged. It roared through Ultima True with rapt alertness. A random Tove swooped down from behind a building, snarling and charging forth blindly. The Striker turned ponderously on its axis, lined-up its nose with the foolhardy incarnation, and discharged its cannon in a shower of sparks and light.

The blast sent the Tove hurtling backwards through the air like a cannonball. The thing melted into a burning lump of cinders and ash as it sailed across the streets of the city. The blast was so violent that one might expect the Tove to be cooked into a chunk of diamond. In any event, the coal-like projectile fell from the air, slammed into the side of an office building and sent a rippling vibration through its exterior frame.

Just a few floors down from that impact the *Chaste Gazer* trembled with the rest of the building. Part of the window supporting the Raiden fell away. Inch-by-inch, the ship slid down the open frame, each second bringing it closer to the open air outside and, inevitably, closer to the hand of gravity.

“Damn it: I’m not gonna make it!” Justin yelled, more to himself than his support staff. Every time he tried to bring the *Platonic Love* past Mach 2 the ship wobbled, threatening to go out of control and end up wrecked in debris like the *Gazer*.

Justin was not a veteran combat pilot: he didn’t have the flight experience needed to hold his ship steady at this speed, so he was forced to depend on his link to correct for each tremble of the ship.

*Stupid round bastard...* he thought darkly. *Let’s go!*

Justin’s mind raced. As much as he wanted to deal with this situation objectively he found that he couldn’t. A mini-montage played through his head: he remembered the first time he and Chenine met. It was an awkward meeting, to say the least. In fact, most of the time they’d spent together in the past month could be considered ‘awkward’. For everything he liked about Chenine, her intelligence, her unassuming, quiet nature (and of course, her body...) there were thousands of things he really didn’t like. Actually, he really despised a lot of things about her. Her arrogance and that quiet superiority she secreted were near the top of the list.

But he also felt guilty: it was his job to watch-out for her, and even if she was a reckless and smug little brat that was no excuse for Justin failing in his duty.

Behind the guilt there was one last motivation. Whatever differences Justin and Chenine had between them, whatever friction gnawed at them, they had a superficial relationship that he was unwilling to let go of.

Justin was a man crippled with loneliness; it sat in his soul like a large dead weight. He'd borne that weight for a lot longer than he'd like to admit. A rocky, awkward pseudo-relationship with *someone* was preferable to nothing at all; familiarity with a person, no matter who they were, was preferable to complete isolation. So, for an ultimately selfish reason, in his heart-of-hearts, he simply didn't want to lose Chenine: a cavalier girl who ultimately cared little for him or, as far as he could tell, anyone else at Base-10.

He closed his eyes. Justin tried to push all these thoughts out of his head; he didn't want to think about his own problems right now. He concentrated all his energy on pushing the *Platonic Love* forward.

The readout for his Impingement Factor broke 2.0.

He cemented his left leg against the side of his cockpit. His right leg was completely numb, though Justin was too invested in his link to notice. The pulsing black cord around his leg sank deeper and deeper into his calf, worming up from the floorboards like a serpent.

Over 12 feet of this cord had already disappeared beneath Justin's tanned skin.

The readout for his Impingement Factor turned dark yellow.

*Move, damn you!* He ordered.

Then something happened. All feelings of motion, the unsteadiness of his Raiden, the trembling of his engines, faded away. Justin felt like he was standing still.

And when he opened his eyes he realized that he *was* standing still, on his own two feet. There was no Raiden; there was no cockpit. The sun was shining overhead.

And his feet were wet.

Justin was standing ankle-deep in a stream. Neon green grass swayed lazily to either side of the water, dancing quietly against a breezeless sky. The sun beat down on Justin's head with a heatless light. His black hair blew all around him, despite the lack of wind.

"What?..." he began, stopping as his voice reverberated all around him, as if he were stuck in a small metal drum. The sound was overpowering, he put his hands to his ears to muffle the din. His limbs were slow to respond, awkward and heavy.

He looked down at the stream, a tiny brook rushing past his feet, flowing behind him. The water was cold and refreshing. He bent down, with dreamlike slowness, dipped his finger in the brook and brought the wet digit to his tongue. The water was sweet, not like in a refined mineral spring but sweeter, like liquid candy. It was so sweet as to feel out of place, vulgar, in this pastoral scene.

When he stood up, he realized there was something else: a pressure on his right forearm. It felt very strange, like a soft tube cushioning his arm. Two slippery rows of ivory gnawed at him between the cushy tube.

His mind did a little somersault: was it teeth?

"And lips...?" He suddenly said, producing more reverberations to pound his brain.

He managed to crane his head down: he could see his arm hanging down at his side. There were no lips, and no teeth. Instead a bright silver cord dangled from Justin's limb, beginning at the exposed vein on his forearm and running down into the brook, disappearing beneath the sweet water.

Blood was flowing freely through that tube, rushing from his vein to the brook. As the crimson liquid wormed through the tube it began to change until, by the time it reached the water, it was just as colorless as the stream.

*Only some things...*

"Jesus!" Justin screamed as his eyes widened: that voice was not in his head, or at least it wasn't a part of his own internal monologue.

*...only... need some things...*

"What the hell?" Justin growled softly, careful not to rattle his brain with loud words. He looked around. His head moved freely, except when he tried to look behind him. "Limerence?" He deduced. "Is this a Limerence Effect?" He balled his fists angrily: none of this was real, it was all a distraction. It was nothing but a little mental collapse on his part. "Goddamnit: this isn't a good time..."

*...some things from the source...*

Justin gasped as he felt a pressure change in the tube: the blood flow slowed to a trickle and then stopped. His skin crawled as he felt a few cold fingers trailing absently over his spine. He wasn't in his sticky black flight suit anymore: he was wearing a pair of loose-fit denim shorts and a tee-shirt. There were no Link Prongs jutting out of his back either, not in this mental unreality.

He'd never experienced a Limerence Effect before. The whole thing felt very strange.

"Who the hell are you?" He challenged the faceless voice.

There was a very long pause before the voice said: *don't know... self...*

"Then you don't know much" Justin growled.

*...know... you.*

"Do you?" Justin smirked. "Then who am I?"

*You are... what you are... already told you...*

"Did you tell me who I am? Well, I can't remember that, but it's all very fascinating..." Justin sarcastically growled as he shut his eyes and tried to get his head on straight. The sooner he ended this twisted fantasy, the sooner he could help Chenine.

*...help... her...*

Justin's eyes slid open. "What'd you say?"

*...why?...*

"Why *what*?" Justin demanded.

The hand on his back grabbed him roughly. Justin felt some kind of energy streak through him; the effect was intense. Justin's eyes shot fully open. It felt like a syringe of adrenaline had been injected into his brain. The pastoral view in front of him, the trickling brook and the swaying grass, shimmered and changed colors. The effect looked strange, but then again it was strangely familiar. Justin was staring through something he knew, but at the same time couldn't quite place.

"Something... crystal, maybe?" He said, bemused.

A flash of images rushed across the wavering landscape: a human's back, someone's back turned to him. The person turned, revealing Chenine and her face with

that ineffable, indecipherable stare of hers, both scornful and mysterious. She was the girl who called his words ‘abstract nonsense’.

She was the girl at Epdin: the girl in the corner, casually watching Justin as he suffered a violent seizure in his own Raiden.

In the corridors of Base-10: the girl with the rolling eyes and the skeptical voice.

In the cockpit: dismissive of his input, cavalier with their lives, indifferent to his presence, treating him as if he weren’t even there.

*... why for her... ?*

*Why... not...*

*... why not this:*

Justin’s head rattled as another image filled his head: Chenine, in her flight suit, slinking through the docking bay. She’s far, far away, like Justin is watching her from the other side of the bay. But she comes into view very quickly.

The camera looks like it’s coming in for a close-up on the girl, getting closer and closer to her as it zooms-in faster and faster. The girl looks up: she looks straight at Justin, straight into his eyes before her face contorts into a grisly look of terror. The girl suddenly flinches: she dives to one side. She appears desperate to avoid the camera’s glare.

Justin looked on, perplexed. “This... this is a camera, right? Is it a camera? Or... is it...”

As soon as the camera reaches the girl her mouth opens in a heart-stopping, noiseless scream. Justin could barely see something pushing against her shoulder: it was silver and metallic.

Something red explodes across the camera.

Then, with Chenine’s mouth agape in wordless terror, the image fades.

*...yes. Right?*

Justin’s face was contorted in horror. “Christ in Heaven...” he growled. The image of the suffering girl sent a deep chill through his body. Even the landscape seemed to react to Justin’s horror: the water turned frigid and the grass crusted over with a sickly brown tinge. The hand on his back recoiled quickly, as if in shock. Justin was getting angry. “*Enough* of all this nonsense: I don’t have *time* to screw around like this. Chenine needs my help!” His face was desperate: Justin didn’t understand what was going on; if this was a link-effect, it was far more intense than he’d been prepared for. “That’s *enough*, I said!”

*...adamancy...*

“You’re damn right I’m adamant. A girl’s life is-”

*...what for?*

Justin’s teeth were clenched tightly. This dream-voice of his was the ultimate brick wall.

Then, as if it’d come to some realization, the voice responded with a knowing lilt. The disembodied specter sounded like a used-car salesman.

*Ahhhhhhh... Do... you... will you... you will... with this:*

The landscape blurred again, and again it revealed Justin’s white-haired colleague. Chenine came into focus, but this time in a far different context: the girl was naked, her arms weaving seductively over chest, a warm glow in her pale blue eyes. Two

hands slid along her sides and gripped her body, holding her tight. They were male hands with the same bony form and dark tanned color as Justin's.

*Purpose... yes? To continue, yes?*

The girl looked up at Justin with a leering, lustful grin. She set her teeth apart in an unsettling smirk. The grin went well beyond carnal lust: it was something closer to vicious animal hunger.

"What the hell is all this?" He barked. "Hey, 'subconscious-me': now's *really* not the time to play these games. Maybe, if you're really good, I'll let you play 'em later..." The racy images continued to swirl before Justin's eyes, becoming more and more graphic as the seconds ticked by. Hands caressed, bodies entwined.

Losing all traces of his humor or curiosity Justin fell to his knees. The cold stream water splashed around his body as it raced behind him. "I need to get out of here, you stupid son-of-a-bitch!" Tears of frustration welled-up in his eyes.

*...There is... no purpose.* The voice rebuked him.

Seething with anger, Justin ignored the infuriating voice and held his head, desperate to escape this living dream and rescue Chenine. In the end, though, he didn't know how to do that, and he was totally at the mercy of this mysterious specter.

Then he noticed something. The water around him began pulsing and rippling in very regular intervals. He looked up. The grass along the banks was quivering along with the brook.

'pulse', 'pulse', 'pulse'...

Justin slowed his breathing and suddenly realized what the source was: his heartbeat. Every beat inside his chest sent a rippling pulse of energy through the landscape. When he looked up again he could see Chenine, this time hunched over a Sudoku puzzle, nibbling cutely on her pencil in the cafeteria at Base-10. He saw her adjusting the collar of her flight suit, giving a tiny nod to him: the kind of small gesture she used as a greeting when they met up in the hangers each morning. He saw her smiling, one of those very rare, genuine smiles of hers.

He saw her when she laughed, the few times one of his jokes managed to hit the mark with her.

His heartbeat swelled until it overtook the landscape: the brook began to slosh over the banks with each pulse, the grass lay down as if a shockwave blast decimated it.

Justin stood up on his feet; he felt the liberating power of that pulse. Soon, it was enough to shake the very ground itself.

There was nothing from the voice for a few seconds. Finally it gave one last, very slow, very puzzled thought:

*I cannot... understand...*

With every ounce of energy in him, Justin forced his will over the place. The pulses of his heartbeat became ever more violent until pieces of the ground around him tore open. The sound of the ground ripping asunder didn't sound like earth and rock being pulled apart: it was more like metal-on-metal grating.

All at one, as if a decision had been made, the hands returned to Justin's body, settling on his shoulders with their childlike softness. Justin again tried to turn around, and again found he couldn't.

As the world pulsed and trembled around him Justin's senses disappeared. Anything he felt, anything he heard, anything he smelled disappeared as quickly as it had

come. And he was never able to look behind him. The only thing he could remember about the place, the person, or the thing that lurked outside of his vision was that it had a very peculiar smell.

It smelled like apples.

...*Adamancy*... the voice repeated, quieter this time...

*I still don't... understand...*

Justin flexed the muscles of his mind; every heartbeat sang from his chest in another seismic shock. They were very *angry* seismic shocks.

...*I see...*

*Alright, then...*

*But, still...*

“Respond, pilot!” Laura was practically screaming into his ears.

Justin sat up. He was back in his cockpit. There was no phantom river, no blades of grass and no sunshine. He was caked in a fresh coat of sweat; his heart pounded in his head.

“What the hell...” he said quietly. Then, collecting his bearings, he said: “Calm down, Lieutenant, I’m with you...” He looked up to see outside the canopy and felt a deep ache in his neck. His entire body throbbed with a dull pain, like he’d just run a marathon. He could hear the furious scream of the engines behind him, but the Raiden no longer wobbled awkwardly in the air; the ship felt very smooth and tight as it sailed down the streets of Ultima True.

Justin, noticing this smoothness, kicked his engines up, up, and up, waiting to feel the *Platonic Love* tremble and wobble, ready to pull back on the throttle to keep the it from flying out of control. No matter how hard he pushed his engines the Raiden kept moving straight to course, without a buck or a wobble.

“Niiiiice...” Justin said, pleased.

He didn’t know how fast he was going. He might not have believed it if he’d actually checked.

“You’re coming up on the signal.” Laura stated.

Justin flitted his eyes around all the damaged buildings in the area. He immediately spotted the *Chaste Gazer*. He saw small pieces of black debris falling from its precarious perch.

“You should be able to set down on the opposite side of the building,” Laura continued. “Pull the pilot out of that ship as soon as you can; let the *Gazer* fall if you have to: it can survive the crash.”

“Negative.” He barked. “The ground’s giving away beneath her: I don’t have any time to retrieve the pilot.” His eyes widened as he watched the battered Raiden begin to slide out the side of the building, rear first.

“What the hell’re you gonna do now?!” Tabris demanded.

Justin ignored him. He brought the *Love* into a screaming dive, then pulled up on his controls, ascending rapidly. He was now approaching the *Gazer* from below.

“Arrrgh!” He screamed as he slung out his Raiden’s dull, damaged spike arm. The arm struck the *Gazer*’s hull with a resounding ‘whack’. Instantly the *Love* started tipping backwards, pushed down by the falling *Gazer*.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” He snarled as he kicked his engines into overdrive. The two Raiden’s hovered in the air for a few seconds, then the *Love*’s engines began to tire and the ships started moving backwards again.

“God take it: I can’t hold the ship up against the building! She weights a *ton!*” He complained with a strained voice.

“Damn!” Laura swore. “You need to get the hell out of there: *now!*”

Justin, snarling like an animal, disagreed. “Negative.” He angrily replied. He pulled back on his undamaged spike arm and, with only a second’s hesitation, sent the needle straight up into the *Gazer*’s hull.

“Rrrgh!” He spat as he dug the razor sharp spike into the hull. He twisted it, like it was a knife, into the *Gazer*’s skin. Various fluids rained down from the pierced Raiden. Black oil exploded from the wound like tarry blood. The sludge rained down on the *Platonic Love*.

Justin sensed the shower through his link. *Funny...* he thought in the back of his mind, *this doesn’t really taste like oil...* many cords, wires and other unidentifiable things oozed from the wound. Some of the wires still squirmed and sparked. Justin figured that electricity must still be flowing through them.

*Although that’s kinda odd for a ship that’s supposed to be dead in the water, isn’t it?* He thought.

With one last thrust of effort Justin succeeded in driving the spike deep enough into the *Gazer* to physically entwine the two Raidens: if they were going to fall, they would fall together. There was little else he could do. He maxed out his engines and braced for impact.

The *Chaste Gazer* slipped free of the shattered window.

The two Raidens began their 20-story plummet, the *Gazer* spiraling dumbly on top of the *Love*, whose engines flared in a violent upward thrust. Despite Justin’s efforts the ground rushed to meet them. Justin maneuvered his Raiden to be directly beneath Chenine’s ship, ensuring that the *Love* would bear the brunt of the impact. Having done everything in his power to protect the crippled *Gazer*, he allowed his Raiden’s collision foam to envelop him. The sticky goo shrouded his body, blanketing Justin’s eyes and ears. He felt a loud, jarring thump from outside; it rattled his teeth. All around him he felt pressure and metallic grating.

Then everything was quiet. He could see nothing out of the canopy; it was smothered by the *Gazer*, which was pinning the *Love* to the ground.

Dripping with foam, Justin kicked-out his rear emergency exit. He hesitated a moment, deciding to snatch-up his Aegis handgun from behind his chair before venturing out. Then the sweaty, beat-up pilot crawled through the rear exhaust tubes like a drowned rat.

“Ugh!” he grunted with surprise as his body came to a jarring stop: something was holding him back. Justin thought that he’d ripped-out all the medical tubes in his body, but when he turned to check himself he found a small black tube wrapped around his leg; it was piercing his ankle.

*I didn’t order any meds through my ankles...* he thought, *guess that’s another error for Roont’s to-do list.* Regardless, he didn’t have time to think about it, so he quickly grabbed the root-like tube and ripped it out of his skin.



Justin stumbled through the dark shadow of the two fallen Raidens like a spelunker through a dark cave. Soon enough he saw daylight and clambered out into the fresh air.

He quickly oriented himself and ran to the front of the *Chaste Gazer*. He went over to its dust-coated canopy and beat on the hard crystal cover with the butt of his Aegis, but there was no response. Justin scrambled around to one side of the beat-up Raiden and found the emergency release panel. He leveled his Aegis at it, shielded his eyes and discharged the gun. The panel exploded with a loud ‘poof’. Justin drew his gloved hand into the wreckage, finding the manual release and punching it.

That caused the canopy of Chenine’s ship to shoot off the Raiden. It landed a good 50 feet away. In a nice bit of irony a crippled Tove was struggling across the lane with its one remaining leg trailing behind it. The heavy crystal canopy landed on it with an almost comical ‘thud’.

*Two birds, one stone...* Justin thought absently as he scrambled up into the cockpit.

Chenine was in her chair, her body hanging limply from her seatbelts. The top set of straps was broken off, so her upper body hung limply over her waist. Her silver hair was strewn over her face. Steam was gushing ominously from behind her seat; the *Gazer* wasn’t a safe place to be right now.

Justin yanked the girl out of her seat. He felt a sickly snapping noise as he grabbed her. At first Justin was afraid he’d damaged her spine, but he noticed a few broken tubes behind her seat and realized it was them, and not Chenine’s bones, that had been broken. He carried the girl over his shoulder. He managed to get her a few feet away from the Raidens before collapsing, dumping her body beside a pile of smoldering debris.

He panted from the effort and rested on his knees. “Lieutenant.” He gasped. “Go ahead.” She called.

“I’ve recovered the pilot.” He surveyed his coworker: Chenine’s face was pale (much paler than usual) and the supine girl was totally unresponsive. Justin ripped off his black gloves and slid a finger against her neck. He leaned down over her face, his ear against her lips as he rested one hand on her sternum. “She’s alive.” He said. “Her pulse is regular; she’s breathing adequately.”

“We’re trying to arrange for medical transport, but it might take awhile. Anyway: you need to do a rapid trauma check on her,” Laura ordered, “Shoulders to abdomen, you got it?”

“Say what, now?” Justin grunted.

“The medics can take care of almost any problems with her once they get there, but if she’s bleeding out from her internal organs she’ll lose her pulse long before they get there. You know how tricky the resurrection process is, so don’t let it come to that. You need to make sure she doesn’t have any holes in her trunk. Check her spine, too.”

“Mmm.” He grunted. Like all pilots, Justin had taken a crash-course (*ha, ha*) in emergency medicine. He was sorry to say that not much of it stuck with him. Grumbling, he grabbed the V-neck of Chenine’s black flight suit and ripped it apart in one fell motion. There was a goopy green sludge hidden between two layers of the flight suit. It was the suit’s adaptive electrical insulation. The stuff bled from the outfit like an ink-tag on a piece of department store clothing.

Justin ripped the top of her suit down to the bellybutton. He got a small shock when he did: Chenine wasn't wearing a bra today. It wasn't much of a shock for him: he'd already guessed that was the case from the way she'd been, well, 'sashaying' through the corridors of Base-10 earlier in the day.

*Get on with the trauma check, you cad...* he chided himself.

He checked her ribs, which were intact, and her abdomen, which was nice and springy in the four places he touched. There were two rows of dark black bruises running over her tummy and lower chest: superficial seatbelt burns.

Justin gently log-rolled the girl and checked her back.

"Woah." He whistled.

All Chenine's Link Prongs were still in place and erect. Her spine curved naturally, all the vertebrae were firm, and there was no apparent damage to Chenine's naked back.

But there were four thick, surgically implanted holes along her shoulder blades, two on each side. Blood was oozing from the pores in a steady stream. Justin put pressure on the wounds, but found that ineffective, as if the holes were saturated with an anticoagulant. He pulled a tiny vial from his satchel, a tube of 'pseudo-fibrin', and sprayed the misty solution over her wounds. The bleeding soon stopped.

Justin rolled Chenine over onto her back. He drew the remaining scraps of her suit over her naked breasts and flopped down on his back, lying quietly beside his unconscious colleague. He was very tired. More than that: he was exhausted. Justin sighed as he looked over at their Raidens: the mighty arsenal of the Tears' Shower Squadron. He grinned as he considered the stupidity of the situation: Justin's Raiden buried twenty feet below the asphalt, Chenine's injured bird lying on top of it in a very undignified riposte.

Despite his sleepiness, he snickered quietly. What was he to make of all this? Was it some kind of cosmic 'no-harm, no-foul'? He turned his head, looking at the white-haired sleeping beauty beside him. *She* was alright, and so was he. Justin drew in a deep breath. He stared up at the darkening sky before giving his 'approach' report.

"Well, I'm spacesick again, and dead tired, but it looks like Operation 'Spider's Falter' is coming to a close." He rubbed his temples gingerly. "The City at Nash Ultima has been successfully defended, at a fairly steep price. The *Chaste Gazer* and the *Platonic Love* are wrecked, but they're completely salvageable. I know there'll be an inquiry about this, and believe me when I say that at least *one* of us can't be punished for that..." he rattled off that snide editorial as he looked over at Chenine.

The beat-up young man sat up, feeling suddenly nauseous.

"Justin." Laura called to him, quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Good work today."

He released a deep breath. "Right..." he grunted. "You too, Lieutenant." He sighed long and hard, cradling his aching body in his arms. Beside him, Chenine started to moan: her voice was dreamy and foggy.

"I know what you mean." Justin quipped. He eyed Chenine's breast pocket conspiratorially. He stuck two fingers into the pocket.

"Pardon my reach, Chen..." he lightheartedly smirked. He fumbled around until he felt the slender tip of a cigarette.

“You dirty smoker, you...” he chided as he put the cigarette between his teeth. Justin turned to a piece of smoldering rubble and stuck his face close enough to the flames to light the tip. He sighed, drew in the thick tobacco smoke and, arching one eyebrow, quickly coughed up a mess of black smoke.

“Ugh! Turkish standards?” He said to the unconscious girl. “You know these things’ll kill you, right Chenine?” He smiled.

The Raidens remained locked together, the *Love* having completely impaled its sister ship. He had no way of seeing what was happening along the hot, mottled skin of the *Chaste Gazer*.

Steamy black fluid and coils still protruded from the Raiden’s gaping wound. The messy sludge came out hot, dripping over the bodies of the two ships, but as it sat in the cold night air the gooey material started to change.

Within ten minutes the entire mess of fluids and cords was rock hard. The cords stopped writhing and the fluid stopped flowing. Frost gathered along the edges of the stuff, and moonlight reflected brightly off the metallic shards.

There was nothing to see here: it was simply a dead piece of metal, with all the strength (and physical properties) of hafnium-carbide.

For the Hybrids, nothing ever went to waste.

The stars were coming out overhead. Justin flopped over onto his back. The tip of his cigarette burned sedately, a small orange beacon in the approaching twilight. He watched as the stars brightened. He drifted into a soft, dreamless sleep as the celestial ballet continued its never-ending performance.



T I A