



The Scholander Bomb

180 Minutes to Gestation.

“We can load up the control rods and stash them in R-B for the time being.”

Clicka-clacka-clicka-clack!

“This whole floor needs to be reinforced with keratinocyte in the long run...”

Clicka-clacka!

“And don’t get me started on the hazmat protocols...”

Clicka-clacka-clicka-clack!

Donald Plinshine threw up his stubby hands. His precious clipboard nearly escaped his grasp.

“Pyotr: have you heard a word I’ve said?”

Old Pyotr Frieze smiled. He sat squat on the floor with a giant wrench in his hand. The gnarled mechanic looked like a primitive baboon wielding a bone.

“In fact, I have. But I prefer t’ do my plannin’ as I go along, if it’s all the same t’ you, Sir Quartermaster.”

“It’s not.” Plinshine barked. “We’ve got enough problems to deal with on account of this god-awful ‘skeleton staffing’; I don’t need you creating even more problems by ‘winging’ it and getting discombobulated in the process.”

“Better’n being lead like a dog on a leash.”

“What was that?”

Pyotr smiled. “Not a thing, Sir Quartermaster.”

“I’m not micromanaging here, you know: without a process, a protocol, a plan of *attack*, a guy can’t hope to get anything done.” The pimply-faced quartermaster adjusted his glasses as he spoke: he bore a definite aura of self-satisfaction.

“Is that what we’ve learned from our extensive lifetime of experience?” The old man cooed.

The younger man scowled. “No: it’s what I learned at the AM’s School of the Quartermaster Corps.”

Pyotr chuckled. “Ah, I’m sure that’s much better.”

Plinshine felt the hair on his neck rise: he could feel eyes on him. He turned to see Justin Storm poking his head around the bay door. His green eyes glimmered with apprehension.

“Oh, for god’s sake.” Plinshine whined. “What do you *want*, pilot? This is the third time you’ve been down here today and its only 0930!”

“I want to go out, Plinshine.”

The quartermaster crossed his arms. “And we’ve been over this, haven’t we? You’re not on standby, your RL hasn’t cleared you for launch, and we’re shorthanded as it is today.”

“I know all that, but look: I’m not authorized to help out with anything else around here anyway, so I’m just sitting on my butt as it is.” He approached Donald with his lower lip held in his teeth. “I really need to get out there, even if it’s just for a minute—”

“No, you really need to cool your jets, pilot.”

Justin then did something unexpected: he crossed his hands in front of his chest and shook them back and forth:

“*Please*, Plinshine! I’m begging you!”

Donald squinted. “Why do you want to go out so much, anyway?”

“I don’t know: it’s something that’s been bugging me all day. I feel edgy and antsy. It’s like there’s a chill in my spine—”

Pyotr interjected, rather unhelpfully: “your spine’s made of metal, if you’ll remember: maybe that’s something to do with it, eh?”

Justin shot the gruff mechanic a sneer. “I feel like I *need* to be out in the ether: I can’t say why.”

“I’m supposed to sanction a launch based on a feeling?” Plinshine shook his head. “The subcommander would not be happy.”

“I’ll call him for my final clearance, okay? It’d only be a quick spin around base: ten, twenty minutes tops—”

“You’ve got the ~~EU~~ 2,500 to cover your fuel costs, eh?” Pyotr clucked his tongue and went back to work on the bay floor.

Justin ignored him: “I’ll take responsibility for any fallout: just *please* let me out!” The pilot’s emerald eyes grew even wider.

Donald considered the frazzled pilot before him, as well as his dogged persistence.

How much can I get done today with him constantly whining over my shoulder?

Donald smirked: it was a small price to pay for a little peace and quiet.

“To summarize: you want to scope things out around base because of a ‘feeling’?”

Justin sighed and hung his head. “That’s about it.”

Donald shook his head: “Alright, little ‘Fiver’.”

The pilot wrinkled his nose. “‘Fiver’?” Then he caught the significance of Donald’s words. “Did you say ‘alright’? You mean you’re gonna let me out?”

He shrugged. “Command Ops’ll decide that, although they won’t be pleased, I’d think. You can board your Raiden in ten minutes, so I suggest you change—”

Justin ripped the turquoise shirt from his chest and shimmied out of his khakis: he was already wearing the black *Liefde*-suit beneath his clothes.

“Ooookay... scratch that. Why don’t you mosey on over to Bay R-B and—”

“About that.” Justin interjected. “The Korangers are all out at Isla Lian, right? Is there any chance I could maybe use a spare Korang fighter today? It’s just for, well, a change of pace, maybe...”

This request nearly floored Plinshine: he couldn’t tell what to make of it.

Pyotr answered for him: “Korangers fly Korangs, Mister Storm, and Typers fly Raidens.”

“Yeah, but I—”

The old man looked up: “Korangers fly *Korangs*, and Typers fly *R-Types*.”

This statement, it seemed, was not open to debate. The young Typer crossed his arms over his chest: “Alright, fine: never mind.”

“Good luck talking your way past Ops.” Donald watched the retreating pilot pass through the door. “And have a pleasant flight, ‘Fiver’.” He smiled.

Justin’s head peeked out from around the door, his eyes skeptical. He looked like he wanted to ask Donald about this taunt, but he appeared to be slightly more interested in getting into the air: his head quickly disappeared from sight without another word.

Pyotr chuckled. “Skittish as a rabbit, isn’t he?”

Donald smiled and wiped down his glasses. “I couldn’t have said it better, Pyotr.”

178 Minutes to Gestation

Sam Roont trudged along the grimy catwalk beneath the Southeastern strut. Rust and mold grew everywhere down here, and the smelly corridor bore a thousand tiny leaks in its frame.

Just the kind of setup you’d want for a structure submerged 500 feet beneath sea-level...

They were a good 200 yards from the central strut of Base-10: this prison-like peninsula was perhaps the loneliest place in the entire base. In point of fact Roont rather wished he *was* alone at the moment.

“You are the most spectacular idiot that I’ve ever worked with, Tabris!” He snorted through his nose as the effort of walking took its toll. “And after we trusted you with so much responsibility!”

“He nearly killed me, doctor: there was nothing I could do!”

“Ever consider *dying*, then?”

Scott stared at the rusty floor as he struggled to match Roon’t pace. “Have you told RL Wraith, yet?”

The Bydo doctor stopped at a small doorway. “No: I have to find a positive ‘spin’ to put on this disaster or that black-hearted bastard’s likely to rip my innards out along with yours.”

He gripped the door handle, but turned to face Tabris one last time: “Mister AGP’s bound to spread this information to the other seatwarmers— I mean *pilots*, and from there who knows how far it’ll go? Damn it, Scott, if the public knew about the kinds

of things we were doing with that harvested Bydo flesh there'd be riots: understand? And what if our horrified little pilots try to up and *quit* on us, huh?" He poked the tech in the ribs. "What'll we do, then, damn it?"

"I don't know, sir—"

"At this point the best thing *you* can hope for is that Mister AGP gets struck by lightning, or something like that: in a lot of ways it'd be better to nix the Diapente Test Subject altogether than let this information get out."

Scott suddenly looked up at the doctor; it was the first time today that he'd looked Roont in the eyes: "Then Storm *was* chosen because he's a Diapente, wasn't he?"

"Don't put words in my mouth, JG!" Roont raised his fist again, but thought better of it. "Besides: that's just idle talk. Wraith would skewer me alive if we did anything 'untoward' towards Mister AGP without his authorization." He stared down at his shoes. "...or without the authorization of his 'handlers'."

"What was that, doctor?"

Roont glared at the tech. "Forget it: it's nothing. Ugh! I've got these puttering post-docs from the Labs to deal with at the moment: I'm behind on my 'doctoral community service' requirements, and I have to play in the sandbox with them, today. You get your ass topside and think about what you'll say to Wraith when he comes for your head!"

173 Minutes to Gestation.

"Malignant Hyperthermia?"

"These results are definitive, doctor."

The base doctor held one of Samantha Rayne's tanned arms out to one side. She used her other hand to grab the printout from her nurse. She scanned the document.

"You can clearly see the markers on Chromosome 19—"

"Textbook." The doctor scowled. "We've run Chenine Chovert's genome through the infirmary dozens of times: how the hell could we have missed something like this? Either I'm incompetent as hell, or this problem grew inside her overnight."

Samantha coughed politely.

The doctor looked up: "Oh, sorry Sam." She released the girl's arm.

The nurse spoke up: "Remember, ma'am, that our instruments are designed to highlight Bydo corruption in DNA and not a simple human genetic disorder like this."

"I'm aware of that, Denise." She looked at the nurse with what Samantha would qualify as barely-concealed contempt. "We still should have picked it up."

Sam wrinkled her nose. "What's 'Malignant Hyperthermia'?"

The doctor held a hand in front of the pilot's face: "You don't talk: this is confidential, and you're *not* hearing any of this information, understand?" She rechecked the printout while walking toward her office.

"Ridiculous!" she muttered. Looking back at Samantha, she waved a dismissive hand: "You're completely healthy, Sam: almost *too* healthy. Off with you. I'm sure the vertigo will pass in time."

"One hopes." The girl muttered as she buttoned up her turquoise shirt. Sam hopped off the examination table and made for the exit. She passed by Denise's workstation on the way out.

“So, what’s the prognosis on Chovert?”

“She’ll be fine.” The nurse answered. “That kind of condition is easily treated, and most of it is due to certain chemical ‘triggers’: a little adjustment on her Raiden’s chemical-support system should keep those triggers out of her body.”

The pilot grunted her approval. “The doctor seems less confident, though.”

Denise scoffed. “She just misses her last head nurse. Apparently the bitch up and left without any notice: can you imagine that? How inconsiderate. Anyway, she was a real whiz with genetic analysis, and I suppose the doctor just doesn’t trust me to do as good a job.”

“Trust is earned, I suppose.”

“Mmm.” Denise brushed her long black hair off her brow; Sam noticed an attractive bracelet on her wrist with an odd heart-shaped design carved into the metal. She wasn’t much for jewelry, but the simple silver trinket appealed to the pilot’s love of simplicity.

“Any significance to that design?” She motioned to the nurse’s hand.

Denise eyed Samantha, then her own wrist; she pulled the sleeve of her lab-coat over the bracelet. “No: It’s just something I like to wear.”

The septic green infirmary doors hissed open. Chenine stepped through them.

“Hey: what’s shaking, Chovert?”

The girl cocked her head at the sight of Samantha. “Captain Rayne?”

“I’m just passing through: I’ve been feeling a little dizzy and sick—”

“—all morning.” The girl finished with a nod: “me, too.”

“Really? What a coincidence.”

Chenine cast her eyes to one side. “If you believe in them, I suppose.”

168 Minutes to Gestation

“I don’t believe in coincidences.” Ramirez declared.

“And I don’t believe in conspiracy theories.” Jen absently typed on her console, one leg propped up on the desk beside her. The sky outside was drab: the kind of somber grey that didn’t bring about a storm, or even a spot of rain.

Just a big, fat bout of grade-A depression...

“God, I hate the doldrums. And it’s kinda strange, because I used to love them...”

Ramirez swung around in his chair. He and Jen were currently the only occupants of Command Ops. The station’s current ‘skeleton staffing’ meant that each and every corridor of the rusty iron shell was deserted and quiet as a tomb. The normal hustle and bustle of the base was replaced with an eerie silence: noises Jen couldn’t normally hear—the squeak of the base’s struts beneath her feet, the pounding of the ocean waves outside and the dull hum of electricity running through the walls—stood out blatantly. This, combined with the dead horizon outside, gave the base a hint of otherworldliness: like a land forsaken by time itself.

I’ll have to keep my eyes open for Langoliers...

“Think about it: the brass call for three days of reduced shifts at the same time that they set their quarterly budget: they’re testing the waters! They wanna see if they can do without us!”

“No one’s shutting down Base-10.” Jen shook her head. “Even if Allied Command was thinking about it, we’re immune from that kind of move as long as we’re the host of the 101st Korang fleet, right?”

“We’ll see about that.” He sulked.

Both Jen’s console as well as the two empty ones on either side of her began droning softly; white pulses flashed on the screens. The girl pursed her lips:

“Damn it: that makes a 50-percent increase in ambient interference in the past hour!”

“Can’t say what’s causing all the jitters in the system, but at this rate your sensors are gonna start mistaking the clouds overhead for an AS-Scan.”

The girl popped the top of one of her control panels. “Yeah: there’s a technical term for this kind of skittishness in a system...”

“Pray tell.”

Jen crawled beneath her console and plucked the bubblegum from her mouth; she placed the gooey wad on her nose as she gripped a tiny screwdriver between her teeth.

“We say that they’re ‘spooked’.” She managed around the tool.

“How very informative...”

A light flickered on Ramirez’s console.

“Huh: speak of the devil.” The duty officer flicked his communication link on.

Justin Storm’s scratchy voice echoed through the hot zone: “This is the *Platonic Love*: launch status is yellow.”

Ramirez’s face contorted. “R-H-AGP isn’t scheduled to fly today.”

“Command Ops, this is the *Platonic Love*,” Justin repeated, “please verify launch status...”

“What’re you gonna do?” Jen emerged from under her workstation and sat up on her knees, gazing over the row of consoles between her and Ramirez.

“I don’t have to do *anything*: he doesn’t have a flight plan.”

“Shouldn’t you call the subcommander, or something?”

Ramirez smiled. “Well: calling the subcommander requires work on my part.” He leaned back and smiled. “Ignoring the message, on the other hand, involves *no* work on my part. Decisions, decisions...”

The duty officer relented only after Jen reminded Ramirez about Sven Wraith’s tendency to rip the heads off people who don’t show him all due respect and courtesy.

The RL, however, did not sound particularly pleased to be disturbed.

“What is it, Ramirez?”

“Sir: Justin Storm is requesting launch clearance.”

“He’s *what*?”

“I know, sir: no flight plan or notice. Couldn’t say what he wants...”

There was a considerable pause before the Raiden-Leader answered: “The past few days have been rather stagnant around here, especially for the squad: the boy most likely wants a joyride...”

“Right: should I make him stand down, sir?”

This was met with an even longer pause.

“Sir?”

“No: go ahead and give him final clearance.” He sighed. “At the very least he can get some practice in. I suppose that’s worth something.”

“Thank you, sir.” Ramirez acknowledged the order, but Wraith had already cut the line.

“Command Ops,” Justin continued, “my launch status is yellow: please—”

The duty officer patched himself into Justin’s cockpit:

“I heard you the first time. R-H-AGP: your status is green, green, green to launch.”

Ramirez’s coffee cup rattled on his desk. Two seconds later the floor itself shook, and then audibly rumbled. A neon blue tint flared across the moody scene outside, and then the *Platonic Love* appeared at the panorama window, already far out to sea with the blue flame of its tail pulsing across the dun-colored sky. The rumble faded, and then dissipated.

Ramirez scowled. “Damn Typers think they own this bucket. They’re always demanding so much undue respect from the rest of us.”

Jen watched the deadly silver ball disappear from sight. Her eyes glowed with reverence. “They kill Bydo: that’s all that matters.”

“All that matters to *you*, maybe.”

The girl watched the *Platonic Love*’s smoke-tail dissipate in the sky; she nodded.

“Yes, it is all that matters.”

Surely she could respect them for that much. Her eyes simmered with a latent fire of their own.

What beautiful dragonflies they are...

152 Minutes to Gestation.

The elevator jostled. Laura’s body bobbed to one side as she scribbled on her data pad. She bumped against Commander Faught’s shoulder, jostling the faded ribbons and medals on his white suit.

“Sorry, sir.”

“Mmm.” He grunted. Faught teased his moustache as he spoke. “Also, have the auxiliary corvette team set up a temporary camp in bay R-Naught: they’ve been looking for extra space recently, haven’t they?”

“But that’s in the R-side of the docking ring: won’t the subcommander object?”

The old man smiled. He tipped back his uniform hat with self-satisfied pleasure. “Wraith is moving in on our fleet’s bays, so it’s only proper that I return the favor, isn’t it?”

“Not very diplomatic.” The Lieutenant observed.

“Diplomacy at the point of a sword is still diplomacy, isn’t it?” Faught chuckled.

The elevator gears hissed: the compartment slowed and then ground to a halt. The doors slid open on Sven Wraith himself. The RL perched his lips as he took note of Laura and the Commander, then his face regained its normal ineffable ambivalence.

“Sir.” Bitter frost wafted through his lips. He stepped into the compartment on Laura’s left, sandwiching the unfortunate girl between himself and Faught.

The Commander made a low-pitch noise like a pig snorting cocaine, or something equally unpleasant.

“And Lieutenant.” He offered Laura a faint grin and a nod.

“Subcommander.” She acknowledged. The Lieutenant looked back and forth at the two men with unease, and then at the wide-open door before her: it was getting awfully stuffy in here, and Laura didn’t think there was room for both her and the two men’s egos inside this compartment.

“Alright, yes: uh, I’ll take care of all these changes to the roster, sir, and if you’ll excuse me, I’ll see you upstairs very soon.” Laura wormed herself out from between the black magnetism of the two men and made for the exit.

The Commander put a gloved hand to her shoulder and shook his head. “It’s 1000 hours, Hayle: you’re scheduled to relieve Ramirez in Ops right now, not later.”

“And I’d object to being denied your company on the trip upstairs, Laura.” Sven smiled again. His flattery, as well as the first-name-basis he forced on the girl both riled the Commander even more. Wraith clacked the head of his back cane against the ‘door close’ button. “You weren’t really going to leave us all alone, were you?”

“No, sirs: of course not.” She sighed. Both the Commander and Wraith again repositioned themselves to place the poor Lieutenant between them.

I don’t know anything about chemistry, but I do know something about ‘buffers’ and how people use them...

As the elevator doors closed she couldn’t help but feel as helpless as a weak base in the presence of two very strong acids.

And if these guys aren’t acidic, then they’re certainly vitriolic, at least...

148 Minutes to Gestation.

The *Platonic Love* rocketed over the water. Justin coaxed the ship low, parting the purple water behind him with his small jet-stream wake. If he flew any closer to the sea he’d likely get a warning from Command Ops, followed by a reprimand on his permanent record for violating the Protocols for Marine-Life Defense.

Yadda... yadda... yadda...

Justin kept his mind as far away from the link as possible. He could infer from Scott Tabris’s confessions that the Raiden-Hybrids required a little stimulation of the living flesh within to fly, and that appeared to be right: each time Justin dropped his devotion below 10-percent the *Love*’s structural-integrity alarm protested with a noisy squeal. The ship, it seemed, was dependant upon Justin’s own processing of ‘reality’ in order to behave ‘realistically’.

The vessel creaked and groaned as it wobbled through the air. These were familiar sounds to Justin— although not so much anymore. Any of these creaks and groans— ostensibly ‘normal’ tension in the airframe— could signal something very different, now. He no longer felt ‘in his element’, here. On the contrary, Justin felt like he was scuba-diving in the depths of Loch Ness. His eyes wandered around this once-familiar cockpit with unease, and no small measure of hatred in his heart.

You’re a monster. You’re an abomination, and whatever symbiosis we’ve enjoyed before is changing— is ending— now, you hear?

Justin truly didn’t know how well the dumb flesh within this ship could understand him: he debated on whether the stuff was as smart as a flea, or maybe even as sharp as a fruit fly.

Actually, one assumes that an insect possesses infinitely superior faculties to this degenerate chunk of 'sea-sponge'...

Assumptions are imprecise things by nature. One's assumptions can often be wrong, and they often are, but Justin's is unique in this one respect:

It was 'infinitely' wrong.

The *Platonic Love* accelerated, then banked into the air and buzzed the low-lying black rock face of Perimeter 1-0. The clunky little island looked dead (the word that came to Justin's mind was 'atrophied') beneath the depressing gray clouds. The pilot grew frustrated.

"Just what in God's name am I doing up here?"

Justin wiped down his brow and hung his head: he was jittery as a jackrabbit, and just about as rational. What was he so on-edge about? He couldn't really say. All Justin knew is that he woke up edgy, he went to work edgy and as the day wore on he was becoming increasingly edgy.

"Call-up computer: put the anti-nausea medication to full-force, please. I'm about to friggin' hurl..."

He was dizzy and sick, too. It felt like there were two giant lead weights pulling down on his heart and lungs.

Tch! For me to be flying around in this condition— and for no good reason— there must be some lead inside my head as well...

His canalphones buzzed to life:

"Alright, R-H-AGP: your joyride's over. You were cleared for fifteen minutes, tops, and you're ten minutes over. Time to take your chicken home to roost, you hear?"

Justin grudgingly banked the *Platonic Love*:

"Understood, Ops: I'm five minutes out, just have my bay 'genuflected' for me when I come in, okay?"

This was a pointless end to a pointless outing. Justin's nerves still pulsed beneath his skin and his flesh still prickled beneath his suit. He would give himself a very cold shower on landing, and if necessary he'd sedate himself to sleep for an hour, at least.

After all: this kind of wishy-washiness is unbecoming an officer, isn't it?

140 Minutes to Gestation.

The barracks door was unlocked, so Scott let himself in.

Water dripped in the dirty sinks behind the bunks. The fluorescent bulbs flickered and hummed overhead. He sat on the splintery wooden bench in front of two lockers marked 'RAYNE' and 'CHOVERT'. Chenine's *Liefde*-class flightsuit lay sprawled over his legs. He trained his fingers over the delicate black fabric of the suit and traced the heart-shaped design over the crotch.

It was a mistake: he'd made a mistake.

Actually, he'd made two. One of them was the obvious: he spilled his guts to Justin Storm and revealed some dangerous secrets. He couldn't help but regret that.

But then there was the other mistake: he *was* in love, there was no question: Storm was right about that much. So what was he doing keeping all this dangerous information secret from the very girl he was pursuing? Love, after all, meant caring for someone above all, and wasn't it pretty damned cold-hearted to treat Chenine so

shoddily? Could he really just play her like Wraith and Roont did? Could he behave as if the girl was just another expendable piece of flesh?

“Just like the other two...”

But she’s not like the other two: she’s nothing like those other two.

His fingers gripped the flimsy garment tight enough to drain the blood from his knuckles.

But I’ve made my feelings for her crystal-clear, and how does she treat me? She gives me no reason, no explanation for her brush-offs; she just treats me like a simple tool that tends to her Raiden!

“And I’m *not* a tool.” Scott’s big brown eyes narrowed.

The tech threw the garment beside him and stood up: he didn’t owe any of them a thing, least of all Chenine Chovert. Dr. Roont was right: the *Tears’ Shower Squadron* bore all the risks of these tests, and rightly so.

Scott balled his fists. She was a soldier, after all: so she should endure the same treatment.

Of course she should...

Scott shook his head and kicked the girl’s locker door in frustration. If he had tried the handle, opened the door and looked inside he might have seen something that would change his mind: a blood-red rose sparkling in a vase.

Things might have turned out differently if he’d seen that, but as it was he had a new mantra planted firmly in his head:

“None of them deserves to know anything more than *we* tell them...”

Tabris turned to leave, but then felt a quivering all along his skin. The hairs of his neck stood at attention and his pulse crept upward.

The ground beneath him rumbled, and then squealed.

“What in the—”

The floor buckled. A second later the rusty metal surface cracked right down the middle.

140 Minutes to Gestation

Roont looked down at the half-dozen fresh-faced ‘children’ around him. Most of these post-docs’ faces bore that repugnant, vapid naiveté that he loathed: they would never amount to much in their respective fields.

That said there was one among them, a shrewd-eyed upstart named Jordan, who at least appeared promising. The kid reminded Roont of himself, and that was always a good sign as far as the good doctor’s opinions fared.

Even a passing resemblance to perfection is something to be desired, after all...

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” Jordan stood front row center. He lacked the electronic clipboard all the other trainees carried: the sharp-chinned youth would commit everything to his impeccable memory.

Quite an impressive boy, isn’t he?

The good doctor smiled with indulgence: “‘Strange’ in what way, Mister Rails?”

“I did my residency over at Base Sruighlea, and they quite sensibly keep their Force Orbs close to the Raiden launch bays. But you, Doctor Roont, keep them hidden all the way down here?”

Roont shrugged. He stood beside a massive iron tube of approximately three meters in diameter. This cylinder ran out from the dimly-lit platform all the way out into the darkness of the strut behind them: that area was shrouded in absolute blackness, and only a few meters of the dark tube were visible before it disappeared into the lonely void.

“It’s an inconvenience, courtesy of our paranoid base commander.” He smiled at the group; the smile was political and insincere. “But don’t quote me on that, please.”

A young woman in the group looked around, taking stock of this miserable metal cavern. “The temperature here is low: about 15 degrees, isn’t it? Your *Ab Ex Mortis* can’t be stored down here, can it doctor?”

“True: Antibydo can’t maintain its structure below room temperature. This is another inconvenience.” He admitted. “But since this base also serves as a full-fledged Raiden development center we have ample storage space. Our Antibydo reserves are kept there.”

“You don’t keep the *AEM* with your Orbs?” Another member of the group recoiled as if he’d been punched. “But what about the ‘scrubbing’? Regulations say—”

“Yes, yes: It’s an unorthodox setup, but I also like to use Antibydo in our quarantine and decontamination setups as a matter of course, so it’s nice to have it closer to hand. As for the possibility of ‘scrubbing’ the Orbs,” he rapped on a vertical pipe beside the platform, “this pipeline runs directly to the *AEM* vats upstairs.”

Jordan arched a well-manicured eyebrow. “It’s most unusual to use *AEM* in routine decontamination, is it?”

“Call me persnickety.” Roont growled.

Talk soon turned to the Force Orbs themselves, and the post-docs had many questions about the control rod system Roont had set up for the R-H’s. Several of them were curious as to why he used the repulsive Type-B control rods (which contain Antibydo) whereas a regular Raiden Orb must be ‘forced’ to get close to its Raiden’s dead flesh via the magnetic Type-A rods.

The good doctor wasn’t interested in getting into this subject, especially with these mere ‘children’, so he decided to distract the rabble.

Distractions, distractions: let’s see... well, children like shiny toys to play with, don’t they?

“Tell me: who here has been up close and personal with a real, honest-to-goodness R-Type Force Orb?”

The post-docs murmured amongst themselves: no Bydo Labs doctor was ever allowed physical contact with an Orb until several years after certification.

“No time like the present!” Roont jovially cawed as he slapped a lever beside the massive torpedo tube. The strut rumbled, and then a sound like a vacuum cleaner on steroids reverberated in everyone’s ears. A loud thud shook the rusty tube, rattling the handle of the cylindrical door. Steam poured from the tube as Roont unlocked the chamber.

“Behold, my children: the greatest sin of man.” He grandly proclaimed.

The steam parted. By this time the post-docs had crowded around the good doctor, their curiosity overriding any caution they might otherwise display.

Jordan eventually spoke up: “Doctor, why is it like that?”

“I take it that even you haven’t seen an Orb in person, eh?” Roont smirked. “You see—”

“No: why is it *luminescent*, doctor?”

Sam Roont’s veins turned to ice. He turned around, wiped the steam from his glasses and peered down at the meter-wide sphere. The edges were cold and black as obsidian, but the center pulsed with a ruddy yellow light.

“What in the—?”

The floor suddenly quaked beneath their feet.

The overhead lights failed.

140 Minutes to Gestation

“...and you need *my* clearance to launch from the bays you’re using.”

“Which wouldn’t be a problem *if* you were easier to get in touch with, would it?”

“You expect a base commander to come running to your beck and call at every opportunity?”

“No, however I believe the SJC *does*, ‘sir’.”

All things considered, Laura desperately wished she had a noose to hang herself with.

Violent asphyxiation would be so much more pleasurable, I’d think...

She sighed and popped the top on yet another can of Pop-Up cola.

They were ‘detained’ en route to Ops: the dilapidated elevator had given up the ghost near the lower-level observation decks. They were sandwiched between the 12th and 14th floors.

And I’m sandwiched between a rock and a hard-ass...

“Hayle to maintenance...” she whispered into her earpiece. Laura’s voice was muffled by the two men’s chest-thumping.

“Y’ve got no heart for patience, do ya’, ma’am?”

“Pyotr, please! You said—”

“I said five, maybe ten minutes, dn’t I? My boys are crawling all over the ducts in your area, but they’ve their hands full: there’re reports of electrical problems throughout the base just now, and I don’t know why.”

“Well, jeez: make this a priority. Both the commander *and* subcommander are in here, you know.”

Frieze was just about to suggest where Laura could stick her snippy attitude when her earpiece cut out. She blinked and craned her neck up.

“What the heck?”

Wraith and the Commander ceased their bickering long enough to eye the Lieutenant with curious glances.

“My buds just cut out—” she started to explain, but duty officer Ramirez’s voice instantly drowned her out:

“Emer— *Battle Stations!* All hands to— t— *brace for impact!* Damnit! Brace—”

Laura was suddenly swept off her feet. The elevator careened in one direction, while the petite brunette took off in another. She slammed into Sven Wraith’s chest, the pair slammed into the cabin’s wall, then both of them flew through the air like rag dolls and crashed into Commander Faught, and then the other wall.

The lights blew out above them, and then the elevator hinges gave way.

Sparks flew in all directions as the cabin plummeted down the shaft.

140 Minutes to Gestation

Outside Base-10 the sky was cloudy and the sea churned, calm but moody. All morning a small eddy of purple froth swirled beside the Western strut. By 1000 hours that eddy had become a bona-fide whirlpool, and now it was a miniature maelstrom.

A gigantic oblong tube burst forth from this disturbance. It radiated a thousand sparks of electricity through air and water. This ‘tube’ was attached to a slender column of gray flesh and bone: a massive, sinewy neck.

Two disturbing slits burst from the tube: giant, blood-red eyes. A thousand serrated teeth suddenly prickled right out of the flesh above these slits. These misshapen teeth looked unnatural and very out of place— cancerous, almost: like a set of teratomatous teeth grown out the forehead of an otherwise healthy infant child.

As the gigantic creature emerged from the frothy brine it became clear that its neck *was* its body: the gray serpent emerged from the waves sporting a 500-meter long body studded with black spines. Dozens of ungainly ‘paws’ blossomed off the trunk all along its length, swaying in the sea breeze like a column of sickly roses on a diseased stem. Two other much smaller ‘head tubes’ graced the disgusting body: one of them bore one misshapen eye-slit, while the other bore three.

Moments after emerging from the water the terribly hydra’s slits hardened into black coals. Soon, this chalky black film fell away and left six gaping eye-holes in the three heads. These holes burned with a brilliant yellow fire as familiar as it is terrifying:

It was the light of the Bydo.

Howling through its diseased heads, the monstrous leviathan careened through the air, belching three columns of sickly purple exhaust from three jagged holes in its trunk. The creature’s massive central head collided with the lower observation decks of Base-10. It swished its gigantic tail in one direction, sending its paw-laden tail section careening into one of the base’s support columns.

Blue electrical fire exploded from the demon’s body at each point of contact.

The *Platonic Love* buzzed the fearsome creature from behind, close enough to make its awkward ‘paws’ ripple with the shockwave from its afterburners. Two dozen photonic cannon bolts followed this strafe, cutting into the hydra’s skin at various points in its body.

Blue electrical fire exploded at each point of contact: these flames rippled throughout its skin, then sank down into the creature’s rippling flesh like water disappearing into a sponge.

Justin banked his Raiden, teeth on edge, and snarled:

“C’mon: you ugly pansy! Walk this way and I’ll give you a kiss!”

He didn’t have his Force Orb at the moment, but that didn’t matter: Justin could discharge his wave cannon without it, but the stream would be much less condensed.

Not a problem. Instead of a sniper, I’ll just have to be a flamethrower.

It was the same strategy, in principle. The only difference was engagement distance.

That means it’s time to get up close and personal with this biological abortion...

The freakish hydra twisted its diseased body around and glared at the gleaming silver sphere behind it. With a caustic roar the demon lifted its body off the exoskeleton

of Base-10 and charged the stationary Raiden. Justin took evasive action and circumnavigated the demon, pulling a good 5 g's. He came out of this graveyard spin dizzy, and with a slight giddiness in his heart. A medical tube immediately sunk itself into his carotid, ready with supplemental O₂ and nutritional stimulants. High turbulence in the cockpit, however, caused the wispy tendril to nick Justin's chest, tearing his flightsuit along the neckline. He gritted his teeth as the garment's goopy insulation fluid dripped down his chest.

Well: there's 15,000 EU down the drain.

The *Liefde*-suits couldn't just be re-sewn, after all. Justin wasn't really going to worry about this loss unless Aryl Wraith came to him with the bill, though.

He crossed his arms over his chest.

Electricity flooded the cockpit of the *Platonic Love*.

Howling with rage, the hydra-demon snapped its body in the ship's direction, cracking it through the air like a whip.

"*Au revoir*, you bastard!" He threw his fists out to either side, hitting the cannon-release panels on either side of his chair.

A long wall of golden fire erupted from the surface of the Raiden. It billowed over the gray hydra's skin. Blue electrical fire exploded at each point of contact. The demon's skin shimmered with a translucent white glow.

Two seconds later something very unfortunate happened.

A wall of golden electrical fire erupted from the surface of the hydra: it flared through the air in the same direction it had come from.

Justin's eyes widened. He didn't have time to react, he didn't even have time to say a word.

Holy fu—

The air around the *Platonic Love* exploded with sparks of light. The electrical firestorm sent the small Raiden hurtling backwards like a pool ball struck by a cue. It careened through the air— wild and uncontrolled— while the pilot thrashed his limbs and screamed in pain. Sparks danced everywhere along Justin's body: they struck his teeth, his eyes, his arms and legs.

And the lethal sparks danced along the tear in his suit, where the hair stubbles on Justin's naked chest stood erect, blackened, and then disintegrated into charcoal ashes.

The Raiden's life-monitoring system emitted a massive peal: a real-time EKG of Justin's heart filled the central screen. This cardio readout looked like a seismograph during a 9.0 earthquake. Shortly thereafter the central screen— and all other monitors in Justin's cockpit— blew out and went dark.

The crippled *Platonic Love* fell to the earth faster than Icarus: Justin's Raiden clipped the main peak of Perimeter 1-0, tumbled across the structure's metal frame, and then came to a rest against the island's vacant wave-skim bays.

Smoke billowed all around the vessel— both inside and within the cockpit— but Justin Storm didn't pop his canopy: the pilot's limp body hung by his seatbelts, his mouth slack and jaw agape.

Five seconds later a glassy film enveloped Justin's strong green eyes, reducing the emerald jewels to filmy, foggy orbs.

He died a few minutes later.

130 Minutes to Gestation

The hydra left the little silver ball in its metal grave, and with nothing else in its path it turned its attention back to the base.

The demon wrapped its tail around the Southeastern strut and lunged at the base's main body. It slammed headlong into Command Ops, then it bashed the bulky superstructure with a dozen strong 'paws'. The hydra whipped backwards, recoiling like a yo-yo.

Things grew strangely calm for a few seconds.

The demon hurtled against the base once again, this time severing the docking ring down its side. With another powerful lunge it broke through the external support beams that protected the base's massive central strut.

Its paws tore into that critical column.

With one last thrust of its body the hydra slammed the helpless base, this time it ripped apart the inferior decks, shattering the windows in the cafeteria and snapping the open-air bridges beyond the mess hall like toothpicks. Again, the hydra pulled back.

The calm returned. Seabirds cawed in the infinite distance.

There was a snap, then a crackle: a sound like metal scraping over a blackboard sounded, soft at first but progressively louder until even the water around the base quivered with reverberations.

Finally there was a deafening pop.

It was calm again one last time, and then the central strut of the Allied Military's Aquatic Base-10 failed. A plume of rust blossomed from the structure like a mushroom cloud as floor after floor after floor wobbled down on top of each another.

The rust cloud disappeared and Base-10 lay still on the water: dark, dumb, crippled beyond all function and at the mercy of the deadly hydra.

Unfortunately for all concerned, in its heart of hearts this creature bore none.



