



### **The Battle for Nash Ultima**

“God in Heaven...” Justin moaned from the cockpit of his Raiden, “I’m gonna die...” he flew the ship with his head hung low, his spike-studded back arched away from his seat. The chair actually had a small depression down the middle to accommodate Justin’s prongs, should he choose to fly with them extended.

*Or should I be forced to fly with them extended...*

“My God-damned back is on fire, and I can’t feel my friggin’ toes.”

“But I’ll bet you can feel the ‘toes’ on your Raiden, can’t you?” Chenine spoke into his canalphones. Her voice was cool and calm, in contrast to Justin’s painful wheezing.

They flew above the swelling waves of the Gulf, streaking through the sky at a steady clip, following the regular base-fleet. Justin craned his head upwards and looked out the top of his canopy. He could barely make-out the shimmering wave of the Epdin network overhead, glowing faintly like the Aurora Borealis. Justin had never seen the Northern Lights with his own eyes, but everyone who had assured him that Epdin’s web looked just like it.

*Just a supernatural crèche to protect God’s green Earth...*

“Ugh. I can feel blood trailing down my back.” He replied bitterly, hissing like a snake as he finished. “This pain is unbearable. Why the hell would Wra-, the Aryl, make us pull out our prongs?”

“Mmm-un-uhn.” Chenine lyrically grunted the phrase ‘I dunno’. “The Aryl wants us in top form, and I guess he thinks that letting us have higher link-devotions will be useful.” She paused for a moment. “I’ll admit, it does kinda hurt, doesn’t it?”

Her voice was *way* too calm for Justin’s taste: he was barely able to speak from the pain. “Nothing could make this situation worse, unless I get shot down today, of course...”

“Well,” Chenine rather whimsically added, “with our prongs out, there’s also the added risk of getting a fatal spinal infection, you know.”

“Lovely...” Justin growled. “And what’s the deal with you, Chenine? Where’s the pain on your end, huh? I can barely breathe and you sound fresh as a daisy.”

Chenine’s voice changed slightly; she sounded less playful now, and somewhat evasive. “They say women have a higher tolerance for pain than men, you know.”

“Bullshit...” Justin growled. He raised his head and looked out the canopy. For the past three minutes he’d flown with his head in his lap, and he could’ve kept it there if he wanted to. A constant, blurry image flooded his eyes. No matter where he looked, he could see a grainy line in front of him: the horizon. He could tell roughly what his altitude and heading were just from the visual feed through those silver spikes in his back. The best analogy for link prongs is to compare them to a retractable antenna in a walkie-talkie: when the antenna is pushed down into the box it’ll still work, but you can only really see what it’s capable of when the antenna is pulled out.

An unfortunate wayward bird collided head-on with the *Platonic Love*, slamming directly into the ship’s photonic bank, located just below the cockpit canopy. Justin shifted uncomfortably in his seat: he felt a sudden sharp pain between his legs.

“Ugh: Right in the old ‘photon cannon’.” He moaned. “Call-up computer: what’s the current status of my link?” He didn’t feel like manually pulling-up the data on his monitor, he was too busy trying to adjust to that gnawing phantom pain in his crotch.

“Pragma-class Sensations Link: 53-percent devotion.” It replied.

“Oh, hell no...” Justin shook his head. There was absolutely no need to fly with that high a number. He bit his lip and focused on withdrawing his mind from the link. As far as he was concerned, anything over 50-percent devotion was insane, and painful. “Friggin’ bird; my balls are in my teeth... this is *all* bullshit...”

“What’s bullshit, pilot?” The RL broke in on Justin’s whining.

“Uh, nothing, sir...” he mumbled.

“Then we can get on with this.” Wraith’s voice was difficult to follow, as there were many noises in the background at Ops. The place was understandably busy, and many people were talking on top of each other. The RL was speaking into a normal headset, which brought in a lot of background noises, unlike Justin and Chenine’s molar implants. Justin couldn’t help but notice Wraith’s obsessive love of augmenting his pilots, whereas he didn’t have a mechanical bone in his body. “Alright, this one is going to be Operation ‘Spider’s Falter’.”

“Spider? You’re talking about Epidin, right?” Justin asked.

“It’s strictly their mess: we’re just the ones who have to clean it up. I’ll provide both of you with your specific orders individually, beginning with Miss Chovert. After that you’ll both maintain contact with duty-officer Hayle for technical support.”

“You won’t be supporting us directly?” Chenine asked.

“Not this time around.”

“C’mon: have a little confidence in us normal military grunts, Chenine.” Laura’s voice cracked over the speakers.

“You’re here too?” Justin interjected, happy to hear Hayle’s warm voice. “H’lo, Lieutenant.”

“Hi, Justin.”

“Cut the chit-chat and prepare for orders...” Wraith blandly declared.

Justin leaned back in his seat, careful to keep his link prongs in-line with the groove in the back of his chair. He manually wound six sets of belts around his body, lashing himself into his seat. Running a hand through his spiky black hair, Justin looked out the canopy at the *Chaste Gazer*, flying out in point position across the purple sea. Wraith would be giving Chenine her orders at this moment.

*But why we need separate orders is a mystery to me...*

“Storm.” The RL’s voice rang in his ears like a bolt of lightning.

“Aryl.”

“Your engagement orders for this operation, which you are to follow to the letter...”

*...are to friggin’ kill anything that moves.* Justin smirked.

“...are to protect Miss Chovert’s six.”

Justin reeled as if he’d been punched. “What? I mean: say again, Aryl?”

“Your orders are simple: do not allow the *Chaste Gazer* to be destroyed. The *Love* has superior armor, as you know, and your wave cannon’s not exactly suited for urban combat.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ever hear of the phrase ‘collateral damage’?”

Justin paused a moment. “But, Aryl, the sniper-type cannon is built for pinpoint hits...”

“And if you fire at a target that hides behind a building, we’ll have a brand-new vacant lot on our hands. Miss Chovert’s cannon is less intense and more diffuse, it’s perfect for engaging large groups of incarnations at a time. *She’ll* be the trigger-woman on this assignment.”

“...and I’m her bodyguard.” Justin sighed, disappointed.

“Learn to love it.” Wraith said. “You’re eighteen minutes to target, so settle in.”

Justin pouted like a sulking child. “This kinda sucks...” he muttered.

“What was that?”

“I said: ‘let’s rip ‘em up’.”

Samantha Rayne tore down through the atmosphere, the front of her Raiden burning red-hot with re-entry, the rear of her ship caked in a frosty layer of ice. Epdin’s beams danced all around her. She fogged-up the mask of her spacesuit with her even, deep breaths as she gripped her controls, making minute and pinpoint adjustments to her course while the beams fired and reset. It was like dancing through the flames in a wildfire.

*Just a fly in the spider’s web...* she was grinning intently as her Raiden careened through the grid.

“*Pizzicato to Terpsichore: angle in my way, now.*” She called to a lone Raiden below her position. The ship was blazing through the cold air with an odd-looking craft

on its rear. The vessel on its tail was fat and bulky, but unbelievably fast. It gleamed with a dark green luster; purple fire belched from its tail and a ruddy yellow light shone from inside the ghostly cockpit.

No pilot was sitting inside that glowing nightmare. It wasn't an Allied Military craft. It wasn't even really a ship. It was actually classic, textbook Bydo Tech. The pursued *Terpsichore* screamed upward with the grace seen only in a Dancer (the *Chaste Gazer* comes close, being modeled after Dancer Tech, but it's still a far cry from their maneuverability).

Sam brought her Raiden on a collision-course with the *Terpsichore* and, at the last minute, adjusted to starboard and swooped past the Raiden. She locked onto the sickly-looking Bydo craft and unleashed hell from her photonic cannons. She didn't stop firing until the thing was broken-up into a thousand pieces of mushy flesh, black blood and metallic bone.

Suddenly her Raiden bucked and shook as sparks flew from the electrical circuits behind her chair. Sam was tossed back and forth like a rag-doll (she might have broken some bones if not for her thick and cumbersome spacesuit). Her head hit the main control panel, and she had to brush some stray bits of glass from the facemask of her suit.

"*Chorea* here: on your six, pilot..." Sam's squadron leader called into the headphones of her suit. Two seconds later a great ball of white lightning flew down from above and vaporized the two Bydo craft that had snuck-up on Samantha. The *Chorea* had discharged its wave cannon.

"Whew. Saved my ass there, didn't you?" she admitted.

"Well, in my book your ass is just too lovely to be junked," he joked.

Samantha grinned beneath her frost-coated suit. "Don't be crude. This line is public, you wanna get sacked?"

"That depends on the meaning, doesn't it?"

Sam shook her head and sighed. Her squadron leader was still angry about losing out on the new assignment to her. When he told Sam that she was the one cherry-picked for the new program he'd been bitter as hell, and more than a little abusive towards her. She could handle his asshole-like behavior: she was a big-girl, and she could certainly stick-up for herself (she had a mean left hook for one thing, plus she had her own set of lovely 'bargaining chips' to use in their quarrels). His recent wave of over-compensating platitudes, however, didn't make things any easier for her. She certainly didn't want him flogging her like he had been, but she also didn't want him fawning over her like he was now.

*I'm not a whipping girl, and I'm not a wounded kitten either...*

And she wasn't the kind of woman to let the matter rest. "Hey, mister fearless leader: do me a favor and *don't* patronize me, kay?" She growled.

"Huh?"

"We'll talk when we get back to Olivier." Samantha quipped, changing the subject. "Alright, I've got a lock on a big group out there up on top of the grid... by their course it looks like they're moving toward the hole." Sam gripped her controls and took a deep breath. "I'm intercepting..." she said.

"You know, Sam, if you keep dancing through that grid you're gonna get burned. Let's go around to 145 degrees mark -60 and intercept them at the hole. Just a nice and easy route along the edges--"

“Sorry, comrade...” She smirked, “but if you had Moro-Plantar scores like mine, you know you just have to let the reflexes shine.” Her engines roared and she screamed up into the plasma-laced web above.

“Cocky bitch.” Her squadron leader growled.

“Please,” Sam added with a grin, “I’ve got what all those computer-techie’s on the ground call ‘mad skills’.”

Samantha took the slender *Pizzicato* back up through the chaotic squall of Epdin. All around her beams of energy sailed through the dark sky. Ever so often she passed by an unfortunate incarnation, writhing in the last throes of death as its grotesque body boiled over in the light of the beams. Naturally, Samantha managed to muddle through the field unscathed. All Raiden pilots were quick-on-the-draw, but Dancer pilots were the quickest of the bunch: Sam could snatch-up mosquitoes with one hand by the time she was twelve.

She took her Raiden up through Epdin’s lethal grid, bursting out into the cold exosphere, white sunlight dancing radiantly off her ship’s ruddy finish. Sam kicked her engines into overdrive and streaked through the sky, skipping like a stone just a few hundred yards above the shimmering sea of fire.

She looked out across the sky and double-checked her scanners. “*Pizzicato* here: something’s wrong... I’m not seeing anything up here.”

The *Chorea* answered: “Well, then there’s some good news: that must be the end of the wave. About time, too. That means we’ve just got to deal with the ones that managed to get through the hole.”

Samantha shook her head. “No way: I know what my sensors are telling me, and there’s got to be *something* else up here...” She brought her Raiden into a hovering standstill. She double-checked all her systems and tried to adjust her scans.

Then she noticed something chilling: her scanners displayed a very loud error message across all her screens. Everywhere she looked, she was getting back only static and a scratchy squeal.

“Son-of-a-daughter-of-a-bitch...” she loudly growled.

“What’s your status, pilot?” The *Chorea* demanded.

“It’s an Active-System Scan,” Sam said slowly, her voice intent.

“That’s impossible! None of the incarnations we’ve seen around here have the ability to fire off one of those. You’ve gotta have a computer error.”

Samantha rifled through her computer’s sensors, quickly checking for a glitch in her system. “Look: I’m not finding anything wrong on my end, something up here is hitting us, and it’s got to... be... big...” her words trailed-off. Sam’s pulse shot up until she felt her heartbeat hammering in her head: her cockpit, which had been flooded with pure, bright sunlight ever since she’d pulled above Epdin, was now darkening, until no sunlight came into the cockpit at all.

The sun had been eclipsed.

She looked up through her canopy and saw why.

Sam’s eyes widened. Her breaths were loud and quick in her spacesuit. She sounded like Darth Vader in the middle of an asthma attack. “*Chorea*...” she called, attempting to maintain some calm, “do we have any Strikers around here?”

“No, Sam, they’re all down on the surface taking on the Fallen. Why?” he picked-up on the urgency in Sam’s voice, and he was anxious.

Samantha said something that was garbled by the Active-System Scan.

“What was that? Say again, Sam? Answer me, pilot!”

Sam’s voice came back through the static. She was speaking erratically and frantically. “Retreat! Pull back, damnit! It’s an Opie! Do you hear me? Fall back, fall-”

There was a sudden, blood-chilling scream, and then there was nothing on the line but static.

“Sam? Sam!” The squadron-leader cried into the dead air. It was no use: there was no response.

“Okay: here’s the low-down:” Laura Hayle’s perky voice sounded in Justin and Chenine’s ears, “the targets are coming in hot all over the city. It looks like the artillery strikes on the incoming bogeys are pretty effective in the outskirts: we’ve got 80-percent containment in Eastland and the Kaiser Banks...”

“What about Ultima True?” Chenine asked.

“That? Downtown’s a mess.” Laura admitted. “There’s a compliment of Strikers circling-inward from the outer city limits. You know, converging on the center, but from what I’m seeing it doesn’t look like they’ll reach the center for an hour or so.”

“Looks like we’re headed downtown, huh Chenine?” Justin called.

“Hmm...” she grunted. “What can we expect as far as support’s concerned?”

“Let’s see...” Laura paused. “Like I said, the Dragonslayer Squad is coming in from the outskirts-”

“They’re the Strikers?” Justin asked.

“Yes. And in the Ultima True area... all I’m seeing is the Precious Metals Squad, but they’re also reinforced with some temporary help: it looks like they’ve got a few Raidens on loan from the Salt-o-Scots.”

“What type are they?” Chenine asked calmly.

“Excel-Class, each and every one.”

“Nice...” Justin said. “At least we’ve got some friends in the area...” His voice trailed off as he remembered that vindictive pilot: Connor Trent. Would he be one of the Scots on loan to the Precious Metals? Would he be there, in the battle zone? Justin briefly flirted with the idea of redemption: could he validate himself in Trent’s eyes? Maybe prove himself to be a true, genuine Typer?

*Maybe show ‘em all that I can earn my daily allotment of oxygen, given the chance?*

That was really just idle fantasy. The thought rang hollow in his heart, and he discarded it. “Some of us just *aren’t* redeemable, really...” he mumbled.

“Say again, pilot?” Laura asked.

“Nothing, Lieutenant...” Justin quickly replied.

The *Chaste Gazer* and *Platonic Love* glided down from the sky, approaching the towering skyscrapers of Nash Ultima at a low altitude.

Chenine sat-up in her seat as the sooty skyline came into view. The late afternoon sun swam through the dense city in wavy streaks, dancing across the polluted air like a greasy stain on a canvas. The grand spires of the city rose up into the silver-lined clouds. At their current distance, Chenine could barely make out the dozens of bridges and transit

roads running between the buildings. They crisscrossed between the massive structures like shimmering arteries and veins.

The Raidens screamed down into the thick of the buildings, descending beneath the setting sun and into the shadow of the city.

*Human engineering... she mused. It casts such a large shadow over everything. It rivals mountains in its opulence. And why? Is it that we're afraid of irrelevance as a species? We don't want to be simple insects in a cosmic shell-game? Then it's all about fear: the greatest works of mankind are rooted in it. But don't all those things we secretly fear in our hearts overshadow whatever structure we can build with our own two hands?* Fear, she reasoned, would mar every inch of the builder's work, if it was gnawing at his heart as he built it. The most beautiful opus could become an irrational testament to the maker's paranoid mind.

Chenine didn't know much about civil engineering. She did, however, know quite a bit about fear. Regardless, the girl took this little bit of philosophy in mind as she began her roll-out report.

"I saw a vulture in the sky..." Chenine began. "A massive shadow threatens the city. This used to be our only refuge..." she looked down on the glittering sprawl of Nash Ultima, her home for the past two years. Those big, impenetrable eyes of hers scanned the abyss below. The slim girl described Epdin's failure, as well as their frantic mission to engage any Fallen that landed in the city.

"Very nice." Justin complimented her when she was done. "Very poetic; I'd give it an 8-out-of-10."

Chenine, gripping her controls, didn't answer. "What were your orders from the Aryl?" She finally asked.

Justin scoffed. "To protect your butt, unfortunately. What about you?"

"Kill anything that moves." She said slowly, in her nonchalant tone.

"Figures..." Justin grumbled into her earbuds.

They flew in silence. There was an eerie calm as they glided towards the center of the city. Below them massive convoys of emergency trucks, civilian transports and private vehicles clogged the roads and lower skyways. They looked like ants crawling through the smoggy mist.

"Now that's an exodus if I ever saw one." Justin marveled. "That must be half the city down there. Hopefully the other half had the sense to get themselves into the central columns of those skyscrapers." Far ahead they saw the bright flashes of artillery shells sailing through the air above them. Korangs flew in nimble formation against the amber sky like bees across a honeycomb. There were other formations in the air as well. Incarnations were hurtling to the ground in bright silver streaks.

"The Fallen." Chenine mused. "They look like rain, don't they?"

"Tch." Justin scoffed into her ear. "A shower of tears for the Tears' Shower Squadron: gotta love the irony, right?" As they approached the conflict zone, Chenine could pick-up the muffled sounds of explosions and gunfire between the towering skyscrapers. They were still several miles away from the engagement, but with her link prongs out and fully interfacing with her Raiden Chenine could hear a cricket chirping beside a freight train.

"It'd be too much to hope that those sounds are fireworks, wouldn't it?" Justin added.

Chenine rolled her eyes. They both dealt with their pre-combat jitters differently. Justin seemed to mask his anxiety with humor. Chenine, on the other hand, preferred quiet and calm. “Final check.” She called. “My Pragma devotion is 47-percent.” She fumbled behind her chair until her hands grasped that lone monitor. “And my Impingement Factor is... times 1.11.”

“That’s some pretty heavy impingement.” Justin replied. “But mine’s up there too: it’s times 1.14. It must be from the added feedback from our prongs.”

“Mmm.” Chenine grunted. *Whatever*, she thought. *As long as my Raiden works, I could care less about IF numbers or link devotions.*

Hayle popped into the conversation. “Okay, gang: what’s the plan of attack here?”

“Chenine’ll do some hit-and-runs, and I’ll look out for her six.” Justin answered.

Scott Tabris was set-up in Ops next to the Lieutenant. He wormed his way onto the line. “But doesn’t your Raiden have that oh-so-special wave cannon on it? And what’re you doing making the lady take the lead? That’s not very gentlemanly of you.”

“There’s no such thing as a gentleman in combat.” Chenine interjected. “Anyway, you shouldn’t underestimate the *Gazer*: I’ve got enough speed to be effective in the city.”

“And she’s got something else I don’t have.” Justin said.

“What, looks?” Scott joked.

“No: carpet bombs.” Justin answered.

“Oh, that might work.” Laura said approvingly.

A silver bullet hurtled through the city smog, streaking to the ground like a shooting star. The thing crashed through a sky-bridge, blowing the four-lane road apart at the middle and sending a shower of concrete and metal to the ground down below. The miniature comet slammed into the ground; a massive cloud of dust and debris mushroomed around the resulting crater, hovering and swirling like a blanket. After a few minutes the cloud of dust and smog cleared.

The incarnation was nine feet tall. It stood on its hind ‘legs’, a spike-studded tail swishing menacingly behind it. In appearance it resembled a mutant lizard with a hominid body; its scaly green ‘skin’ pulsed as some unimaginable fluid swished beneath its scaly flesh. In some places the skin looked practically organic; in other places it was obviously metallic and artificial. Its back was split open along the spine, allowing space for its propulsion system. A purple column of warm, misty air screamed out and downward from that spinal hole, curling along the ground as it went. Two dagger-like cannons protruded from its chest where its nipples would be (if it had them). The thing’s large, reptilian eyes blazed with the yellow light of the Bydo. It was a fearsome display of Bydo Tech, but it wouldn’t have a particularly long life.

The ground around the monstrosity exploded in miniature geysers of concrete; a shower of photonic bolts rained down on the area. In the quick strafing run, the rounds ran across the fractured asphalt, up the monster’s legs, along its torso and over its head, with one well-placed round decapitating the horrible lizard. Its mangled body danced and writhed for a few seconds, then it fell lifelessly to the ground.

The *Principalities* screamed over the dead incarnation, leaving a fierce sonic boom in its wake. Connor was sneering blissfully. Within moments, the Precious Metals squad leader called him: “Hey there, Trent. This is the *Golden Selection*: what’s your status?”



Connor, nimbly navigating his Raiden through street corners and between bridges, responded. "I'm moving past 118<sup>th</sup> and Malthus Street."

"Heavy resistance?"

"Negative. Not at the moment, anyway. I'm gettin' nothing but those damn Toves around here. Things seem to be cooling down in the Westland Districts."

"And what's your estimate on casualties?"

Connor took a breath and shook his head. He didn't like to talk about such things. "I'm not sure, but there were a bunch of cars and transport vehicles on the thoroughfare. Many of 'em were trashed. I guess there were probably some people who got out of the vehicles before they were crushed, but..."

"Many didn't; I got you."

Connor was quite content to drop the subject. He didn't want to dwell on such things, preferring to channel all his emotions into a demonic rage against the devils in his midst.

"Anyway, if things are cool over there I want you to get back to the city center, pronto. Maybe you missed it, but there's an AS scan coming down from on high, and it's focused on the center of Ultima True."

"An AS Scan?" Connor grinned like a devil: he knew what that meant: Something was coming to the city center.

*Scratch that: something's coming to the city center, and it's biiiiig...*

It was about time, too: those jerk-off Precious Metals guys had relegated Connor and the other Scots to the sidelines until now, and Trent was eager to fly headlong into the eye of the storm.

"If you can, get here within ten minutes."

"I'll be there in five." Connor smirked darkly and kicked his engines into overdrive.

A legion of lizard-like Toves streamed down a wide, ornately adorned avenue of the city. Below them the traffic lights blinked dumbly. The street was empty. Eighteen lanes of smooth concrete stretched out to the horizon. The feet of the city's skyscrapers stood imposingly on either side, forming a deep and vast canyon. The sky-bridges high overhead dangled between the buildings in the fog like massive vines. This street was empty, but a ten-lane cross street down the road was clogged with cars, trucks and a rail-line. The mess of vehicles was stalled in the mad rush to evacuate the city.

The lead Tove's nipple-cannons glowed fiercely, and then a stream of photonic bolts exploded from those deadly barrels, hurtling straight into the traffic, ready to vaporize the terrified passengers in the convoy.

The *Chaste Gazer* screamed into view from a side street. The elegant bird hovered mere feet above the mess of cars. The ship rocked and shook as the photonic rounds impacted its roof and wings. Chenine's body spasmed in her chair and she screamed with pain, her head thrust backward involuntarily. The girl brought her head back to level, her teeth set upon her ashen lips and a dark fire in her pale eyes. She growled angrily.

She took the *Gazer* from a hovering standstill to a high-velocity blur in seconds, discharging her own photonic cannons as she screamed above the incarnations, mere inches over the Toves' heads. The Raiden's underbelly slid open in one smooth motion, dropping a full payload of water cooler sized bombs. The black eggs fell to the earth

under the incarnations and detonated, vaporizing the highway in a holocaust of fire and sending pillars of concentrated flames straight upwards.

The incarnations were roasted alive by the inferno while the *Platonic Love* brought up the rear, zigzagging between the flames, indiscriminately firing its photonic cannons as it went. Two Toves screamed down from overhead, firing upon Chenine's craft. Justin swooped in ahead of the decelerating *Gazer* and impaled the lead incarnation on his spike-arms. He immediately took three well-placed rounds on his hull that were meant for Chenine. Through her ear-buds Chenine heard Justin cry-out in pain, and then she heard him roar with anger as the *Love* spun to port, unleashing a photonic barrage upon the lagging incarnation. The demon was torn to pieces.

Justin snarled fiercely like a cornered animal. He was growling with either anger or pain, Chenine couldn't tell.

"Are you alright?" She asked matter-of-factly, without much concern in her voice.

"I'm fine." He quickly answered. "What's our next move?"

Chenine checked her scanners and found another hoard of incarnations a few blocks away. "More of the same." She shrugged.

"Peachy." Justin answered, panting lightly. The *Gazer* screamed down the road, close enough to the ground to knock over two metal signposts with its wind shear. Justin sighed as he watched Chenine, that indefatigable girl, sail into the urban horizon. "No rest for the weary, I guess..." he grunted as he pushed his *Raiden* into pursuit, struggling to keep up.

The *Principalities* rumbled ominously as several shots landed on its rear hull. It screamed up into the sky, darting between the city's web-like sky bridges. A black-coated ship spiraled through the air in pursuit; it had all the sleek construction and elegant design of an Excel-class *Raiden*, but it was definitely something else. The thing seemed to be covered in a syrupy, chocolate mess (it could have been that, or blood, perhaps). An evil yellow light blared from its empty cockpit, as if it were the portal to some horrible otherworld.

"God-damned Batesian *whore!*" Connor screamed angrily. The sweating pilot looked past all those thin sky bridges he was rushing towards; he could see the evening sky through all the veins of concrete. If he ran all the way past the skyscrapers and out into the open sky above he would be an unprotected target, and an easy kill.

*Like a quail flushed from the bush*, he thought as a sky bridge beside him exploded, hit by one of the *Raiden*-mimicker's blasts. He narrowed his eyes as he considered those cumbersome bridges.

All the while he kept getting a very cryptic broadcast into his headset. It was static-laden and distorted. It was a voice, or at least what appeared to be a voice. The garbled, gurgling sound was 'off' in a strange and macabre way. It had the croaking cadence of a zombie from a cheap B-horror flick. And it was even less human than that.

"Dissh... isssh... R... E... X... Excel-Clash... Call... Are-el... Sqaron-Leader... point possison..."

*Give it a rest, you son-of-a-bitch...*

The message was coming in on the dedicated *Raiden* emergency frequency and there was no way to block it, so Connor had to do his best to ignore the otherworldly blather of the incarnation.

*Let's think about this, now...* He did some rough calculations in his head and, with uncanny reflexes, brought his port wing just a few inches too close to one bridge. His wing smacked the concrete as he passed, sending the *Principalities* into a quick spin. Connor immediately adjusted his propulsion output, expertly correcting his course by jamming his starboard engine into full-reverse. When all was said and done he was flying backwards, staring right at the Batesian incarnation.

"Burn in hell!" He screamed as he targeted the thing and savaged it with his cannons. After two seconds of precision fire, the incarnation disintegrated into a gooey mess of indescribable gore. It rained down from the sky impotently. Connor radioed his temporary squadron-leader. "What's your status, Golden-boy?"

"We've got a damn Tove army down here, Trent. Whenever you're ready, you can get our six and provide cover-fire." The *Golden Selection's* pilot ordered.

"Hmm." Trent grunted unenthusiastically. "D'we have any support in, yet?"

"Nothing of consequence. I've been getting reports from my guys about a pair of oddball Raidens out there calling themselves the Tiered-Tower Team, or something like that."

"A pair?" Connor quipped. "A pair does not a squadron make. And I've never heard the name. What are they: Strikers? Dancers? Are they any good?"

"I don't know their specs. They might be Excels, but my guys say their ship designs don't really fit any specific type. As for their competence, apparently they fly very straight and pretty, but their combat technique is juvenile and amateurish at best, like they're a couple of noobs or something."

"Excellent handling: idiotic technique? Then they're set-up with Sensation Links, I suppose." Connor surmised.

"That'd account for their mastery of the basics. Anyway, I want your ass back here as soon as possible."

"What about that anonymous AS Scan?" Connor asked.

"We're thinking its gotta be an Opie." He replied. "Look: the Strikers are coming in from the outskirts, from the damn four-corners of the wind, Trent, and *they'll* handle that behemoth as soon as they arrive."

"Not very sporting of us, 'ya ken?"

"Don't be an ass, you Scottish bastard." The squad leader growled, insulted. "We've got all these Toves to deal with for now, and you know as well as I that a few Excels could only hope to slow an Opie down temporarily. The damn Strikers were built to handle those mobile leviathans, so spare me your blind aggression and get back down here."

"I've got a few more Batesians to handle up here." Connor declared intently with a silver fire in his black eyes, "but even when I'm through with them, I'll be a little too busy to be your ass-guard."

"Busy with what, you arrogant prick?"

"I think I'd like to try my hand at being a speed bump." He grinned sarcastically. "You know: just to slow your leviathan down a bit."

"And I'm ordering you to stay *away* from any Opies, Trent. Hear that, you idiot? Stay away: 'ya ken'?"

"No, I'm Connor" (Trent couldn't remember where he got that joke from, but he found it pretty funny) "and luckily you're not your brother's keeper as far as this issue's

concerned. Read the terms of our unit's lend-lease agreement, pal: I've got partial autonomy to do what I want."

"I swear to God in heaven that I'll have your wings if you disobey me, pilot."

Connor scoffed belligerently. "You know: that's not the first time I've heard that phrase. Don't feel bad, though: it's come from the mouth of an impotent prick every other time I've heard it, too."

He wisely disengaged his ship speakers after saying that. Connor brought the *Principalities* into a free-fall nosedive towards the streets below. He'd go ahead and clean-up this section of the city.

And then? It was time for some Opie-hunting.

The heart of Ultima True was a testament to the human will. It was a construction of epic grandeur, flawless beauty and towering elegance. That was how a poet might describe it. If you're an engineer, you'll appreciate this description a little more.

Geologically speaking, an 'Ultima' is big, wide piece of land that humans have seen fit to eradicate with a clean-fusion bomb. That leaves a nice bowl-depression in the ground. After that they slather down a great swathe of steel-reinforced concrete. After that's dried and set, they're left with the equivalent of a thousand-acre parking lot. To be more precise, it's a thousand-acre parking lot capable of supporting the most massive manmade structures on the planet. Producing an Ultima is beyond taxing; it's a huge public-works project. The Ultima in the City of Cities was chartered by a man named, predictably, John Nash.

Ultima 'True' is the site of the actual reinforced groundwork, and therefore the *real* heart of the city. Everything else in the surrounding areas is just the pudding around the plumb, so to speak. The average height of the buildings in True is around 300 stories, the tallest stands higher than the Tower of Babel.

All around these colossal structures the Fallen ran amok, many were still streaking to the ground in a deadly silver rain, bouncing off the buildings like ping-pong balls as they went. The outer facades of many buildings fell away, revealing the structural innards of the skyscrapers. None would fall, though. At least not yet: each skyscraper was endowed with a reinforced central column made of solid hafnium-carbide. Gigantic metal spikes ran from the column to each floor, analogous to the spines on animal vertebrae. This arrangement would at least hold the skeletons of the buildings together.

Thick smoke rose from all around the heart of Ultima True, curling up from the abyssal streets below. One of the Fallen, a lizard-like Tove, reclined unnaturally in the gutted remnants of one building; black blood trained over its body and flowed freely from between its gums. It was impaled on one of the haf-car rods of the skyscraper's supporting skeleton. It had done its damage to mankind's elegant engineering when it fell from the sky, but it wouldn't be a threat to anyone ever again.

The *Platonic Love* and *Chaste Gazer* blew past that gutted skyscraper, spiraling down to the dark city streets. The Raidens were far from peak condition: there were several scorch-marks on the *Gazer's* opal armor, and one small gash ran along its right wing. Its sister-ship, the *Platonic Love*, was faring even poorer. Justin's Raiden was ripped and torn in several places; his right spike-arms was bent into a hook, deformed from overuse (Justin, unlike most Raiden 'arm' pilots, was right-handed, not

ambidextrous). Chenine brought her Raiden into a hovering standstill, level with the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of a neighboring building.

Justin came up behind her. He was panting openly. Sweat flowed down his forehead in an uncontrolled, sticky drip. He put his hand to his chest, and suddenly started gasping like a fish.

“You’re dehydrated, pilot.” Laura advised. “You need fluids.”

“What I *need* is a God-damned dermal regenerator for my hand...” he snarled.

The lieutenant chastised him. “No, you don’t, in fact. Your hand is fine: all that damage belongs to your Raiden, remember?”

“Tell that to my neurons.” He quipped. Justin was cradling his ‘damaged’ hand gently against his chest.

“*Gazer to Love*,” Chenine’s lilting voice drifted into his ears, “what’s your status?”

“I’m good.” He said after a second.

“No, you’re not.” She replied, accusingly.

“That’s news to me.” Justin growled at her. “Where’d you get your medical degree, Chenine?”

The girl paused, choosing not to address the jab. “I can see your vitals.” She replied. “Your blood pressure and respirations are through the roof. You’re a step away from psychogenic shock.”

“Your concern is touching.”

“And if that happens, you’ll crash the *Love*, and die, and then I won’t have any cover for my six.”

Justin smiled faintly. He wondered if Chenine was smiling, either that catty, not-so-nice grin of hers, or that very rare genuine smile she so seldom flashed. It was very difficult to tell when Chenine was being serious (which was about 90 percent of the time) or humorous. Odds are she simply meant what she said.

“How practical of you.” He answered. Justin brushed damp hair from his eyes and looked at the *Gazer*. Chenine herself was far from unscathed. Her wings were singed with cannon-fire, meaning she was feeling burns in her shoulder blades. On the way downtown a Batesian Mimicker tried to take her down. Justin spotted it too late and the *Gazer* took a round from thing’s cannon full-force in its underbelly just beneath the canopy. That meant Chenine was also feeling a gaping hole in her tummy, probably near her bellybutton.

*I suppose that would hurt a bit, too.* Justin thought.

Laura’s voice of reason fell on their ears. “How about both of you take five, kay? Neither of you are in peak condition right now, and you could use a little recoup time.”

Chenine agreed, though belatedly. The pair brought their Raidens around to the intact side of the skyscraper, sheltering themselves from view. There were a few Toves and Batesians scampering around in the distance below them, but with the skyscraper shielding them Justin and Chenine were safely out of sight.

Justin took the time to care for his condition. “Call-up computer,” he ordered in a weak rasp, “I need some saline.”

“Make it ‘quarter-normal’ solution.” Laura interrupted, “that stuff’s got enough dextrose in it to keep you conscious, at least for the time being.”

He shrugged amicably. "I'm won't argue about taking sugar when the info's coming from the 'Cola Nut' herself. You heard the woman, computer: two IVs, left forearm and wrist, please."

The computer objected. "Symmetry is recommended."

"Great." Justin sneered. "And I don't care: no needles to the right arm, you got it?" He still cradled his 'wounded' right hand near his body.

"Quantity?" The mechanical voice asked.

"Until I'm *full*." He growled.

Justin lay back in his seat as two mechanical tendrils wound-up from behind his chair and pierced his left arm in two places. He felt broken, and very tired. His chest still heaved mightily as the fluids flowed into his body. Justin narrowed his eyes and withdrew his mind from the link. It was difficult to do with his prongs out, but eventually he managed to drop his devotion to just above 30-percent.

"That's better." He mused as he gingerly moved his right hand away from his chest and took turns flexing and extending each finger. The pain was settling into a dull throb. "I think I feel human again, Chenine."

There was no answer. If Chenine was on the line, she wasn't in the mood for conversation.

He was jarred from his seat by a sudden burst of static and noise from his canalphones. The noise sounded seven times very rapidly, in the rhythm of a heartbeat.

"Emergency signal coming in." Chenine called.

"I got it." Justin acknowledged.

A man's voice came on the line. His timber was dark and gruff; he spoke with urgency. "This is the SL of the Precious Metals Squadron. To any and all units available in the central core of Ultima True: the Fallen are converging on the city center near the Sixty-Nine Memorial Tower. This is urgent and priority. Repeat: urgent and priority. We've got two legions of Toves and at least one legion of Batesian Mimickers. Repeat,-" his voice disappeared as static overtook the entire channel

Justin blinked a few times, double-checking his sudden loss of the channel.

"The transmission," Justin said, worriedly, "...it shouldn't have gone out like that."

"What about it? The SL just broke communication, right?" Chenine asked.

"No." Justin replied, quickly confirming a very frightful truth. "No, he was cut off, damn it: we're being hit with a jam. It's an Active-System Scan." He spat. "Shit and hell!"

"That's impossible." Chenine objected.

Justin narrowed his eyes. "Do you really want to put your scanners up against mine? Try calling Base-10, if you want: all the lines are dead." Despite his dehydration, Justin still managed to sweat a few extra bullets as he adjusted his scanners. "I just don't know what's causing it."

Chenine didn't say anything for a second. Then, quite calmly and matter-of-factly, she answered: "It's an Opie."

Justin scoffed. "Yeah, sure. I guess one of those could do it, but where's your evidence for..." he looked up from his consoles and immediately stopped talking. On the other side of the avenue, through the broken windows of the skyscraper, Justin could see something moving.

An O.P.I. is one of the more frightening things a Raiden pilot can encounter. The clever acronym stands for 'Outer-Parameter Incarnation'. There's a really simple way to visualize it: while a Batesian Mimicker usually takes the form of a Raiden or a Korang fighter, an 'Opie' takes on the form of an entire battleship. It takes on the *size* of one, as well.

This one was, conservatively, one and a half football fields long. Justin marveled at its stunning, lethal frame. He was suddenly very happy that he was sheltered by the gutted skyscraper. There were three 'heads' on the incarnation, analogous to the bridges of an Allied Military craft. The heads were little more than black spikes facing forward, with one row of razor-sharp teeth apiece. The teeth were little more than decoration, as the heads were cemented firmly to the ship's hull with stubby, snakelike necks; they wouldn't move more than a few feet in any direction.

*But God only knows how many cannons are in each of those mouths.* Justin thought.

The body was, simply put, disturbing. Horrific might be more apt. The dorsal section was a complex frame of metalwork and pipes. Spikes ran along the top of the hull with large, living cannons on each protrusion. The cannons all had one yellow-tinged eye apiece, fixed above all the barrels like a demon's sniper scope. The underbelly, in contrast, had a wholly organic appearance. It bulged and pulsed like a grotesque sack of hot air. The entire leviathan looked like a nightmarishly painful metal cap suspended in the air by a pulsing balloon. It moved slowly, like a zeppelin with a rusty propeller.

*Hulloooo, zeeba neighba...* Justin thought, awestruck.

"God in Heaven." He growled. "I've never seen one of those in person. It's unbelievable..."

"The Sixty-Nine Memorial Tower is north of here," Chenine mused, "that means it's across that street."

Justin tried to orient himself. He wasn't a native to Ultima's sprawl, so he had to play catch-up with Chenine's intimate knowledge of the city. "What, you mean up 7<sup>th</sup>? There's no way we're going up there. Not at the moment, anyway. We'd have to cross right in front of that thing, or wait for it to pass. But even after it passes it'll still be well in range to take us out." He worked on his scanners. "Gimme a minute here and I'll reestablish communication with the base. The lieutenant can give us an alternate--"

"No time." Chenine interrupted. "We're got to get up there, now."

Justin shook his head. "You get an A-plus for bravery but a C-minus for strategy: we cross in front of that thing and we're Swiss-cheese. You got that?"

There was a pause on Chenine's end, then the *Gazer* started moving towards the opening between skyscrapers. The nose of her Raiden was just feet from being exposed to the massive incarnation.

"What the hell are you doing?" Justin said.

"Setting policy." She said calmly. "I'm the point, this is my call, and I have my orders."

"Okay, yes, but have you ever *seen* Swiss-cheese? Maybe my analogy wasn't clear--"

"You've got the scanners, but I've got the speed." Chenine answered coldly.

“I can’t follow you past that thing without getting blown apart!” Justin retorted. “My orders from the Aryl are to watch your backside; that’s hard to do if I’m full of holes and on fire...”

Chenine was quieter this time. “I’ve got my orders from the Aryl, too. Just come when you can.” She said indifferently.

Justin had to shield his eyes as the overdrive engines on the *Chaste Gazer* roared to life in a dramatic blue blur. Chenine’s Raiden rocketed beyond their cover, out into the open avenue between buildings. The hovering leviathan immediately responded with a shower of photonic cannon rounds from its three heads while its back-cannons blanketed the sky with glowing yellow projectiles.

“Damn it, Chenine!” Justin screamed.

The *Gazer*, spinning like a top as it blazed through the firestorm, sustained only a few indirect hits to its tailfins and wings as Chenine piloted it down the street towards the Memorial Tower.

Justin’s green eyes blazed with fury as he watched her Raiden accelerate down the lane and out of sight. “*You God-damned, stuck-up, pig-headed little bitch!*” he roared.

“Ouch.” Laura’s voice came to him. “That hurts.”

Justin gritted his teeth: he wasn’t in the mood for humor or goodwill at the moment. “Lieutenant: Chenine’s lost me. She’s on her way to the center of True.”

Scott Tabris interjected. “And what’re you doing, huh? Havin’ a coffee break? Keep up with her, pilot!”

Laura regained control of the line. “It’s dangerous for her to be alone downtown, Justin, we’re starting to get some AS-interference over here. There are reports of O.P.I.’s getting shot down in the atmosphere, and unconfirmed reports that some have made landfall.”

Justin rolled his eyes. “Well, let me be the first to confirm those reports: I’m being pinned in place by one right now. Chenine took off ahead of me, but I don’t have the speed to stick my neck out in front of this thing.”

“Wow. That’s not good.” Laura clicked her tongue, she was obviously unhappy with the girl for ditching her ‘chaperone’. Her lyrical voice had a hard, biting edge to it. “We need to coordinate, here. Put Chenine on the line for me.”

“No can do.” Justin growled. “She doesn’t have the scanner-power to break through an AS. Hell, *I* can’t even receive any signals from her Raiden anymore with all this interference. But if you’ve got a message for her, I can *broadcast* it. Whether or not she chooses to *listen* is another matter.”

“Then that means she could hear that little ‘bitch’ speech of yours?” Tabris said accusingly.

“I certainly hope she did.” Justin quipped. “Anyway, let’s just hope she doesn’t get herself killed: that’s an expensive ship she’s flying...” He stared moodily through the broken windows of the skyscraper, looking straight at that deadly Opie through a gnarled mess of small opening and broken glass. The thing was hovering and moving forward very slowly. It was so big, and so strange-looking.

Justin raised an eyebrow: it was also a pretty *juicy*-looking target, too. He leered at it through those tiny ruined windows. It was such a *big* incarnation, very nearly motionless, and Justin was looking at it through a pretty small ‘peephole’. He grinned darkly. This scenario was a sniper’s wet-dream.



*That is too tempting a target...*

Justin reached under his seat and flipped two switches into the 'off' position: the safeties for his wave-cannon.

"I can't believe CRTS would pull a stunt like that. Well, Chenine'll have to watch out for herself for a while." Laura surmised bitterly. "Anything I can do for you at the moment?"

Justin grinned. "Yes you can, Lieutenant: I'm not familiar with the physiology of the average Opie: can you give me a rough estimate on any possible, you know, 'dermal deficiencies'?"

There was a pregnant pause on the line. "Say again?" the Lieutenant asked dubiously.

"Weak points. I'm gonna snipe the Opie through these windows with my wave cannon."

There was a light scoffing sound on the other end of the line. He heard Jen Drake in the background. "What's he saying? He's gonna take on *that* thing? I'm reading these mass-density numbers right, aren't I? Is he *nuts*?"

Justin smirked. "Tell the private that her confidence in me is very reassuring."

The Lieutenant was hesitant. "Justin, there's not a whole lot of tactical... well, sanity, in taking on an O.P.I. by yourself. All the battle-plans I've seen for engaging them involve Striker-tech."

Jen was in the background again. "And even then, according to the analysis here, they have a hell of a lot of Strikers doing all the shooting. A Raiden like his or Chovert's wouldn't stand a chance against those things."

"Oh, ye of little faith." Justin said as he prepped his wave cannon. "You guys should know that I'm nothing like the *Gazer*. Chenine's Raiden is all based on Dancer-tech, but the *Platonic Love* is a bona-fide Striker-clone. And guess what that means?"

"You've got a Striker-grade cannon." Tabris conceded.

"I've got a Striker-grade cannon." Justin repeated with an avid grin.

"Damn it, Justin," Laura chastised him. "The *Gazer's* in danger, you know. I don't care what you do, but you should be focused on trying to get past that O.P.I."

"Ummmm..." Jen was on the line again. "If you're gonna do it: I think your best bet is to try hitting its underbelly, right?"

"Negative." Laura quickly corrected her. "From your ship's readings, I'm thinking its vital, well, 'organs' are hidden under that metallic dome. Try busting it up. I suppose it's worth a *try* at the very least."

Justin took a breath, inched his head back into the 'sniffing' position, and then slowly exhaled while resting his fingers on his weapons controls. He grinned despite himself. "Again, everyone: your faith in me is overwhelming..."

He fired-up the charger for his wave cannon and braced his body. White sparks of electricity flooded the cockpit and his nostrils flared as he smelled the power building.

Chenine ran the *Gazer* full-throttle down 7<sup>th</sup> street. Three Mimickers swarmed her from behind, but with a flick of the wrist she launched her Raiden up past Mach 12. At that velocity she was well-nigh untouchable, at least to the Mimickers. Her shockwave decimated the building facades on either side of the street. Intact windows exploded as she passed them, leaving a bright silver train of glass shards in Chenine's wake.

Within minutes the Batesians were out of visual range.

Another ship pulled into view from a cross-street. At first Chenine thought it was another Batesian, but she quickly realized it was an actual Raiden. She used her Link to gently nudge the *Gazer* above it, smoothly avoiding a collision without spinning wildly out of control at her hypersonic speed. She blew past the ship and instantly received a hail.

“Unidentified Dancer: what’s your unit and designation?”

“Who’re you?” Chenine brashly demanded.

The pilot didn’t answer for a second. He was thrown off-guard by Chenine’s impudent disregard for protocol. “You’re quite a smart one, aren’t you?” He growled. “This is the *Principalities*. Seein’s how you just nearly killed me, I’m owed a bit of an explanation, don’t you think?”

“Not really.” Chenine answered, noting with annoyance that the Raiden was trying to tail her. “And if you’d like get off my backside, I’d be happy.”

The gruff Scotsman on the other end of the line was obstinate. “Not at the moment. I’m getting a lot of weird readings from your Raiden, missy. If you’re a Dancer, you’re like one I’ve never seen before. So, until you tell me who the hell you are, I’m your shadow, lassie.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m the *Chaste Gazer*, daughter-ship of *Cross-the-Rubicon*, second Raiden in the R-H lineage, point-ship of the Tears’ Shower Squadron. Now leave me alone.” She said all this with a measured, formal cadence, but added a drop of venom to that last part.

“The new program.” He replied. “I’ve heard of you guys. So that’s ‘R-H’ Tech, eh? Doesn’t look like much to me.”

She gritted her teeth. “There’s an old saying about books and covers, you know. Now go *away*, please.” Chenine was definitely getting irritated. She never ranted or shouted when she was peeved; she preferred to be curt and dismissive.

The man on the other end seemed to relent, mercifully. “Fine, as ‘ya wish, but you’d better find your mates; it’s not safe in that direction. There’re Toves and Mimics everywhere down that way.”

“They’re preferable to Opies.”

“You’ve seen an Opie?” He sounded quite interested. “Where’d you spot any, if I might ask?”

“If you really want to fight one then just go back up 7<sup>th</sup>. You know: the *opposite* direction from me.” She made sure to enunciate that part.

“Indebted to you, love.” The man’s voice was smooth and confident. His Raiden broke pursuit of the *Gazer* and tore back the way Chenine had come.

That left the girl alone with her thoughts. Chenine pulled a few stray strands of white hair from her brow. Her yellow highlights glowed with a dull luster in the red light of her cabin. Her legs were cemented again the sides of the cockpit; one of her knees was trembling slightly. She willed it to be still and took a few deep breaths.

Her orders from Wraith had been crystal clear. “Chovert,” he had sternly ordered, “you’re going to get us into the papers today, understand? *You’re* the one who’s going to thrust the R-H program into the limelight.” She was ordered to find the hottest of the hotspots and thrust herself into the eye of the storm. She was ordered to be savage, cruel

and vicious. She was ordered to throw herself into the melee for as long as it took to crush the enemy, up to (but not including) the point of dying.

*He wants glory.* She thought. Chenine didn't care about glory, or praise. She cared about her own survival, marginally, and she cared about being able to fly a Raiden. Anything else was inconsequential to her. She didn't have a warrior's heart beating in her chest, but she was no coward, either.

Her leg started trembling again. Chenine gripped it angrily with one hand until it stopped.

A warning buzzer sounded near her head: there were bogies ahead. There were a *lot* of bogies ahead. A few uncharacteristic drops of sweat rolled down the girl's porcelain cheeks. She bit her lip and relaxed her body, folding her hands into her lap and closing her eyes. For the moment, she flew using her link alone.

*Calm down, girl... be still...* She tried to quiet her head; she let her troubled mind ride the wave of her Sensations Link in an attempt to cool her mental gears. There were other thoughts, unwanted feelings, intruding into her consciousness. The thoughts pittered and pattered through her head like the footfalls of children through an otherwise quiet house. She thought about her recently exed ex-lover: did *he* make it out of the city okay? Was he worried about her? Would he be trying to look for her in all this chaos?

*Would he take me back if he knew what I was doing?*

Her 'Pragma-Link Devotion' rose to over 50 percent. It wasn't long before her Impingement Factor began a slow, ominous creep upwards as well.

Up ahead in the distance a giant formation of Toves streaked through the air on a direct intercept course with the *Gazer*. Chenine kept her eyes closed and hands folded in her lap until she was within 200 yards of the enemy line.

Then they flittered open; her eyes bled a dark blue fire. She looked like a woman possessed. Chenine's frosty lips rose in a tiny grin: it wasn't one of her nice grins. She'd make it easy for them to get to her.

After all, Chenine was never very good at playing hard-to-get.

*Come and get me.*



T I A