



'Goodbye, then...'

I.

Operation 'Concerted Reaction' officially began at 0150 hours, Greenwich Mean Time.

It was at this time the Mass at Ganymede was at its most vulnerable. It was 'half-cocked', right in the middle of rebuilding its power reserves. Bydo Cores all follow a seven-day cycle of energy buildup, then discharge (that discharge is always in the form of an incarnation-wave assault).

With its Core regenerating, and unable to fold-in on itself into that blissfully impenetrable, armadillo-like state of 'Autistic-Withdrawal', the Galilean Mass now faced the wrath of humanity's greatest armada.

There was absolutely no measure of menace in its heart, nor poison on its lips, as it considered this coming storm. Only blind, unthinking coldness existed within: it was the coldness born of a basal desire to survive, no matter the costs, or the damage to anything else. Over time, that coldness can become even frostier than then vacuum of space.

The Bydo Empire personify this coldness, much more than anyone can imagine.

Pause...

It opened its eye.

There was something else out there. Something *new*.

No, it wasn't new...

This was something *familiar*.

Something *silver*...

...two lustrous wombs...

No, not wombs... wombs carried things that could *continue*...
These things could not continue.
Their purpose? *It is lost*...
Sterile tombs...
The Core stopped regenerating.
It sat, dead in space, silently circling the gray moon.
It could *feel* them, coming in through the darkness, coming home...
Tombs or not, they were something precious:
Self...
It didn't consider this development interesting- it had no concept of 'interest'- but it did feel a stirring: a latent desire in the dark recesses of its heart.
It watched, and it waited.

II.

The warship *Hapherobe* is classified as a 'light armored carrier'. The craft, while massive from an unreferenced point of view, is nonetheless tiny compared to other Allied Military transport ships. Its twelve small decks hold a skeleton crew of thirty in tight quarters; its two medium-sized fighter bays are dwarfed by the eight full-size bays of an average AM warship.

The *Hapherobe* is a 'special services' transport, often used to shuttle valuable cargo or military VIPs on emergency 'rush' missions. Since the relative speed of an object across the trans-dimensional boundary is inversely related to its mass, the little *Hapherobe* holds a distinct advantage over other ships as a rush transporter: given its relative light weight it can 'skim' much faster than bigger AM warships.

At the moment this ship was seven hours out of Earth's atmosphere; it passed the Mars orbital about thirty minutes ago. In contrast, the great battleship *Onycophage*, the SJC's own flagship, took over *eighty* hours to hit the Asteroid Belt, moving at top speed.

Besides the two small Korang units housed in its carrier bays, this little ship was carrying something very important, indeed.

"Bashed in the head?" Roont scowled as he and Sven Wraith tromped through the corridor.

"By an 'unknown assailant'."

"An assailant who knew about her designation?"

"And likely more than that, assuming he was serious enough to try to kill the little bitch. Whoever it was had to know about the Project itself."

Roont scratched his chin as they rounded a corner; the rusty, lime green corridors of the ship all looked the same to him, and he had to rely on Wraith's sense of direction. "So, then: it's a leak in your much-vaunted information pipeline, huh? Do you think the 'assailant' was a nut-job from Parity, or something?"

"Parity's dead." Wraith shook his head. "But all the dedicated radicals from it aren't, of course. Not yet, anyway. But, honestly, we don't know *who* it was; I've got the Committee looking into the matter."

"And what about Little Miss CRTS?"

"Light concussion and moderate blood loss: nothing serious."

The pair reached a red door. It bore the words: 'Danger: Outer Reactor Area. Intense Shielding Measures in Effect: Augmented Persons Should Consult With Ship Doctor Before Entry!'

"She was fine, not even shaken up, as the eyewitnesses tell it, but you know her: the girl's normally as energetic as a sloth." Wraith pushed open the door. "But I didn't take any chances. I had her put in the base's Karat Pool for a good 6 hours before we left for the launch pad; she came out as fresh as a daisy."

"Tch! I didn't think the girl was that gung-ho about being underwater." Roont noted.

Wraith's eyes were coals. "She's not. I had her ass sedated: we can't coddle any of our subjects' moronic idiosyncrasies at the moment: this is too important."

"Mmm. Guess that'd work." Roont poked his head into the room: there was a hellish green light blaring from across the massive floor. It was impossible to look at the far wall of the bay: something akin to the light of God flared from behind a transparent shield. The light rose and fell in mysterious green pulses.

"A reactor room." Roont grunted, "not the healthiest place to hang around. We might as well cut out the middleman and just eat a plate of plutonium granules."

"The accommodations are annoying, but necessary." Wraith acknowledged.

They met two crewmen in the control room. One of them, a black-vested supervisor, looked over at Wraith as he hobbled in.

"Raiden-Leader." He saluted the RL. For a moment the four men stared down at the R-H's; the deadly birds lay prostrate on the floor of the room. The supervisor eventually broke the silence:

"Again, sir, and I don't want to pry, given that the Superior Joint Command's asked that we extend all *due* courtesy to you and your pilots, but--"

"Please don't be obsequious."

"Fine." He threw up his hands. "Put bluntly, this isn't a mooring floor. You said that these Raidens needed the best 'protection' that we had to offer. When I said that this was the most shielded room in the *Hapherobe* I wasn't lying. But, sir, I *assure* you that the other parts of this ship are *very* safe, even if they don't have a triple-layer of military-grade keratinocyte, they'll still--"

"We're only asking for your indulgence until we pass the Ceres orbital."

The supervisor scoffed. "What, are your ships allergic to the asteroids, or something, RL?"

"Yes, actually." Roont whispered under his breath.

Wraith jabbed the doctor in the side and glared at him harshly. "Call us persnickety." He explained to the supervisor.

"I think I will." The man growled, rolling his eyes.

Soon thereafter the supervisor and his tech left Wraith and Roont alone in the control room. Roont stared out the window at the *Chaste Gazer*; he put his fingers on the pane, as if he wanted to cradle the whole ship in his hand. He considered Little Miss CRTS, sitting docilely in the open cockpit.

"Goodbye, Norma Jean." He murmured with a shake of the head. "You know, Wraithie, you go through every motion in the script, like an actor in a play, but when you get to the final act, well, it's a pretty brutal thing, isn't it?" The tone of his voice was not

typical: it was as close to 'reverent' as Sam Roont could get. He looked over at Sven Wraith.

For his part, the RL turned his back on the window. "Whatever happens, happens." He said without emotion. "We can theorize all we want, but in the end no one really knows what's going to happen to the *Chaste Gazer* once it gets within range of the Mass. It's quite possible that the Raiden will come through the event intact, even though it's a lot *more* probable that it won't."

Roont nodded in acknowledgment of this point.

"The homing beacon: did you plant it in the hold?" Wraith asked.

"Of course I did." The Bydo Doctor scoffed. "It'll amplify the *Gazer's* signals as soon as she activates it. It's the equivalent of dumping a gallon of blood into a shark tank: the Mass would have to be dense not to notice."

"Good."

"What about the cover story? What'd you tell Little Miss CRTS?"

"She believes that she's carrying experimental scanning equipment."

"Oh, you magnificent bastard, you." Roont chuckled.

The canopy went down on the *Gazer*, sealing Chenine inside the craft with a hiss. It thumped shut with a reverberating snap, much like the clapping of a coffin's wooden slats as they're nailed together.

This is the moment, he thought with excitement. Blood pounded in the Aryl's head; his limbs almost quaked with anticipation. Suddenly he felt exuberant, like he hadn't felt in years.

For all your genetic immortality, and your unyielding strength, you still underestimate the depths of my hatred... Wraith snarled visibly. With the coldest of hearts I revile you! With all my will I despise you! And, with all my Antipathy, I strike at you: I stab at your chest!

He restrained his boiling blood, but soothed himself with the knowledge that with the fruition of this test, he would have his revenge on both the Bydo scum that crippled him and those incompetent fools at Allied Command.

Ring-around-the-rosy, boys: he grinned darkly, everything comes back full-circle in the end!

His blood still simmered within him; in the back of his head the Aryl desperately wanted to suit-up and jet out to the combat zone. He wanted to see the main event for himself. Of course, he knew that none of this was possible. There was absolutely nothing left for him to do at the moment: everything was in order, and all the promises of the 'Prototype Test' were about to come to a head.

"Iacta alea est." Wraith declared darkly. "The die is cast: now let's see where it falls."

"Assuming this works, Wraith, there should be plenty of 'dying' to go around. That poor girl doesn't even know what she's about to do," Roont smirked. "Ah, well: guess you could give the little pop-tart a medal, if she comes home again, that is."

"I guess." Wraith agreed disinterestedly.

There was certainly hope between the two of them but, deep down inside, neither man really expected to see R-H-CRTS, or its fair-haired young pilot, ever again.

III.

"Brace yourself, operator..." the mechanical voice ordered.

Justin tensed and gripped the sides of his seat. The *Platonic Love* shook violently.

"Variable-Specific-Impulse Magnetoplasma Rocket successfully installed."

"Fantastic." He growled.

Scott Tabris's head popped up, mere inches from Justin's body: his canopy was open at the moment. The spherical Raiden lay on the large reactor room floor. Tabris's face was colored green in the sickly light that of the massive fusion generator. The deadly furnace was sealed within a clear-metal sarcophagus behind them. Most of the room was taken up by that ungodly power plant, but there was just enough space on the dirty floor to hold the *Platonic Love* and *Chaste Gazer* side-by-side.

Not the nicest way to travel, but one can't really complain...

"VASIMR's good to go," the tech said. "and we're ready to put the modified flesh into the channeling tubes. You'll need to keep your link on while we do it, to make sure you'll be able to control the skimming function on the engine once you're space-born."

"You're thinking with your head today instead of your dick, aren't you, JG?"

Justin scowled. "I figured that you'd be over there helping 'Little Miss Chenine' get settled in." Justin pointed to his sister ship on the other side of the room as he tilted his head back. His mind swam, and he felt that dreamy chime in his head: the link was activating.

"Donald's taking care of Miss Chovert." Scott answered shortly. He didn't have the time, or temperament, to confront Justin on his sour attitude. Storm had been verbally abusive all night, and he obviously didn't plan on changing that mind-set before his departure.

Justin interrupted his link to look over at the *Gazer*: Donald Plinshine was standing on the nose of that elegant bird, coaching Chenine as she activated her own link. His bald pate glistened in the green light: the doctor had to shave him bald to treat the concussion that Justin inflicted upon him; it would take the poor guy months to re-grow his scraggily head of hair.

"He doesn't want to be anywhere near me, does he?" Justin guessed.

"No." Scott confessed after a pause.

"What about you: Tabris?" Justin looked at the tech with hard eyes.

Tabris's face was granite in the green light of the room. He wasn't apt to betray any emotion to Justin: his eyes were rivets. "Put your head in the link, if you wouldn't mind."

"Of course." Justin grumbled.

A few seconds later the *Love's* systems blazed to life. That cumbersome artificial voice declared: "Pragma-Class Link at threshold: devotion is fifteen-percent."

"And Impingement..." Tabris leaned into the cockpit and checked that lone monitor, "is times one-point-zero." He looked up at Pyotr Frieze on the catwalk above him.

"Go!" He shouted.

Justin's head drifted with the link: it was very difficult to keep his devotion up with the canopy raised. His senses continually drifted between hypersensitivity and normalcy. He kept feeling the electric field of the nuclear reactor waxing and waning over his skin, giving him massive gooseflesh. His senses were too cluttered, but there

were tricks for dealing with this problem: Justin needed to focus on one specific stimulus to focus his mental effort and keep his devotion above threshold.

From the corner of his mental sinuses, Chenine's lilac-scented skin cream drifted through his head.

Now there's a benchmark to reference. He thought as he inhaled the familiar scent. It was as good a focal-point as any. Justin tried to hone-in on that vaporous aroma; his devotion rose as he willed his nostrils open. Justin zoomed in on the smell like a bloodhound trails a scent, or how an electron microscope scans a bundle of cells: he spurred the Raiden's sensory equipment so hard that he began to smell a separate odor beneath the cream. It was musty and unclean, like concentrated sweat, but nonetheless intoxicating: Chenine's natural pheromones.

Good Lord... he reeled at his body's sudden response to that chemical. Justin quickly retracted his mind from that overpowering scent.

Then his eyes opened wide. His pupils dilated into 8-balls: he sensed something new, something on his 'back', near the rear of the Raiden.

"Can you feel it, now?" Tabris queried.

"Yes." Justin mumbled. "Oh, God: yes."

The *Love's* computer blandly declared: "Flesh induction complete: initiating electrical field..."

Justin clenched his teeth and growled as half-a-dozen bright colors exploded in his brain. Then he felt it: the entire length of that tubular engine that now protruded out the back of the *Platonic Love*.

"Ooooooh yeah..." Justin smirked.

The computer continued droning: "End of stimulation: the VASIMR system was successfully converted; Galvanic, Organically-Supplemented Impulse Magnetoplasma Rocket is online. System condition is nominal."

Tabris thumped the nose of the *Love* twice and dismounted. "To whom it may concern: the 'Gossamer Engine' is a go on R-H-AGP!" His voice echoed in the bay.

"Gossamer's a go on CRTS!" Plinshine whined as he back away from Chenine's ship.

Justin studied Scott's face as the *Love's* canopy lowered between them.

You'd think I had the Bubonic Plague, or something. He scowled. No doubt about it: he was a joke in almost everyone's eyes: while Chenine was being sent to the front lines as a soldier in the main 'Penetration Team' Justin was relegated to the sidelines. He was being pushed as far away from the action as possible: everyone expected him to come back from Jupiter with a boring, embarrassing story to tell.

But none of that really mattered to him.

The truth was: he didn't plan on coming back from Jupiter at all.

IV.

The black vacuum of space is a lonely place.

More than that: it's *eternally* lonely. Even with seven AM warships in the vicinity, this lifeless void of unending night reeked of cold and isolation. One tiny, orange ball lay on the black horizon: Jupiter loomed, the size of a human eyeball. The sun

struggled to shine from 800-million kilometers away: it was a pinprick of cold fire set off in the infinite distance.

An explosion of light radiated across the void: nine beams of pure-white energy thrust into view, then slowed as they came upon the group of warships. By the time the beams lost their inertia they were no longer glistening silver shards, but nine Excel-class Raidens.

Specifically, they were nine very *angry* Excel-class Raidens.

"King's Mind, here." The SL's voice droned in Connor's cockpit. "We've got the final confirmation from Command Ops: Operation 'Concerted Reaction' is a go."

Nice to see that no one's losing their balls at the last minute. Connor smiled like a devil. *'Course, it's easy for the 'purple-vests' over in Command Operations to be so bold, issuing their orders from their pretty little bridge onboard the Onycophage.*

Those old boys could have their cushy bridge chairs, he thought: Connor Trent was all about 'hands-on' interaction with his enemies.

"Prep your GOSIMR's and wait for the salvo." The SL ordered his fellow Scots. "We'll move back into skimland for six-hundred-fifteen seconds, exactly: that should put us a good 30 kilometers inside the Mass's *Zona Introverda*."

That was the 'event horizon' of a Bydo Mass, as some people liked to call it: it was the area around a full-fledged Core where the Active-Systems Scan power was so great that it manifested itself as an ethereal, mist-like shield. Almost anything within that area was fated to be ripped apart and destroyed by the magnet-like Active-Systems Scan. There was only one thing that could survive in the *Zona Introverda*.

Kin, Connor smirked: Bydo flesh, no matter how warped or denatured, could move freely through that deadly, invisible sea.

And a craft that carried a few pounds of the stuff in its armor? That was good enough: in the end, the only way to strike at the devil's heart was to gird oneself in the devil's vestments.

The sheep in wolves' clothing.

"30 clicks *into* the 'event horizon'? Any closer and we'll be kissing that bloody thing on the lips." One pilot noted.

"Any closer," *King's Mind* replied, "and we'll be swatted out of the sky by the Final Core Barrier."

"Aye: like hitting a brick wall at 120 kph." Kelso jovially noted.

"*Ceàrr*," the other pilot objected, "you're not quite right, there: try 120 clicks per *second*, Kelso."

"No risk, no rewards." *King's Mind* declared. "We're pushing in deep on this one, mates. Now, I know that we can't personally set fire to the bloody thing, and- aye- it's the Penetration Teams who actually get to 'shoot the Core', but mark my words: there's glory to be had for us, as well."

"And revenge." Connor broke in darkly.

"Aye, that too."

The less gung-ho pilot was unconvinced. "I'm all keen for a nice, bloody slaughter, but just what exactly are we gonna find in that *Zona*?"

Kelso replied with his old, sage voice: "We won't know," he admitted, "at least not 'till we're *in* the demon's den, laddie, but always remember: *theid seòltachd thar spionnadh*."

“‘Cunning will overcome strength.’” King’s Mind agreed.

“And we have both in scores.” Connor smiled.

The SL ended their conversation: “None of you forget: the AM’s ordered us to run interference for those swift little Penetration Teams, and believe me: there’s *plenty* of honor to being a decoy. We’re a flock of clay pigeons, but we’ve got our talons about us, haven’t we?”

“Oh, aye!” The hawkish men declared in unison.

One hour passed, and then another. Eventually, the force orbs on every Raiden’s nose began glowing a violent orange.

It’s opening... Connor noted. *The bloody thing can see us now.* He gripped his controls tightly. *Good for it, but I guess it doesn’t know that the chicken that sticks its neck out is liable to get it lopped off.*

Streaks of light flared all around them: the AM warships launched their gigantic trans-dimensional torpedoes. The warheads on each missile bore a massive Za’ar Bomb. Smaller specks of light poured out of each ship: Korang fighters, by the hundreds, flitted around the warships in a protective swarm.

The Mass’s half-assed wave-assault would be coming in, soon. It would be a pretty pathetic affair; the Korangs were more than a match for the lackluster long-range strike. The Core would most certainly draw the majority of its available power around *itself*.

And that’s where the fun part begins...

“Now, please don’t you fall behind, Laddie! If the *Principalities* comes through all this in less than five pieces, I’ll buy you a lollipop back at Sruighlea, you hear?” Kelso’s gruff voice echoed through the cockpit; he masked his concern for Connor with the barbarous quip.

Trent reciprocated. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for two weeks, *Dominions*, and let me forewarn ‘ya: once I get going, I don’t intend on stopping to bail your fleshy old ass out of any jams, so don’t fall asleep behind the wheel, ‘kay, auld boy?”

“Cut the chatter, *Principalities*.” The *King’s Mind* reprimanded him.

Seconds later a siren blared in each Raiden’s cockpit: the pealing alarm devastated the tranquil silence around them and sent each pilot’s heart into his throat.

It was the ‘point of no return’.

Jupiter, or bust...

“Za’ar bombardment complete: total devastation achieved outside the *Zona Introverda*. This area is temporarily secure: Korangs and Raidens deploy. Repeat: Korangs and Raidens deploy. K-Type teams 0-1 through 8-1 move to planetoid perimeter: do *not* approach within 1,000 kilometers of Ganymede. R-Type Squadrons 0-1 through 1-3, approach from your prearranged vectors: engage all targets in your designated areas at or near the atmosphere around the Mass’s *Ocean of Nostrum*. Do not approach within 10,000 feet of the liquid surface.”

I hadn’t really plan on it. Connor agreed. Having to set eyes upon the hellish black oceans of a Mass from afar was bad enough: he had no intention of going down there and playing amongst its dark waves.

He heard background noise from his SL’s Raiden: the lead man’s Gossamer engine starting-up. Connor brought his Raiden up to the front of the line, beside the SL and Kelso, the third ship in the hierarchy.

"Nemo..." The SL whispered from his cockpit .

"...*me impune*..." Kelso, floating beside him, declared.

Connor braced his legs against the side of his cockpit and shored-up his seatbelts. He revved his GOSIMR engine, drew a deep breath, and glared at the ruddy red ball out in the distance of space.

Here: chick, chicky, chicky...

"...*laccessit!*" He screamed.

All three frontline Raidens then disappeared in a shower of golden light. The other six ships soon followed them.

The Salt-o-Scots Squadron screamed towards that swirling land of darkness, nine shards of beautiful, vengeful silver light.

V.

As soon as the *Platonic Love* fell out of skimland Justin retched: he retched *violently*.

Oh, yes, this is a good start... he sourly noted as his breakfast danced around the cockpit in weightless bliss.

"Ugh!" He growled. While the ship's cleaning system dealt with the mess he tilted his head to one side and sucked on a tiny plastic tube: the tube ran around to a big reservoir of 'Pop-Up' Cola near his headrest.

That was a nice little tradition amongst Raiden pilots when they took on Masses: everyone got to carry a gallon of their favorite beverage on-board (provided it wasn't alcoholic, of course). Justin couldn't for the life of him figure out how the tradition got started, but it seemed to make the Typers happy, and *he* certainly wasn't complaining.

Although the catheter is a little annoying... he squirmed uncomfortably in his thin green spacesuit: Justin was wearing his normal black *Liefde* suit underneath it, but in order to putter around in space one was required to wear the filmy, Class-I adaptive spacesuit.

He hated it, but it could be worse: if he were piloting a Dancer-clone like Chenine he'd have to wear that horrible Class-III suit. That gigantic red thing must weight at least 120 pounds. As it stood, he was allowed the flimsier suit because he was piloting a Striker-clone.

The two Raidens flew on cruise control through the darkness; they finally approached a small group of AM warships. The scale of space was something that Justin had yet to master: when he and Chenine dropped out of their skimming states those warships looked quite close in front of them. They *looked* so close that Justin thought he could touch them, but in reality it took nearly two hours to reach the rally point. Their computers guided the ships' high-speed engines to a graceful stop between the warships.

Two other Raidens suddenly swooped into view from behind one of the warships: one was a thin little Dancer, the other a large, red Striker.

"Craft R-S-VNS requesting your attention." The computer declared. "The operator's communication code is valid."

Well, of course it is, nitwit...

"You R-H-CRTS?" A woman spoke into Justin's canalphones.

"Not even close." He answered. "You want my colleague here..."

Justin waited for Chenine to take over. When she didn't he barked into her phones:

"Hey, starfighter: it's show time!"

Dead air.

"We're kind of on a schedule, here..." the woman chastised.

"Just a sec." He grumbled. Justin worked his console; he punched-up the canopy access codes for the *Chaste Gazer*. Immediately the night sky outside his ship disappeared: he was looking directly into the cockpit of his sister-ship.

Chenine was lying in her chair, arms over her midsection, dozing with her head hung to one side.

"*Sleeping Beauty!*" He growled. Chenine's head flew up with a start; she bumped her knee on the console and muttered a naughty word under her breath. She looked up at Justin.

"Hiya." He sarcastically waved.

The girl wiped some 'sleep' from her eye, then noticed the two Raidens waiting for her outside.

"Apologies." She acknowledged.

"So this is the 'Hero of Nash Ultima'." The woman in the Striker warmly replied.

"She's a certifiable Tove-killer." Justin quietly agreed.

"But a dancer, huh? Look: truth be told, I'm already babysitting *one* Dancer, and I don't really want to have to look out for two. Any chance that *you* could take her place?" The woman in the Striker pressed Justin.

He had to put a hand to his mouth to keep from laughing: he could see Chenine's face scrunch in quiet offense. It looked like the girl had just eaten a sour candy. Two seconds later she remembered that her canopy-monitor was on and promptly disengaged it, shutting Justin out of her cockpit.

"No can do, VNS." He replied. "The *Chaste Gazer*'s the one with all the spiffy scientific equipment in her cargo hold; she'll be bringing it along with you guys to see what kind of cool stuff we can learn about a Mass's interior."

"While the rest of us are busy *dismantling* it." The woman growled with exasperation. "The last thing we need are more demands from those pencil-pushing scientists at the Labs. It's bad enough that we've got to haul around a data-miner—" She caught her breath. "Erm, sorry about that, Onizuka."

"That's alright, ma'am." The Dancer's pilot replied.

"We've all got our crosses to bear, ma'am." Justin apologized.

"Still..." the woman mumbled, "you two are supposed to be the flagships of the new program, right?"

'Flagships'? Try only *ships*, lady...

"Um... yes. Yes: that's technically true." Chenine answered.

Again, Justin had to hold a hand over his mouth.

"Strange that they'd give you a *scientific* role in this mission, given your combat credentials..."

"I don't question my Aryl." Chenine coldly replied.

"Oh, of course not." The woman agreed; she promptly dropped the matter. Justin was starting to realize the importance that every Typer placed in obeying their Aryls. He hadn't always been aware of that 'blind-obedience' bent to Raiden-culture: the only

reason he obeyed Sven Wrath, primarily, was because the irascible man scared the hell out of him.

Justin looked out his cockpit at the elegant frame of the *Chaste Gazer*; whatever happened during the battle, he didn't really expect to see it ever again. The image of Chenine cutely sweeping all that 'sleep' out of her eyes flashed in his head: it was a maneuver that made her look absolutely childlike and innocent. Whatever the truth about her, he might as well try to remember the cantankerous girl in that context.

Like a babe in the woods.

The 'woods' she was going into were darker than death or night. Truthfully, though, Justin's own suicidal desires deadened any possible concern he could have for her.

We've all got our crosses to bear, don't we?

"Time to go." The woman in R-H-VNS ordered. "Our Penetration Team's rallying point is just outside the *Zona* facing Jupiter, so we've got a ways to go."

His silver-haired colleague put her Raiden into gear and followed the retreating Striker. Justin called her as she moved off. His solid green eyes were tough as granite.

"Goodbye, Chenine." He bluntly declared.

Justin turned the *Platonic Love* on its axis and prepared to head-off for his own rallying point. Suddenly his canopy wavered and Chenine's face filled the screen.

He bit his lip uncomfortably as the girl stared at him for a full five seconds- an eternity- before she tilted her head to one side and leaned forward, as if to get a better look at him.

His first impulse was to ask her what she wanted, but his lips were rubber, and he found that he couldn't say a thing. Chenine's abyssal-blue eyes bore into him like lasers.

Finally she looked away from him, as if satisfied with her scan.

"Why 'Starfighter'?" She mumbled.

Justin had to regroup his faculties. "Ah, you *were* awake, were you...um, well: they call Masses 'black stars', don't they? Somebody does, I think..."

"The Dead-Landers do."

"Yeah. Well, there you are: you're the one going on the offensive..." for some reason, he found that he was having even *more* trouble looking Chenine in the eyes than usual, "so, well: go get 'em, 'starfighter'." He flashed a fake grin.

Chenine cast her face to one side, averting her eyes from this hideous attempt at warmth.

"Goodbye, then." She quietly declared in a cold whisper before killing the link.

Now alone in the dead of space, Justin watched the three Raidens disappear into the night. Jupiter loomed in front of them, a ruddy drop of blood on a mourning veil of blackness and stars.

Please, don't get so mushy, Chenine. He smirked derisively.

He flipped his fingers out to either side of his body, then he sunk his head down into the link. The *Love's* two spike-arms flipped out from their default configuration and locked-down on either side of the ship: cemented in their battle positions.

As for me? I plan to get very mushy...

Justin flexed his digits: he could already taste the blood of his enemies.

VI.

The Salt-O-Scots dropped into a turbulent wake of mist and crystals as they pressed into the nebulous *Zona Introverda*. It was eerie and unbearably quiet. Jupiter eclipsed their entire view; the perspective it forced at this range was nauseous. Connor felt like a fly gliding past a massive wooden house. They were over a million kilometers away from the monstrous gas giant, but it looked like they were skirting its atmosphere. The planet reflected huge quantities of sunlight: it acted like a miniature sun itself, lighting the foggy nether region of the Mass.

The mist increased; the temperature outside steadily dropped. The Raidens started wobbling back and forth as they passed through the fog: it was more like drifting through a steamy mess of seawater than empty space.

Then, across every single channel available to them, a noise came to their ears. It drifted through the cockpit speakers like a ghost's whispers. At first it was soft, and very low in pitch. As they crossed through that endless river of fog and ice, however, it rose in intensity. Garbled noises flitted across the static: things like voices (that were not voices, at least not *human* voices) whined and clucked over the line.

Those sounds were not very pleasant.

The *King's Mind* finally declared: "Right, then: this muck is reaching critical levels. Communication is useless from here on in, so go ahead and cut the feed to your—" the garbled noises rose to deafening levels: it almost sounded like someone, or a *lot* of someones, were being slowly strangled with piano wire. There was another sound underneath that; it resembled a madman's chuckling.

Connor killed his communication system. As they drove further into the darkness the fog increased; even the massive light of Jupiter died down, leaving the squadron very much alone in the mire.

It's just like those dark apple orchards back home, Connor thought with unease. Fear was unbecoming of him, so he shelved all those unpleasant thoughts. In the kitchen of his mind, however, his boyhood fear of hidden monsters and hellish gateways simmered on the backburner. The faint, ruddy glow of his instrument panel was the only comfort to be had.

Everyone's force orb grew in color until they were the only things visible outside. The ruddy orange spheres bobbed and weaved on the Raidens' noses, swaying in the mist like lanterns hanging off the bow of a ship lost in fog.

The Ferryman's dinghy to another world... he mused, *'cause we're not in Kansas, anymore.*

The *Zona's* icy haze finally parted: the Raidens emerged over a sterile plane. Tens of thousands of feet below them a black ocean ebbed and churned.

This part of the Mass was like the Antarctic Sea in winter: cold, barren, and smothered in brooding clouds. It looked uninspiring, stunted by a cold, torpid death. An atmospheric storm lazily thundered and flashed far away on the horizon.

Connor's eyes flittered to his SL: the *King's Mind* was thundering down to starboard. Connor saw the reason why: strange dark specks danced on the water far out on the horizon; they bobbed and weaved around a massive shard of solid carbon-dioxide. The island of dry-ice jutted out of the Mass's oily Ocean of Nostrum. It was a crusty black pinnacle set atop the endless liquid surface.

Time to make ourselves known to this moldy piece of cach... he glumly surmised. So far there was no official ‘welcoming party’ (which was eerie in its own right), but Connor assumed that the Mass was simply not taking them seriously. *Looks like we’re going to have to teach this wannabe planet that we’re worthy of its efforts.*

Connor flipped the safeties of his wave cannon; he was intent on bringing his *own* little storm to this barren hell.

“*Mo chladheamh!*” He screamed as the other Salt-o-Scots thundered towards the monolithic shard of ice.

VII.

R-S-VNS, better known as *Silene’s Girdle*, thundered through the soupy *Zona Introverda* on the opposite side of the Mass from the Salt-O-Scots. Chenine and Kensu followed suit. Behind them, an Excels and one additional Striker brought up the rear.

“Looks like the diversionary teams have started their little firefights over in the Western hemisphere,” Kensu mentioned to Chenine. “We should have smooth sailing down to the infrastructure, at least.”

“Okay: boys and girls!” *Silene’s Girdle* decreed: “we’re doing this thing by the book; there are six other Penetration Teams working in this hemisphere, and as long as the decoy teams on the other side keep attacking, we shouldn’t be bothered too much.”

“Until we get past the skeletal forest.” Kensu lamented.

“C’mon, what are you afraid of, Dancer-boy?”

“More than lions, and tigers and bears, I’d say.”

“What are your orders for me?” Chenine asked the woman.

“Stay on my ass,” the *Silene’s Girdle* replied, “and don’t go anywhere else. Don’t *think* about going anywhere else; don’t *try* to go anywhere else and don’t make me drag your ass *back* from ‘anywhere else’. Understand, Dancer-girl?”

“That seems fairly explicit.” Chenine agreed.

“I know that you’re a competent fighter, but we’re gonna take it nice and easy,” the woman continued, “and drop through the layers *carefully*: we’re doing everything by the numbers, here. Whichever Penetration Team reaches the Core first gets the killing rights, so there’s no need to be reckless.”

“Still, It’d be nice to be able to say that we were the ones that got the Galilean, wouldn’t it?” The other Striker in the team opined.

“Don’t forget that we’ve got the *Halide* and *Gazer* to watch out for.”

“Yeah, what’s the deal with that? Do we have *two* data-miners on this job, or something?”

“I’m carrying experimental research equipment,” Chenine explained, “I’ve been ordered to test it inside the Mass.”

“And that makes her part of the mission, consequently.” *Silene’s Girdle* stated. “Whenever we come out, she’s with us, no question. That means we’re keeping track of her: you guys are her official ‘guardian angels’. Uh, not that you’re *incapable* of fighting, *Gazer*, but-”

“I understand.” Chenine answered.

"Also boys and girls, and this part is obvious, but once we reach the Final Core Barrier, only *one* of us can get to the 'creamy nougat center' before the barrier folds-in on itself. Just so there's no confusion: *I'm* the designated Core penetrator, 'kay?'"

"No arguments here." Kensu agreed.

The team streaked down through the Mass's brooding atmosphere. They passed through a pocket of clouds which were right in the middle of releasing a misty liquid methane rain down onto the ocean. The Raidens condensed into a tight formation, leveled out above the endless sea and jetted, mere meters over the alien water.

"Excuse me, ma'am..." the *Silver Halide* called Chenine.

"Go ahead, *Halide*." She hesitantly acknowledged.

"I never really got a chance to thank you. For Nash Ultima, I mean. You saved my life, you know..."

"I was following orders." She blandly replied.

"Still, you were incredible." He gushed. "And, also: I never really got your name..."

"You didn't?"

"No."

"My... name is Camille." She lied. Chenine remembered the rosy-faced Onizuka from back at Auckland. She was not interested in heroism, or being a hero, and her celebrity back at Base-10 was already unbearable: she had no intentions of spreading her 'epic story' any further.

About fifteen minutes later the group picked up speed: the black Ocean of Nostrum ebbed mysteriously beneath them.

"That's very odd..." one of the Excels noted. "Look at the sea ripples: they're *all* pointing in the same direction; that shouldn't be..."

"How so?" *Silene's Girdle* asked.

"The Nostrum down there should behave like the water on Earth, at least in principle: it should be move in natural contour patterns due to the tidal pull from Ganymede."

"Like our moon pulls Earth's oceans, huh?"

"Yeah, but I can't explain what's going on down there. Let me play with my scanners and see what the rest of this hemisphere is doing."

They flew in silence for a few minutes; finally the Excel pilot came back on the line.

"Sweet bleeding Jesus." He muttered. "I think I've found the problem."

"What is it?" Kensu asked hesitantly.

"The Nostrum down there is 100 feet *below* sea-level."

"Okay, yes... I see..." *Silene's Girdle* mumbled. "Right: that makes absolutely no sense to me: what the hell are you talking about?"

"It makes sense, ma'am, when you consider the 500-foot tidal wave behind us."

"Tidal wave?"

"All the liquid under us is being pulled backward by some massive internal force: it's coming up behind us in a tsunami... and it's growing."

"A 500-foot wave..." The *Girdle* mused. "You're saying that the Mass is trying to attack us, or something?"

"It could know that we're here, but there's never been any reports of an Ocean of Nostrum 'reaching out' like this."

"And we're sure this isn't natural?" *Silene's Girdle* asked.

"Other than a few methane storms and some CO₂ icebergs, there's nothing in the environment that could cause this phenomenon."

"Oh, yes, terrific: this isn't ominous at all." Kensu mumbled. "What do you mean by 'reaching out', sir?"

"The phenomenon is following us *perfectly*. I can't explain it, but its like the water *itself* is trying to pull us under..."

Chenine looked down at her console, surprised to see a few drops of sweat land on the pad. She wasn't feeling very good at the moment. The girl's head was hung low and she flew using the link. When she finally looked up to reassess her situation, she realized that she was breathing very hard and heavy; there was a constant trickle of sweat training down her forehead. For some reason, her heart was very nearly in her throat.

She checked her link-devotion: it was obscenely high.

Why is that? she wondered. *I didn't think I was investing that much of myself...* her muscles were starting to tingle and ache: she'd never felt this way before.

The *Gazer's* Impingement Factor was climbing. The little display screen behind her chair flashed erratically, illuminating the dark rear of her cabin with ominous yellow flickers of light. These flashes bore an uncanny resemblance to a cracking campfire as they bounced off the shadowy cabin. These flashes increased steadily.

The group kicked up their speed and continued onward across the dark water. They were moving much faster than the ominous wall of water behind them, but the whole situation was still unnerving: to be in this horrible place was bad enough, but to be actively pursued by something as innocuous as an *ocean* was just creepy.

"Ah-ha! To hell with the waves!" *Silene's Girdle* laughed with satisfaction, "there's a landmass at one-o'clock." A mist-choked piece of land loomed on the horizon: it was jet black, indistinguishable from the water surrounding it, and very low-lying.

"Oh, that's a big one." The Excel pilot agreed. "You know that there's gotta be a 'maw' in that one."

Twenty minutes later the Raidens exploded across the black earth. The lonely island was brittle and silty: their shockwaves kicked up a lot of chalky black dust as they passed it.

At the center of this island was a massive crater. It descended down beneath the Sea of Nostrum, apparently unending. The only illumination in this tunnel came from long red cracks in the earth descending all the way down the shaft; these cracks blazed with a cancerous red light.

The *Silene's Girdle* flipped in the air, turned over on itself, then dove straight down into the bleak crater. Chenine and the others followed suit, disappearing from the scant light of the surface and into the black shadow of the Mass's innards.

VIII.

The incarnation was small, shaped like a sleek letter 'A' with thin, sturdy wings and a hellish mess of pulsing organs and tubes closer to its midline. It swivled quickly on its axis and sent bolts of bright light hurtling towards the *Platonic Love*. Justin knocked

one bolt away with his spike-arms, the other two glanced off his port side and upper canopy.

Unfazed, he hurtled himself at the weak Bydo ship. One of his arms slung out and rammed the blazing yellow cockpit of the Korang mimicker. It went clean through: black blood erupted from the incarnation and radiated out through space, the droplets sparkling like diamonds in the sun.

"Fucking Müllerian scum." He growled with derision. "Know your *place!*" He sneered as he brought the other spike arm out, disemboweling the hapless incarnation.

Justin lay back in his Raiden and drifted through the weightless, gooey remains of the monster: he relished in the feeling of the thing's blood and innards as they brushed over the *Platonic Love*.

"AGP!" The captain of Korang group XXIII barked. "This is the last time I want to tell you: start using those photonic cannons; all those pointless physical attacks are inefficient."

"But not *ineffective*, Captain: I don't *have* to use my God-damned cannons," he growled angrily.

It was humiliating: when Justin reached his rallying point, he discovered that he'd been assigned- 'special circumstances'- to a *Korang* unit. These men and women were heroes in their own right, and at the moment they were risking their necks to protect the AM warships from every spare incarnation sent out from the Mass.

But these incarnations were pathetic: most were Müllerian Mimickers: Korang-clones. Many others were simple spear-blob soldiers, unformed and about as tough as a stick of warm butter. Twice, a couple squads of BADACRE gunslingers came by. The things looked like fighters pulled right out of a bad mecha-anime; these incarnations relied on 'Bydo Tech' much more than other incarnations, and were comparative much more metallic than organic.

They were the toughest of this lot, but after few minutes of slashing and dashing Justin had turned the battlefield into a grisly graveyard of serrated organs and severed appendages.

All too easy.

And now he was sarcastically 'handicapping' his game by refusing to fire his cannons. Justin considered it a passive-aggressive protest: a Raiden had no business in a fight like this: it was the equivalent of a stock-car racer competing in a children's soap-box derby. Just *being* here was humiliating.

Suddenly his eyes shot open, wide.

Every hair spiked on his body; the back of his neck tingled with gooseflesh.

Holy crap... he thought as bubbles of sweat began appearing on his face.

He didn't know *what* the hell was going on, but the powerful sensors of the *Platonic Love* did give him one useful tidbit: all these anomalous sensations were coming from the Galilean Mass. The thing was an invisible speck of dust on the black horizon, but Justin could feel the energy change: something very big was happening over there.

"Captain," he growled derisively, "get on the horn to one of those warships and ask them what the hell just happened at Ganymede."

"What are you talking about? Don't concern yourself with the combat over there, AGP; besides, how could you possibly know about any-"

"-*trust* me, Captain." Justin impatiently ordered. He had to draw his mind back from the link; it was making his heartbeat erratic. "Something just happened out there, and I wanna know *what*."

The snide captain had a few choice words for Justin, but he eventually relented and spoke with one of the warship's duty-officers. When he came back a few minutes later his voice had changed.

"Er, they're saying that the planetoid just quadrupled in mass."

"What?"

"You heard me: apparently it happened suddenly; there's a hell of a lot more material around the Core. In fact, Ganymede's starting to orbit the Mass now, instead of the other way around."

"But that violates the Law of Conservation of Matter!" Justin argued.

"Don't you Goddamned, muscle-brained Raiden pilots know *anything*? The Core is a gigantic mess of flesh; it's got enough raw flesh to move things to *and* from its home: it must've shifted some matter out of Dimension 26 for its personal use."

"Instead of incubating some more matter on its own..." Justin considered this. "Why would it do that?"

The answer came to him almost as soon as he asked the question:

To replace a massive amount of flesh that it expelled from its body 'on the fly'.

And why would a Core expel such a massive amount of flesh from itself?

To send an overwhelming force up to its surface...

It was a mini incarnation-wave assault; the Core was going to strike at the Raiden units, and it was gonna strike *hard*. Everything had already been triggered; there was likely no stopping it. The legions of hell itself would be popping-up all along the surface.

'Legions of hell', huh? That sounds fun...

Justin kicked the *Love* into gear and flipped around. He angled his nose towards the bloody dot of Jupiter.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, AGP!" The captain balked. "If you leave this engagement you'll have your ass handed to you, along with your commission. You hear me? That's a dishonorable discharge! I'll see to it, you moronic hotshot!"

That'll teach me... Justin laughed. *It's hard to hand a corpse his own ass, though, Captain? As for my commission, if they really want to strip me of flight privileges, they'll have to do it posthumously.*

It was 'blaze of glory' time.

As far as Justin was concerned, this was his last act: the final curtain call for his woebegone Raiden, not to mention his life.

Little did he know that this was not the case. This wasn't the case by a *long* shot: Justin Storm was merely participating in the conclusion of Act I.

His Gossamer Engines whined, the Bydo flesh within burned until it reached a plasma state. Then both Raiden and pilot vanished in a column of heat and light as they skimmed towards the shadow of the great gas giant.

IX.

"This doesn't make any sense..." Connor mumbled to himself.

Three other Raiden units rendezvoused with the Salt-O-Scots at the colossal iceberg. Those black clouds swirling about the mountain peak turned out to be swarms of dragonfly-like creatures, each measuring only a meter from wingtip-to-wingtip, their tails curled over into large spikes which dripped a corrosive yellow gel.

"Momeraths..." he growled, mystified, as he gunned-down a whole cloud of the creatures with the *Principalities'* wave cannon. "Nothing but Momeraths. These things couldn't defend a Mass to save their lives."

The overwhelming firepower of the combined Raiden units peppered the insects until the crusty mountain was covered in their blood: its peak became as black as the Ocean of Nostrum itself.

Despite the lack of a challenge Connor found himself getting into the moment: it was a very satisfying turkey-shoot. His lips were parted in a wide grin for much of the engagement.

It wasn't until every incarnation was dead, and all the Raidens hovered around the silent, blood-caked mountain, that he realized something was *very* wrong.

There was a sleek little Dancer hovering in front of Connor, its pilot likely just as confused as he was. Why was the Mass playing things so poorly? Did it have *any* real energy to spend at all?

Trent flinched in surprise as the Dancer suddenly spasmed in the air: something long and black streaked through the Raiden. A cruel-looking chain ran from the projectile all the way down into the Ocean of Nostrum, from where it had been thrown.

The massive spear rent the Dancer's cockpit in two. Engine coolant exploded from the ship's canopy in a geyser; the green goo was mixed with large chunks of rent human flesh.

"*Dè bha sin!?*" Connor screamed aloud as he took evasive action. The pierced Raiden, along with its dead pilot, fell limply from the sky and spiraled down into the misty sludge of the Nostrum.

As soon as Connor turned his Raiden around a giant, headless monstrosity eclipsed his view.

Oil flowed all along the thing's humanoid body, from its spike-studded shoulders down to its hindclaws. Three sets of bony, serrated wings jutted from the body along its back, waist and ankles. The terrible appendages weren't for flying, but for slicing. The only thing more terrifying than the demon's lack of a head was the razor-sharp spear in its hands.

It stabbed the *Principalities* with this massive metal javelin, shearing Connor's starboard hull like a can opener.

The force of impact drove Connor's Raiden into the mountain of ice. The ship slammed into the frozen surface, jarring the Scotsman violently. The black chain attached to the incarnation's spear went taut; syrupy Nostrum dripped from the barbed chain lengths.

The headless incarnation yanked on that chain, ripping the *Principalities* out of the ice and back into the air. Connor felt his frame squeak, then relax. That torsional strain was overwhelming: it nearly ripped his Raiden in half.

"Goddamnit!" He cursed.

The spear chucker was an Obolus: a bona-fide Mass guardian.

Connor noticed out of his periphery that this monster wasn't alone: dozens of horrible spears flew out of the oily ocean below, all attached to those cruel black chains. Dozens of those terrible, headless Oboli rose from the sea. Nostrum dripped off their wrinkled, gray skin, exposing the creatures' horribly disproportionate bodies. These incarnations were vague attempts at mimicking the human frame, with limited success. Besides their six bony, curled wings the monsters sported huge claws on their hands and massive propulsion jets where their feet should be; ruddy purple fire roared from their extremities. Roughly half of the demons bore vulgar, excessively-large genitalia between their scaly legs.

The *Principalities*' photonic cannons roared, slicing through the chain that restrained it. Connor angled his ship to strike down the Oboli, but the demon shuddered, then went into a violent spasm as it 'belched' a large cloud of Momeraths through its open throat. The effect was morbid: for a second it looked like the Oboli was a recent beheading victim, flailing its limbs as the little bugs exploded out its neck like a torrent of blood.

That cloud of insect-Bydo hit the *Principalities* by the dozen, plunging their syringe-like tails through the ship's armor.

"*Gonadh!*" Connor growled. He sent his Raiden into a tight barrel roll, retreating from the large Oboli, and subsequently clipped the ice mountain once again. The Momeraths went flying from the ship like passengers without seatbelts; Connor's head slammed into his own console. He hit his facemask hard enough to bruise one eye and open up a lengthy cut along his scalp.

Bleary-eyed and light-headed, he surveyed his situation: the *Principalities* lay on a small ice ledge, 5,000-or-so feet above the Ocean of Nostrum. Connor's eyes widened as he gazed at the black water: something was happening down there.

The ocean was swirling in an organized manner for dozens of miles around the CO₂ glacier; a gigantic whirlpool was forming, exposing the black soil underneath.

Something was rising out of that darkness. It was something *big*.

The Nostrum cascaded off this mountainous entity, sending a 50-foot tidal wave radiating out in all directions. The shape of the thing soon became apparent.

"Ferryman?" Connor whispered with dry lips. "A Ferryman..."

Good God: no!

The tsunami struck the ice mountain; it swayed in the atmosphere, cracked, then started to slowly slide apart.

The horrible Obolus sailed down behind the *Principalities*; it brought its fearsome spear over its head, then summarily thrust it down into the cockpit.

The crystal canopy shattered into a trillion pieces; the spear's tip landed, unencumbered, smack in the center of the pilot's cabin.

X.

This was *not* simply 'darkness': it was total absence of light, refutation of light, *smothering* of light, even.

Chenine's Penetration Team sailed through the dank innards of the Galilean Mass. They'd punched through the crusty skeletal forest beneath the ocean; that place was misty and humid, with Nostrum continually dripping down from overhead. Ten minutes into the

massive chamber and a rush of water sounded behind them, followed by a fast-flowing stream of oil beneath them: their pursuing tidal wave had finally spilled over the low-lying island above.

Silene's Girdle punched through one particularly large bony strut; she hollowed out the bone's 'marrow' with her cannon and everyone descended through the gutted tube.

They passed into the Outer Organ Rim; weird shapes and tiny pulses of light reflected from the Raiden's high-beams. Twice Chenine noticed strange groups of gnarled creatures with pink, anemone-like bodies; they appeared to congregate in the darkness around the Mass's blood-engorged organs. The things scattered in every direction, like cockroaches, whenever her lights fell on them.

Down, down, down into the darkness they went.

They crossed another massive cavern: the ceiling lay far, far above them in the darkness. Giant swaying stalks covered the ground, like reeds in a pond, or the tall grass of a savannah.

...of a Savannah imprisoned in eternal night. The girl mused.

The stalks reacted to the harsh light of the Raidens in different ways: some retracted in indignation, others simply pointed, ominously, towards the approaching Raidens. More than once Chenine had a great desire to look over her shoulder, afraid of what those stalks might be motioning to.

Or, are they beckoning to us? She wondered.

Twice Chenine swore that she saw big, bloody eyes attached to some of those reeds, but these often sank down into the hellish grass before she could confirm it.

Silene's Girdle stopped at the side of a massive 'stone' wall. Part of this monolith was studded with smaller pieces of sparking debris, like a hole encased in crystal.

"The *Zona Pellucida*." She mumbled in awe.

"Last stop before the final run to the Core." The Excel pilot gloated.

"But this can't be right: where are the defenses?"

"They must all be dealing with the decoy teams on the surface." Kensu guessed.

"Even if they were, we'd still have a *few* obstacles in our path: Masses don't just leave themselves completely open to attacks like this, no matter where you punch in, there should be *something* in the way."

"And we've had absolutely smooth sailing." The other Striker noted.

"That's what's bothering me. It's like the Core isn't even trying to stop us..."

Kensu was not *nearly* as bothered by this fact. "Well, ma'am, there is a thing as being *too* paranoid you know."

"It's not paranoia," *Silene's Girdle* retorted, "when you know that the whole world really *is* out to get you."

"Don't call this hellhole a 'world'; that's offensive." The Excel pilot wryly chided.

Chenine hung back from the rest of the group, waiting for them to decided upon a course of action. She'd activated her special scanning equipment thirty minutes ago, but had no way to know if it was working or not.

In all fairness, she didn't really care.

The pilot lay back in her seat, fully reclined. She was very nearly supine, and even though her legs were pinned uncomfortably between her seat and the ship's consoles, Chenine made no move to adjust her position. It was pointless, after all.

Her blood pressure and respiration rate were still wonky; Chenine didn't know why. The problem only seemed to worsen the deeper they got inside the Mass. She wanted to take this pause in their journey to rest up a bit and recoup at least some of her spent energy.

After a few minutes of light dozing, every hair on Chenine's body rose in quiet alarm: her legs were sliding off to one side: toward the starboard side of her cockpit. She could feel the pressure of her seatbelts against the ribs on her right side:

The *Gazer* was listing to one side.

She sat up abruptly, banging her knees as she did so, of course. Chenine first ordered the ship to level out with her head, then her controls: neither worked.

"Something's wrong." She called out to her fellow travelers.

"Technical difficulties?" The *Silene's Girdle* replied.

"Unsure..."

The *Silver Halides* turned, very slowly, to get a look at the *Chaste Gazer*.

"Experiencing electrical problems?" Kensu helpfully asked, "Because, you know, sometimes a Mass's AS-field can really-"

His floodlights hit the *Chaste Gazer*.

"*Nante koto!* Mother of God!" Kensu's high-pitched scream chilled the girl's blood.

"What?" Chenine began, then the wind rushed out of her lungs:

There was a massive bloody eye leering at her, mere inches from the crystal canopy. It was attached to one of the millions of reeds swaying in the midnight savanna.

It had risen up, far above the others, to glare at Chenine: and it wasn't alone. Dozens of other tendrils coated her starboard wing. With a slow, deliberate pull, the weeds sunk back down into the brush, pulling the *Chaste Gazer* with them.

"Shit and hell!" *Silene's Girdle* exclaimed. The Striker whipped around to face the stalks, but by that time the weeds had the Raiden almost completely ensnared: she couldn't shoot them off without tearing the *Gazer* apart.

Chenine maxed out her engines, twisted her wing flaps in all directions and fired her photonic cannons; her struggles were met with an ominous crushing pressure all along the Raiden's frame; her cannons were soon clogged by the monstrous reeds, and seconds later her canopy was completely covered by the spindly brown weeds.

The other pilots watched, horror-stricken, as the *Chaste Gazer* disappeared into the midnight grassland.

Chenine screamed at the top of her lungs. Her cries were filled with primal, instinctual terror. Soon, only the very tip of one of the *Gazer's* beautiful opal wings poked through the swaying forest.

Soon thereafter, the lovely origami crane disappeared entirely.

The Ketoni girl's screams continued for several agonizing seconds.

Then a sudden, gnashing noise obscured her cries. The sound was gut-wrenching.

There was only static on the air after that: Chenine couldn't cry out anymore: she was brutally silenced.

And the *Chaste Gazer* was gone.



T I A