



Hatchling's Rage

“Skimmers crossing the Belt!”

The alarm was raised in Command Ops and two dozen technicians scrambled wildly to verify the reports and coordinate with the other Gulf-area bases. Commander Faught stormed back onto the bridge, walking past Chenine and Justin, who were standing back in the ‘cold zone’ area. He passed the pilots wordlessly.

Chenine’s information about her docking experience was unnecessary. She’d briefly snuck into the ‘hot zone’, or main control room of Ops, and spoken with the senior duty officer, Laura Hayle, but at this point the situation was becoming ominously clear.

And now the first wave of enemies was hurtling through space, hurtling towards Earth.

Hurling towards this base... Chenine thought with certainty.

Commander Faught tipped back his uniform hat. “What are our orders from Joint Command, Lieutenant?”

Hayle replied: “The SJC recommends full alert status for all bases.”

“Damn-well good enough for me. To hell with that spook Wraith. Lieutenant: order the alert and get our fleet mobilized.” He barked. Laura nodded and went to work on her console.

Another technician yelled out additional information: “There’s another active system-scan coming in from the targets! Focus is 50,000 ppm: extremely refined.”

“What’s the target of their scan?” Laura yelled.

The technician paused. "Latitude 34 degrees, longitude -118 degrees..."

Hayle turned to the commander: "Sir, the skimmers are scanning this region."

"Son-of-a-bitch..." Faught growled.

"Also, sir," a male technician added, "it'll take the fleet at least 90 minutes to scramble from Isla Lian and return to base."

"Order the corvettes and fighters to fly ahead of the frigates; this is now officially a footrace, we need to sacrifice our strategic formations for speed."

Chenine watched the people in Ops scramble; their lips silently moving behind the Plexiglas barrier. Justin leaned against a wall behind her.

"What the hell are you two doing here?" Wraith had snuck up behind the pair (he could be quite silent when he wanted to be, even with the cane).

"Aryl." Both Chenine and Justin saluted.

"The Commander's raised the alert, and the Bydo are knocking on our front door. So why are you *here*?"

Justin looked at Chenine with a slightly sheepish expression. Chenine replied: "We didn't expect to be called upon for this. We thought that the fleet would--"

"Well, you *are* being called upon." He said curtly. "The Commander waited too long to issue orders and I don't think the Base-10 fleet will be able to scramble into position in time. As much as Faught wouldn't like to admit, he needs Raidens in the air, and right now. Take the emergency lift and get to your bays."

"Sir." They both answered. The pair boarded the lift opposite the main Ops deck and told the computer where to take them. Maybe it was nothing, but Justin couldn't help but notice the dark look that Commander Faught was giving Sven Wraith as the limping RL hobbled into main Ops.

Then the lift doors slammed shut and the elevator plunged downward, back towards the R-side of the docking bay.

Out in the midnight darkness of space the asteroids danced. Far, far away the distant sun shone upon them. Beneath the canopy of a lone R-Type spaceship, a pilot watched the somber ballet. Connor Trent hated two things above everything else. One of those things was downtime.

And the other thing he hated... well, it was on its way from Jupiter.

The Belt was a depressing place to be. Connor disliked the vast emptiness, the isolation, but also the uncertainty. Any minute a black shadow might rise out of nowhere: an asteroid's ghostly presence. Things were unpredictable here.

It had been nearly fifteen years since the 'poisoning' of the Belt: mankind's desperate defense against that terrible demon that lurked in the darkness, the Bydo Empire. Connor watched through the frosty glass shield of his canopy as a giant oblong asteroid moved across the night sky, gliding through the empty void like a stone knife.

It was an ugly, nondescript piece of rock, but hidden in its shadow was a ghostly trail of death. Connor looked at the small spectral display on one of his consoles: it was a surreal mess of odd colors and flashes (the bleak asteroid looked purple on it) but behind the flying rock an eerie tail of golden light was clearly visible, trailing out behind the stone in its wake.

A tail of death for Bydo flesh...

Connor was getting philosophical, and that wasn't a good sign. This downtime was a killer: he'd rather be fighting in space or brawling in a bar than just sitting motionless amongst the asteroids.

Finally a call came in from somewhere across the void.

"This is R-EX-0381, all my scans are negative so far. What about you, laddie?"

That was Kelso, in the *Dominions*. Connor's entire R-group had been dispatched from Base-4 over six hours ago. They were scrambled to engage whatever targets emerged from the Belt.

Or at least whatever targets manage to survive the Belt...

"R-EX-2887 here," he replied, "I've got nothing to report, either."

Time seemed meaningless here... the hours could really start to blend together. Even for a trained R-Typer, a waiting game like this really wore a guy down. Just waiting and staring, deep into the darkness, imagining Jupiter and the orbiting hell that lurked in its shadow.

"Kelso," he began, "d'ya know if the listening posts have any info on possible targets? What're we expecting from this Mass?" Connor inwardly laughed at that euphemism: 'Mass'. He imagined the size, the terror, of that thing infecting Jupiter.

'Mass', indeed...

"S.J.C.'s still piecing together all the data." Kelso replied. "But I can tell you that they don't know much. Hell, these damn things aren't even supposed to be *able* to appear this close to us..."

"Yeah, how the hell did it just- wait a second..." Connor sat up in his chair and looked outside, down the front of his ship. On the tip of the nose there were four large prongs, and resting on the tip of those prongs in gravity-defying riposte was a sphere, about five meters in diameter. Ten seconds ago it had been as dark and nondescript as the night, but now it was starting to glow.

It was glowing orange, and it was getting brighter.

"Kelso..."

"I've got that, too, chum." He confirmed.

"Bloody friggin' time: let's get some!" Connor gripped his controls and steadied his legs against the cabin sides. The orb grew brighter and brighter with each passing second.

Brighter and brighter as the 'skimmers' closed the distance.

So much for downtime.

Running, huffing, puffing, Justin scrambled through the R-ring bay. A sudden explosion of light and noise filled his eyes and ears: the *Chaste Gazer* was blasting off from the bay next door. Justin was not so much behind schedule as Chenine was ahead: she was still wearing her flight suit, whereas Justin had needed to change.

He raced across the mooring floor and reached the bay elevator. "Call-up computer: take me to the *Love*. Access code is 'Storm 12-15-22-5'." The lift shot up to the superior bay level.

The doors hissed open and Justin dashed into the docking bay. Sean Roont was sitting in a corner of the bay, stuffing his used hazmat suit into a disposal chute. "She's all yours, pilot." He said, the sweat dripping down his nose.

"Thanks," Justin replied. He mounted the ladder and slipped into his ship's cockpit. "Wish us luck, Doc." he called to Roont, but when he looked down all he saw was the Doctor's back as he wordlessly left the bay. The door coldly slammed shut behind him.

Nice guy... Justin thought sourly.

As he activated the ship's systems and settled into his seat, Justin mused on the fact that it was easier to get a B-type control rod in this base than it was to get a drink of water.

Somehow that doesn't seem right... he thought bemusedly.

Justin called out: "Let's go!" and the cockpit of the ship slammed shut, the main control panel raised up from between his legs and a sudden squeal of air burst into Justin's face, indicating cabin pressurization.

"This is R-H-AGP, preparing for launch, please initiate the arm." He called over the ship speakers. From high up in the bay's control room, a technician activated the 'arm', really a giant crane on a rocket-propelled zip-line built into the ceiling of the bay, but the joint in the middle, as well as the multiple prongs on its end, designed to hold on to the top of a ship, gave it the uncanny appearance of a human limb.

The technician's voice rang in Justin's ears. "The arm is ready, pilot, your status is red, launch in approximately eighty seconds."

"Thank you." Justin quickly strapped himself into his seat and brought his main console online. "Ship status is nominal."

"Initiating sensation-link." The technician voiced. A wave of light flashed inside the dark cockpit and a soft, sweet chime sounded in Justin's ears. Then, new stimuli flooded his senses: where once he smelled only the stale air of the pressurized cabin he now smelled the greases and oils of the docking bay outside. Instead of just feeling the buckles and straps of his cramped seat, he now felt the cold metal arm above him, digging into the top of his ship. He felt it as intensely as if it were his own bare back being held aloft.

"Ship systems are now online." He checked the small, lone monitor behind his seat. "Impingement Factor is times one-point-zero." The ship was raised into the air and turned by the large metal arm to face the opposite wall. That wall lowered to reveal a long, dark tunnel. The silvery afternoon sun shone from far away, down at the opposite end.

Justin opened a line directly to Command Ops for final clearance. His eyes were intent, and he braced for the acceleration. "This is the *Platonic Love*," he called, "launch status is yellow."

After a brief pause, Laura Hayle's voice came in. "R-H-AGP: your status is green, green, green to launch."

The rockets on the arm fired, and Justin's ship was hurtled through the darkness at breakneck speed, rapidly accelerating towards the silver afternoon light.

Skimming through space on a black cosmic wave...

Hurling through the void; rocketing in space... dancing between dimensions.

Out of space... out of time... flying nowhere, and everywhere...

The *Principalities* trembled and shook like a broken washing machine. In the cockpit, Connor Trent's teeth rattled. A thousand points of light flashed and spiraled

around the ship. Out in front, in a trembling haze there was a wavering, golden line, stretching out into infinity, towards whatever horizon existed in this odd place. It looked like a golden river of fire as it wound, snakelike, before the shaking spaceship.

"Goddamnit, Kelso!" Trent yelled. "What the hell happened!? How the hell did they just *pass* us like that!?"

"The 'Thantos Tails' didn't get a single *one* of 'em!" Kelso yelled back, his voice distorted and wavy in the ethereal fog of this place.

"Bollocks!" Connor ranted. "The bastards are fast... too fast..." he clenched his teeth and bit his lower lip. His hazel eyes clouded with anger. "I've never seen them move this fast... ever."

Kelso agreed. "Nary've I..."

The Bydo were vicious killers and voracious beyond belief, but never had Connor witnessed such blind, haphazard aggression. The 'skimmers' had shrieked past the Belt with absolutely no ill-effects from the swirling poison within. They screamed past the *Dominions* and *Principalities* like they were standing still. The Belt's poison was supposed to drop those bastards out of 'skimland' (that was just one of the toxin's ill effects on Bydo flesh) but *these* freaks appeared to be immune.

As the bogeys screamed by, Connor registered only a few targets on his scan; Kelso reported two others. This was no invasion fleet, it wasn't even a full *unit*: there were perhaps nine or ten targets, total. It was as if that black mass at Jupiter had concerted all its available power into sending out a few small bogeys, built to survive the Belt and evade pursuit.

And they *were* unbelievably fast; there was no way to keep pace with them in open space.

"These things can't expect to do massive damage to Earth, not with numbers that small." Kelso's voice was laced with frustration. "This doesn't make *sense* for the Bydo, it's like they're suicidal or something..."

"They can't experience that emotion." Connor gruffly retorted. "This looks like a spear-tip attack, y' ken? You can't cause wide-spread damage with a spear's tip..."

"But you can smash the hell out of a single, small area with the head." Kelso agreed. "You think they could be smart enough to be launching some kind of precision strike? That doesn't make sense: these bastards attack with *numbers*... what the hell are they doing changing up their game plan like this?"

Connor didn't have an answer, but he was wondering the same thing.

What the hell are these things after?...

The *Platonic Love* exploded out of the docking ring of Base-10. It was the third ship in the Superior Joint Command's 'R-H', or 'Raiden-Hybrid', program.

This R-Type spaceship was designed around the 'arm-design', that is the ship did not so much resemble a sleek aeronautic craft (like its sister-ship, the *Chaste Gazer* does) but instead it was perfectly round, except for a flat, trapezoid-shaped base. The canopy of the craft was vertically-oriented, meaning the pilot climbed into the front of the craft rather than entering from the top as in a traditional Raiden-Type ship. It was a large and awkward-looking ball, gleaming with a silver luster. On either side of the bulky sphere were the *Love's* two arms: little more than slender silver prongs, capable of only the most basic physical tasks, but decent as a last-ditch defense.

Its engines were on its back, and its four Force Orb control rods were on its front. Sven Wraith contacted Justin: "We're sending out the orb now, pilot."

"Yes, Aryl." Justin replied.

Base-10 was a rusty metal wheel on the ocean, raised up out of the sea by its seven gargantuan struts. Four long, cylindrical jetties extended out into the sea in the four cardinal directions; these sea-level spokes housed various base functions, but it was the one pointing southward that was of most interest to the base's R-Typers. As the *Love* screamed upward into the sky, a loud explosion sounded from the end of that southern spoke, white smoke climbed up from the jetty's tip, and a large black sphere accelerated out from the haze.

Justin closed his eyes and relaxed in his seat. He imagined the orb, flying out into the open air, hurtling through the sky, and sent a single intense thought through the computer's sensation-link:

C'mere!

Seconds later he felt a bump, and sure enough when he looked out his canopy he saw the giant black marble hovering inexplicably on the rounded nose of his ship, balanced horizontally on the four slim control rods protruding from the nose.

Justin didn't check, but if he had looked at that lone monitor behind his seat at the moment the Force Orb connected, it would have read "Impingement Factor: times 1.15"

Wraith was still on the line: "This'll be Operation *Hatchlings' Rage*. We don't know what the mass at Ganymede is sending out, but we believe its aiming for some target in the greater Gulf area."

"Could this base be the target?"

"That's a possibility, but it's highly unlikely. Regardless of their destination, you and the *Chaste Gazer* are to intercept and destroy them: any and *all* of them. Understood?"

"Yes, Aryl." Communication with base ceased.

Justin maneuvered the *Platonic Love* above the cloud cover, in the turbulent air the spheroid spaceship wobbled like a Frisbee. Nausea built up in Justin's stomach.

"Call-up computer: I'm about to toss some cookies, here..."

A whirring noise droned from the back of Justin's seat. Suddenly a sharp stab of pain landed in the back of his neck, making him gasp despite his anticipation. Within one second the wound-site was completely numb from the needle's local anesthetic; within 30 seconds the needle's contents had reached Justin's brain. His nausea evaporated instantly.

The *Chaste Gazer* came up alongside Justin; the graceful bird was built perfectly for atmospheric flight, and it was in stark contrast to the awkward *Love*. As they rocketed away from the base, Justin called Chenine.

"Hey, Chen, do you want to do the roll-out report or should I?"

Chenine answered after a few seconds: "I'll do it... but don't call me that..." she didn't sound angry, but she was certainly annoyed.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot." He replied softly.

Chenine activated her black box and started speaking:

"I saw a vulture in the sky."

"It's 1633 hours on the seventeenth of May. Skimmers have been sighted heading past the Asteroid Belt, six hours after an unidentified mass was detected orbiting the

Galilean moon of Ganymede..." She rattled off all the details of their mission in a soft, quiet tone.

When she finished, she called Justin. "What're your scanners reading?" she asked.

"I'm getting feedback from the active-system scan... I think my ship can cut through it, though..."

Chenine grunted; she had the same problem: they were being doused with the incoming targets' homing signals, which screwed with their tracking system: they couldn't pinpoint the targets. She blinked in surprise as a small warning light began flashing on her dash. Chenine was startled, which was a fairly rare event.

That warning light... that's impossible...

Chenine lifted her body out of her seat and looked down the nose of the ship:

Her Force Orb, floating precariously on the *Gazer's* nose, was starting to glow a very ruddy yellow.

Shit!

"*Gazer to Love*: I've got a reaction in my orb!"

"*What?*" came back an equally startled reply. Then, after a second. "Jesus! Reaction in mine, too!"

Chenine worked over her controls quickly, her mood was as close to 'panicky' as is possible with her. "I can't get a lock on their position..."

There was no reply from the *Platonic Love* for several tense seconds. Without a target lock, interception was impossible, and without intervention the incoming Bydo would scream down from the heavens, pass right by the two ships, and strike their target.

And no matter what Command Ops thought, Chenine knew that target was Base-10.

"Got it!" Justin cried, "I'm giving you the coordinates... Christ, they're coming in hot as hell; they'll hit the outer atmosphere in 60 seconds."

Chenine gritted her teeth in preparation. She plotted the coordinates, and within seconds both the *Gazer* and the *Love* were rocketing into the sky on an almost 90-degree vertical ascent.

"...interception in 56 seconds..." Justin snarled through clenched teeth.

Chenine didn't answer. She reclined in her chair, closed her eyes and folded her arms over her abdomen, keeping her legs cemented against the sides of the cockpit floor as the two ships rocketed up into the cold ozone.

Connor's body slammed against his seatbelt as the *Principalities* fell out of 'skimland' and returned to normal space. The nose of his Raiden craft immediately started glowing, and sparks flew from the edges of the ship's thick wings. The ship rocked violently back and forth as it entered the atmosphere of Earth. Far, far below him the big Blue Marble looked calm and serene. It was a far cry from Connor's current situation.

"Kelso!?" He called over the air. "Kelso, where the bloody hell are you, man!?" there was no answer.

Jamming his accelerator to the limit, Connor maneuvered the *Principalities* into a steep downward dive. The entire front section of the ship glowed red-hot. The turbulence became incredible. The extreme forces jolted his body to the left. That was when he saw it.

On the starboard side of his ship, diving in a grotesque shower of ice and heat, one of the Bydo bogeys loomed. Despite his anti-nausea medication, Connor's stomach churned. The thing was perhaps half the size of his ship: it was black and lanky, a four-limbed monstrosity.

Four limbs... Connor thought. *What the hell are you pretending to be?*

It's front 'paws' were held tightly against the sides of a long, dark body. Its huge, 'muscular' legs dangled strait as arrows behind it. Connor could only watch with horror as the hideous thing turned its head ever so slowly towards the *Principalities* and stared at the canopy with cruelly slanted, hollow 'eyes'. They were merely holes in a twisted, monstrous head; the bright yellow light of the Bydo shone out from those evil sockets.

If they *were* more than just empty holes, Connor would've sworn that the thing was staring right at him.

Connor's own eyes were wide, his mouth agape. "Sphinx..." was all he managed to say before the terrible thing rolled in mid-air. With a blood-curdling roar, it dove straight towards Trent's ship with razor-sharp claws extended.

All things considered, it could be said that Sven Wraith was one of the best poker players in Allied Command. The RL was notorious for his cold composure and detachment, regardless of the situation. Right now, as he stood in the shadowy background of Command Ops, a thin smile graced his cold lips.

From the command floor, Ron Faught glared back at the RL icily. "Wraith, if this base is damaged because of your childish games I swear that you'll live to regret it. Because of your *incompetence* our fleet is behind the 8-ball and those Bydo bogeys are gunning for this station..."

"But because of my fortuitous planning we have the perfect defense mobilized and on-target; your bogeys will be incinerated in mere moments."

Faught turned his back to the RL. He leaned in close to Laura Hayle. "Bring all available defense systems to full-power."

The aged commander gripped the back of Hayle's chair tightly. *Relying on your toys, Wraith... what kind of insane stunt are you doing?*

Sven Wraith continued standing in the background, and he continued to smile thinly. In a way, he was quite a reassuring figure at that moment. However, only a veteran poker-player could discern that faint smile for what it was: a 'tell'; it was an involuntary indicator of Wraith's inner emotion.

And at this moment, the emotion was nervousness.

The *Platonic Love* burst from the stratospheric clouds in a spray of water and ice. The atmosphere started to thin, and the spheroid ship soared into its true element: the cold vacuum of space.

"Contact in... seven seconds..." Justin managed as he fought the intense pressure of the ascent.

Chenine didn't respond, but the *Chaste Gazer* matched Justin's trajectory.

The stars were bright and twinkling in the black sky above; the burning sun radiated a brilliant white light. The *Love's* canopy was automatically darkening to shield Justin from that lovely, deadly light.

"There!" Justin cried as he saw them, out in the distance, far above the two ships and falling fast. Nine pinpoints of red, burning light were accelerating towards the planet. They looked like a twisted constellation of decaying stars. They grew exponentially bigger as their distance rapidly narrowed.

The hair on Justin's right arm stood on end and small bumps of gooseflesh rose across his skin. He looked to his right and saw the front end of the *Chaste Gazer* glowing and pulsing with a silvery light. A white shower of sparks began trailing behind the craft like the gossamer train on a bridal gown.

Chenine's Force Orb was now glowing a brilliant yellow, almost to rival the sun itself.

Justin was preparing to charge his own frontal wave cannon when Chenine broke in:

"I'm getting a friendly signal from up there!"

Justin scrambled with his controls and checked his zoom-in monitor.

"One of those nine dots is a *lot* bigger than the others..." he noted. "I think," he paused, and then with sudden certainty he said: "Chenine, there's an R-Type ship up there tangled with one of the bogeys!"

"I'll intercept the small grouping on the left," she replied. "You take the opposite side and do what you can for him." It was up to Justin to assist that pilot: Chenine had begun charging her main wave cannon; it couldn't be stopped and she couldn't engage that single bogey without vaporizing the ensnared ship as well.

"Roger." Justin replied and cancelled his cannon charge.

Instead, he extended the *Love's* two stubby arms out in front of the ship; their sharp points gleamed like platinum in the sunlight.

Justin's breath quickened as he surgically maneuvered his rapidly ascending ship to intercept the falling target above him, sweat dripped down his cheek as he considered the negligible margin of error. Soon, a low-pitched whine sounded: it was the ship's early collision-warning.

The sinister red stars in the sky grew bigger, and bigger, and bigger...

Suddenly a warning light flashed on Justin's main monitor as the ship's sirens screamed. The computer blared in Justin's ears: "Danger: collision imminent... collision imminent..."

"Gaaaaah!" He screamed with animal fury as he braced his arms against the controls.

The claws ground and scratched with savage fury. Connor watched as the disgusting, black Sphinx-demon howled and clawed at his Force Orb. He'd managed to turn the *Principalities* directly into the demon's path before it struck him. The Bydo creature rammed full-force into Connor's Orb. If he had turned the ship just a second later, the creature's claws would have torn through the skin of his canopy and sent Connor into the afterlife.

Now, all the hairs on his body rose as the nose of his ship crackled with wild and terrible electricity. His skin prickled with goose bumps. Energy built up in the ship's wave cannon.

Charge, damn you, charge!

The Principalities trembled as it descended in a free-fall towards the Earth, and the howling creature on its nose scrambled awkwardly to grip the Force Orb and steady itself to strike. The dark, grinning demon reared up. Its hollow eyes were flooded with yellow fire. It roared and opened its mouth. A sudden power surged from its steaming maw: black smoke poured from the grisly mouth as the thing prepared to belch a deadly burst of energy.

Sweating and breathing rapidly, Connor laughed.

A cannon in the mouth, eh? How original...

Suddenly, a quiet calm fell across the ship; all of Connor's hairs relaxed and the turbulence outside died. Sparks stopped flying from the front of his ship, and his Force Orb glowed a steady, lethal white.

It was the white glow of a fully charged wave-cannon.

Connor's own demonic grin widened.

"Die, ya' bastard!" He snarled.

Connor slammed his fists against either side of his panels, hitting two red buttons simultaneously. Instantly the canopy was consumed by a brilliant, blinding light. A roaring wave of energy exploded from the Force Orb, and a howl of rage and pain rose from the front of the ship.

The blast from the wave cannon sent the Sphinx demon hurtling backwards; the thing steadied itself in its wild free-fall and faced the ship again, yellow eyes ablaze. Half of its face was gone, vaporized in the cannon's flash. One upper arm dangled uselessly by a dripping, spindly thread from its catlike trunk. The twisted thing's decimated body was open and torn: it dripped a black and bloody pitch that was not blood, skeletal material hung out that was not bone. Several meaty sacs that were not muscles bled profusely from its exposed innards.

Lovely Bydo tech... Connor smirked, wiping sweat off his brow. He grasped his weapon controls and prepared his missiles. "A pleasant evening to 'ya..." he quipped as he prepared to fire.

Just then a second demon floated down into view. It flew in a sinister but graceful dive. It was surreal, watching the skydiving devil gradually drop to eyelevel. It soared to the side of its wounded counterpart and turned its head towards the *Principalities*.

If the first Sphinx's face were intact, it would have smiled with something close to triumph.

"...screw me..." Connor said simply, aloud. He activated all available missiles for launch, but with the resiliency of *this* Bydo incarnation he would need his wave cannon to fend-off the new-comer. The *Principalities'* cannon took 43 seconds to charge.

That was about 40 more seconds than he had.

Connor brought his hands onto the missile controls and snarled, defiantly: "Come and get me, 'ya ugly cat-whore!" His fingers closed in on the fire buttons; none of his digits were trembling.

The pair of vicious creatures screamed terribly and raised their claws.

Still, none of Connor's fingers were trembling.

The pair charged the defiant ship. That was when something unexpected happened.

A silver blur flashed across the *Principalities'* nose, slicing up into the sky at a tremendous speed. This caused two things to happen. First, the wounded Sphinx's

body disappeared in a black spray of bloody organs and shattered bone. Second, a massive sonic shockwave slammed Connor back in his seat and pushed his ship backwards.

Connor blinked, startled.

The bloody spatter of the annihilated Sphinx-demon scattered in the burning air, revealing the second creature. Its rear legs and much of its lower torso had vanished in the sudden strike, completely ripped off. The writhing creature howled and spun in the air, unable to stabilize its out-of-control motion.

Connor clicked his tongue, hiding his relief with a simple, calm sigh.

What the hell was that thing?

He fired a stack of missiles at the hapless creature before him; they connected with a bright flash, and the thing's dark inner fluids splattered all over the *Principalities'* canopy.

The *Platonic Love* rocketed upward as Justin cut the engines. His heart pounded like a cannon in his chest. His collision with the targets was rough. He'd nearly broken one of his legs in the impact. Outside his canopy, a grisly severed head stared at Justin with its cold, dead eyes.

That's funny...it looks like... a pussycat?

Justin shuddered and fired his retrorockets, killing his velocity. The severed piece of Bydo flesh continued onward, out into the eternal night above. For a few brief seconds the *Love* remained suspended in the sky, motionless. Gravity slowly did its job, and the rotund spaceship began hurtling back down through the atmosphere.

Darting through the clouds, Justin honed-in on a trio of targets. They were gliding over the seawater, incredibly fast, parting the ocean behind them with their shockwaves.

You guys think you're Moses, huh? Justin smirked. He only saw the three targets hauling across the water, but two other ones came into view quickly enough: the *Chaste Gazer* was spiraling through the clouds above, pursued by a duo of those demonic cat-things. The Bydo incarnations appeared to be spitting corrosive sludge from their mouths.

"What's your status, Chenine?!" Justin called as he angled the *Love* for an intercept.

As he watched the *Gazer* weave and spin in the air, Chenine's quiet, controlled voice came on over the speakers. "I annihilated two with my cannon; these three are trying to protect the other ones. I think they're trying to- *ah!*" She cried as the *Gazer* was struck with a direct hit by some of the toxic sludge. Justin flinched for her, with the sensation link on, it must have hurt like hell...

"Angle in my way and I'll cut them down for you!"

"Negative," she replied, again composed. "I believe they're stalling me, those other three are heading straight for Base-10. You should go after them."

Justin rolled his eyes: he disliked being ordered around by another pilot. "I think we need to work on admitting when we need help, Chen..."

"*Don't* call me Chen." She said through gritted teeth. She sent the *Gazer* into a tight, controlled barrel-roll, slamming one of the demons squarely in the jaw with her elegant opal wing.

"Wraith, here." The RL's scratchy voice cut into the *Platonic Love's* cockpit.

"Aryl." Justin acknowledged.

“Your priority is to protect the *base*, pilot: defend it at all costs.”

...even the cost of another life... Justin mused. He watched the *Gazer* bob and weave in the sky. The *Bydo* incarnations hurled their acid-vomit at her from all directions. He sighed with resignation: Chenine was a better pilot than he was, and Justin knew that. She was also in the best position to dogfight: the *Gazer* was built to comfortably move in an Earth-like atmosphere; the *Love* was not.

He bit his lip. *You stuck-up, arrogant bitch...*

“Base, I’m starting my pursuit of the remaining targets.” Justin conceded.

The *Chaste Gazer* spiraled wildly through the air as one of the dark cat-demons scratched its left wing with a sharp claw. Chenine regained control and sent the ship into a screaming ascent; the Sphinx-like creatures followed, trailing dark purple jets from their heels.

Their propulsion system is in the legs... she mused.

Warning lights were flashing in her cockpit: there was corrosive acid damage to both her wings, and her emergency power systems were failing. The silver-haired girl focused on her plan of attack, but in the back of her mind she considered the truth: her wing structure was deteriorating; the ship bucked and shook even during this simple ascent. Soon, the fuselage would snap-off from the airframe and she’d go spiraling into the dark blue water below.

Chenine’s pupils dilated as she considered that watery death. Her heartbeat was regular and calm, but in the deep recesses of her mind she was anxious.

...can you hold... even for a little while? She thought.

Behind her the demons closed in and prepared to hurl more of their deadly bile. She only had one shot at surviving the assault: either it would work, or her ship would be scattered into a million pieces on the water.

I think you can hold...

Chenine closed her eyes; her breathing became deeper and slower. She braced her legs and jammed the controls up as hard as she could. The *Gazer* screamed in protest as it started the vertical loop. Cracking, tearing noises rumbled in the airframe.

Hold...

Chenine scrunched-up her face as the g-forces pushed her back in her seat, smothering her, pressing against her chest like a pair of assailant’s hands. Her mind fogged; she flittered on the edges of consciousness. The *Gazer’s* sirens blared:

“Structural integrity critical. Structural integrity critical: frame breach imminent. Repeat: frame breach-”

Hold!

There was no way that Chenine could have checked that lone monitor behind her seat at that moment; she could barely keep herself conscious. If she had checked it, she might have been interested in what it said; she might have been interested in the current value of the ship’s ‘Impingement Factor’.

And she might have been interested in how rapidly that number was rising...

The *Platonic Love* shot across the ocean a few feet above the salty sea. The glassy water exploded behind the craft as it passed.

“Base: I’m tailing three bogeys; heading is two-oh-niner: they’re coming straight at you...”

Laura Hayle’s voice came up. “Pilot: what’s your time to intercept?”

Justin stared ahead, sitting up in his seat like a jockey would sit in a horse’s saddle. The ocean screamed by beneath him, just inches below his ship. A few hundred yards ahead of him the water was parted into two massive waves: the wake of the Bydo incarnations.

“I’ll be in weapons range in sixty seconds...” They were fast, *very* fast: Justin was maxing out his engines just trying to keep up.

“Damn it!” he growled, “they’re ignoring the *Love* completely. They’re still heading straight for you, Base-10.” He was closing the gap, but slowly. The best attack method at this point would be a long-range pick-off with his wave cannon.

Justin closed his eyes and gripped the weapon control panel on his left. The cockpit of the *Love* filled with electricity and all Justin’s hairs spiked-up. He took two deep breaths as his body adjusted to the extreme amount of energy that was flowing through the ship.

“Alright, base, I’m gonna try sniping these bastards with my cannon.” He took two deep breaths, calming his mind. The ship’s sensation link tried to flood his brain with excited, racing stimuli. “Base, I should be able to- *ugh!*” Justin scrambled to react as one of the three cat-demons suddenly broke away from the other two. It left a sickly purple streak in the sky as it reversed course, heading back the way it had come: heading straight for the *Love*.

Justin quickly struck both sides of his main control panel: firing his half-charged wave cannon at the thing. A small pinpoint of light flew through the air and impacted on the creature’s face. It exploded in a shower of white and pink-hued light, filling the sky in front of Justin with its radiance. For a second, he couldn’t see a thing.

“Gah!” He recoiled in his seat as the creature flew out of the white light and impacted on the canopy of the *Love*, snarling and hissing with a deformed, but intact, face. It held itself in place with its rear paws and began savagely slashing away at the ship’s canopy. A bright ringing noise sounded as the demon slowly but surely demolished the one barrier between it and the pilot. The sound was like metal scraping against crystal.

“Call-up computer: conventional photon fire!” he screamed as he weaved the *Love* desperately from side to side with the horrible devil balancing on his canopy. Justin couldn’t even confirm his distance from sea-level. If the *Love* hit the water at this rate of speed it would completely break up.

And if that monstrosity broke in through the canopy, well, Justin wouldn’t have to worry about the crash...

Quick, bright flashes of light appeared outside the canopy. The Sphinx-demon howled angrily as the *Love*’s photonic cannons pounded its body, stabbing it with hundreds of needles of energy. The thing’s black blood rained down upon the besieged canopy, but the attack was not enough.

An ominous tearing sound began moving across the weakened canopy as the monster savagely clawed it. Long cracks appeared in the thick glass.

Goddamnit...

The photons ravaged the demon's lower body, but it clung like a cancer to the front of the ship. The canopy would last a few more seconds.

Then it'll crack like an eggshell and the cabin will depressurize.

And that snarling beast would poke its head inside and stare at Justin, face-to-face.

Right before it tears me to shreds... he thought darkly.

Eyes narrowed, Justin pulled a pair of aviator's glasses from his pocket and put them on. He checked all his seatbelts and tightened them. Then Justin waited, his body tensed.

The depressurization was slightly more violent than he anticipated. One minute everything was quiet and calm, save for the hum of the engines and the 'ping' of the demon's attack on the canopy. All at once a deafening roar shook the cabin as the chaos on the outside broke in. The canopy disappeared in a shower of glass. The shards bounced off Justin's secured body and peppered his protective eyeglasses. For a few tense seconds, Justin's body was pulled towards the giant hole made by the shattered canopy. Then there was nothing but a steady, howling train of wind and sea foam, savagely battering Justin's secured body.

Despite the furious sound and force, he managed to get one of his hands behind his seat.

The Sphinx stuck its demonic head inside the cockpit, growling softly as it peered at Justin, inches from the pilot's face. Justin could smell the thing's sickly odor; it smelled like rotten eggs. Outside the ship the thing's lower body was disintegrating under the photonic cannons' fury. It raised its head while its upper chest heaved.

It was ready to vomit...

Justin smirked. "You rude son-of-a-bitch!" he screamed into the wind. He brought his right arm out from behind his seat: in his hand was a snub-nosed handgun.

Crack, crack, crack! The firearm sounded three times as Justin blasted away at the Sphinx's head at point-blank range. The low-caliber, exploding shells devastated the thing's face. The Sphinx's head had already been deeply fractured by the *Love's* wave cannon, now it fell apart in a shower of thick, stringy sinew and black liquid.

At the same time the photonic cannons outside succeeded in obliterating the Sphinx's rear legs. The headless, legless thing blindly hung on to the remains of the canopy for one surreal moment, then slid off the front of the *Platonic Love* and disappeared into the ocean below.

Covered in the thing's blood and sticky remains, Justin spit to his side and hung his head, wind blowing all around him.

This'll be one hell of a dry-cleaning bill...

The *Gazer* screamed through the sky at full-throttle.

The airframe had inexplicably survived Chenine's near-suicidal loop, and as she'd come out of the maneuver, wave cannon charged, she mercilessly fired upon her two pursuers, vaporizing one and severely damaging the other. She unloaded her photonic cannon on the survivor, aiming at its legs, which exploded in a purple haze of smoke and propellant. The screaming monster clawed at the sky as it fell, helpless, into the sea.

Now she was blasting across the sea as fast as her damaged ship would take her. Base-10 was visible on the horizon as a small dot. She was quickly closing in on the *Platonic Love's* position.

"Gazer to Love: what's your status?"

"One of the targets hit me with a kamikaze attack," Justin replied. "My canopy's gone. Chenine: get after those other two and gun 'em down!"

"Negative: my structural integrity's been compromised. The ship won't be able to handle the force from my wave-cannon discharge: I'd shake apart."

"Well, even without a canopy, the *Love* is still in fighting condition, but I don't have your speed, you know. I won't make it to the base before the targets attack."

Chenine clicked her tongue. "Then we've got a problem..."

Ops was in a tailspin: the two remaining Bydo targets were coming in fast.

"Set defensive weaponry to maximum power! Order all non-essential personnel to the inner rings!" Faught ordered. "Lieutenant: what's the status of the fleet?"

Laura checked her monitor: "The corvettes and advance-fighters are coming in at maximum velocity. Time to base is eighteen minutes."

"The Bydo targets will be here in seven minutes!" Jen added.

Sven Wraith was standing by a technician's station at the rear of Ops. "Open a simultaneous channel to the *Chaste Gazer* and the *Platonic Love*." He growled. The technician complied, broadcasting a conference call between the RL and the two pilots.

"Storm. Chovert." He called.

"Yes, Aryl." they answered.

"We've got two targets approaching the base: I think this would be your time to shine. Are you both finished playing with all the other targets out there?"

Chenine responded. "Yes, but the *Gazer's* taken severe damage; I can't use my wave cannon without risking a total breakdown in ship structure."

"And the *Love* is too slow to intercept the targets, Aryl." Justin added. "They're too damn fast."

"I see..." Wraith said, simply.

Chenine offered a solution: "I recommend that I bring the *Gazer* into target range and engage them. I've got the speed needed to intercept."

"These targets are too resilient for you to gun them down with your photonic cannons alone." Wraith reminded her.

"Then I'll use the wave cannon."

"You'd be killed. You said yourself that the *Gazer* can't take the strain of the wave cannon." Justin objected.

"I could use the emergency eject." She retorted.

"You wouldn't have *time* to eject, Chenine!"

"I don't see another possibility, do you?" she answered, cold and emotionless.

"Shut up, both of you." Wraith snapped. "Let me try to make this crystal-clear: the loss of *either* of those ships is unacceptable. Is that understood?"

There was silence, then: "...yes." Chenine sounded chastised.

Wraith leaned on his cane. His gamble was becoming more and more unsavory. He bit his lip as he thought of two distressing scenarios. In one he saw the destruction of one (or both) of his R-H ships.

That cannot be allowed to happen...

In the other, he saw the Bydo incarnations penetrating the base, slicing their way deep inside the inner rings, slashing past all available defenses into that dark, mysterious chamber in the bowels of the base marked "R-H development center".

That cannot even be imagined...

All RL's were former Raiden pilots and Wriath had a pilot's mind in him; he weighed all his options and formulated a plan.

"Storm," he called.

"Yes?" Justin answered.

"Have you ever windsurfed?"

"...Windsurfed? ...um, no, sir..." he replied, perplexed.

"Well, today's a great day to try, don't you think?"

There was water, and there was noise...

The banks of Loch Katrine were always beautiful in July...

...a picnic on that bonny shore...

...her face, so fair...

...those lovely locks of hair...

...a scent of strawberries...

her face...

a face...

a slap to the face...

...Kelso standing over him.

"Damn it, boy, snap to!"

Connor sat up, dizzy and disoriented. He was still in the cockpit of the *Principalities*; the sun was lower in the sky than he remembered...

"What the hell?" he slurred.

Kelso was standing over him; the cockpit of the ship was open. Seabirds flew by in the distance. He felt a gentle rocking, a swaying motion... the motion of being on the open water.

Connor's missiles had damaged his target, but a second blast had knocked-out the *Principalities*' systems and backups. Crippled and helpless, that bastard Sphinx-thing had some kind of suicide-bomb: a white shockwave radiated from it.

"You've been through the wringer, haven't you? Looks like you've had a more exciting time than I've, eh?" Kelso said with a smile on his bearded face. He slapped Connor on the back.

The *Dominions* floated beside the *Principalities* on the afternoon sea. Kelso had hit a rough patch and come out of 'skimland' too late. He had needed to backtrack several hundred miles. He found Connor's ship floating on the water. Apparently, after the shockwave crippled his ship, Connor had free-fallen to the Earth, blacking out on the way and winding up in the water.

"What happened to the bogeys you ran into, boy-o?" Kelso asked.

Connor shook the stars from his head and shrugged. "Something got 'em..."

"Something?"

"Yeah... something..." Connor said evasively as he examined the damage to his ship's systems. "D'ya have a backup power source? My system circuits should be okay, but I'm gonna need a shitload of extra power."

"From the state of y'self right now, you need a shitload of extra talent."

"To hell with you." Connor grinned. "Do you know what the condition of the surviving bogeys is?"

Kelso shrugged. "No idea: you should have seen the armada that tore through here earlier: 'fraid you were still sleeping like a babe. Soon as I found your ship and landed here, about thirty ships came tearing through the sky. Didn't even ask if we needed assistance, the blackguards..."

"Raidens?" Connor asked.

"Nah, regular military. A bunch of corvettes and Korang-Type fighters. Looked like a base compliment; I believe Base-10 is just northward of here."

"They were hauling back to their base? Then that's where those bogeys must've been heading, as well..." Connor mused.

"Nothing we can do about it: my ship got a little frazzled while we were in 'skimland' and the on-board computer needs to be reset. As for the *Principalities*..."

"Yeah, I'm in no condition to fight, either." Connor admitted. If he tried sending any power to his weapon systems the ship would likely stall-out and fall from the sky (again). "Where's the rest of our contingent?"

Kelso shook his head: "They're taking care of a few bogey landings over at Olivier, but it's the damnest thing: from the radio chatter I've been getting it looks like only targets worth their salt in combat were sent into this area. And these things're hellish, from what I've been hearing..."

"I'll attest to that, but what the hell is wrong with the Bydo?" Trent leaned over the side of his floating ship and wet his hands, smoothing back his disheveled hair with the salty seawater. "From what I can tell, this isn't much of a precision strike... you'd expect badasses like these guys to hit the armories in the north or maybe the City, but out here? 'ya figure it's some kind of guidance malfunction on their part?"

"Who knows?" Kelso shrugged. "But you won't see me complaining. These things could have done real damage if they'd landed in a more vital area."

Connor grunted. He remembered the battle in the atmosphere, and that strange silver blur.

"On a different note, Kelso," he said slowly, "do you know if Base-10 has a Raiden unit?"

The large and noisy photonic cannons on Base-10's outer defense-ring fired wildly and haphazardly, sending a random stream of energy shots into the air. The remaining Sphinxes darted around them, leaving their dark purple trails as they criss-crossed in the air.

In Ops, Commander Faught slammed his fist on the table.

"That damned maneuverability! They're drawing the cannons' fire away from each other."

"Covering themselves." Lieutenant Hayle agreed.

"Switch the primary cannons to manual targeting: focus on just one of those bastards."

The weapons officer, his hands fixed to the main cannon controls, yelled back: "No luck: they're too fast. They've got a type of propulsion system I haven't even seen before; these things are impressive..."

"Chovert to base; Chovert to base" Chenine's voice suddenly rang out in the room. "Cease fire, please. Repeat: cease all offensive fire."

"What the hell for?" Laura retorted, shocked. She immediately covered her lips in embarrassment; her eyes wide. She looked back at the Commander sheepishly. "I'm sorry, sir..."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." The commander growled. "I think I can handle this, if you don't mind." Laura blushed furiously; Jen Drake gave her a sympathetic smile.

Faught asked the girl the same question: "What the hell for, pilot?"

"I'm coming in at full speed, sir: ready to engage the targets."

"But your RL informed us that the *Gazer's* frame was damaged."

Justin's voice cut in: "But *mine's* not! Please cut out the gunfire, we'd really, absolutely, positively enjoy *not* getting shot today! ...Uh, sir."

"R-H-AGP, is that you?" Laura Hayle sounded incredulous.

The male technician next to Jen Drake broke in, perplexed: "Pilot, I show the *Gazer* coming in at full-speed, how the hell are you keeping up with her?"

"Just a little windsurfing." Wraith surprised everyone at Ops with his interjection. The man was smirking slightly.

Just a little water sport...

The *Chaste Gazer* roared through the sky, tearing the air apart with its high speed. Behind it the air collapsed in a massive sonic boom. Between the ship and that shockwave there was a small pocket of air with a lovely, blissful drag force. Inside that small pocket of air, flying just feet from the rear of the *Gazer*, was the *Platonic Love*.

"How's your frame holding up?" Justin called to Chenine.

"Fine, but keep your position steady," she complained, "if you keep drifting you'll end up getting burned by my engines."

Justin sighed. "Thank you so much for the observation... I never thought of that." He was nervous, but the humor kept his spirits up. He jammed down a button near his seat.

Justin's body hair immediately started rising.

"Ready for countdown?"

"Ten seconds..." Chenine called.

Justin's pulse was racing and his heart was nearly leaping from his chest, but he took two deep breaths and kept his humor up. "Ever notice how the back of your ship is kinda ugly, Chenine?"

"Five seconds..."

Sparks started flying from the front of the *Love*.

"It's not really hideous... I mean, you've got that beautiful opal finish on the front..."

"Three seconds..."

Justin took one last, deep breath.

"Two... one..."

The Force Orb on the front of his ship suddenly glowed white. Justin's hairs fell back into place.

Full charge...

"Roll-out: now!" Chenine yelled.

Justin immediately responded: "Overdrive engaged!" The *Chaste Gazer* suddenly rocketed into the sky; at the same time the *Platonic Love's* engines maxed-out in a violent burst of sparks and flame.

As the damaged *Gazer* disappeared above him, Justin immediately took-in the scene: Base-10 was a thousand meters in front of him and getting closer very quickly. The demons were approaching the lower docking ring, flying in tandem with their scaly black backs to him.

The *Platonic Love* used a 'sniper type' cannon design: it sacrificed a wide-range of fire for a narrower focus of power. It required precision. Justin's ship was hurtling through the air much, *much* faster than it was designed to. He couldn't adjust his trajectory without spinning out of control. He and Chenine had turned the *Platonic Love* into a high-velocity bullet, and there was no room for error.

Justin had less than two seconds to act.

...have to shoot from the hip...

Gritting his teeth, Justin squared-off his targeting system on one of the devils and fired the wave cannon.

A pinpoint of raw energy rocketed from his orb, sailing through the air with a wake of yellow light trailing it. It passed wide right of the two demons, then exploded with a terrible brilliance. A ghastly prism of light and sound showered the entire area, blinding Justin, Chenine, and the senior staff in Command Ops.

Standing motionless, staring out the panorama-window of Ops, Ron Faught watched the *Platonic Love* bear down on their position with incredible velocity; it was hurtling off to the left and downward, pursuing the Sphinxes towards the docking rings. He watched the ship fire its cannon. The grizzled commander looked over his shoulder at the RL; Wraith was standing as far away from the windows as possible. The smug RL looked the commander in the eyes; he was wearing his thin, black sunglasses.

Was this the plan all along, Wraith? Using your wind-up dolls to save the day? To justify your career? To further your own idiotic visions?

"Bastard." He growled, inaudibly.

The explosion from the *Love's* cannon was indescribable. Ops was filled with a light that was beyond bright; colors danced wildly from the exploded shell. The staff in the room shielded their eyes, some screaming in shock and surprise as the shockwave slammed against the window. Part of the glass cracked-open immediately, flooding Ops with a swirling tunnel of air.

Faught didn't move as the wind whipped around him, ruffling his uniform coat and blowing his cape wildly behind him.

Bastards, all...

"Unbelievable..." Laura Hayle marveled at the incredible force.

The male technician sitting next to Jen smirked. "Never seen the full-force discharge from the *Love*, huh? That puppy's weapons are top-of-the-line." He spoke with an air of pride. "I was honored to able to assist Dr. Roont with installing it."

"Ummm... does the cannon work better if it actually hits the target?" Jen Drake tapped her monitor urgently. "I think the shot went off to the right..."

"What?" Laura reflexively pushed Jen back from her console, sending the girl sprawling across the deck in her chair. She rapidly sorted through the monitor data. "Damn it!"

The male technician checked his own monitor. "Both targets are alive!" he cried. "One's been severely wounded; it's heading out to sea, and fast..."

"What about the other one?" Wraith interjected.

"It's at the lower docking ring shell... it's clawing at the hull..."

"These guys *are* trying to infiltrate this base!" Jen exclaimed.

"Storm," Wraith's scratchy voice was stern, "eliminate that target!"

No one in Ops actually heard what Wraith was saying. As he spoke, Justin was already screaming savagely on the other end of the line.

The fantastic light of the explosion faded. Chenine brought the wounded *Gazer* out of its rapid ascent and leveled-off. Her skin was prickly with gooseflesh. The blast from the *Love's* cannon was gone, but Chenine could still hear a faint ringing in her ears and her skinny feet tingled inside her tight flight shoes.

Drawing a deep breath, she had to admit to herself that the force of that blast was interesting.

The *Chaste Gazer* shuddered as one of the Sphinx-demons buzzed its nose, rocketing out towards the open sea.

Perhaps I spoke too soon...

"Damn it..." Chenine cursed as she took her ship into pursuit velocity. She trailed the demon, increasing the *Gazer's* speed gradually. The airframe shuddered; a hollow rattling sound began to fill the cockpit. Caution lights flashed. Then, the computer came up with a strange warning. Actually, Chenine fully expected the computer to protest her abuse of the damaged ship, but the content of the warning was, as Chenine would say, 'atypical'.

"Warning, structural damage is critical: Impingement Factor is down..."

The girl raised an eyebrow (she never did this in public, but the overall effect made her look fairly adorable). *Impingement Factor? What about the impingement factor?*

"Call-up computer: what does the IP have to do with ship structure?" she asked in her monotonous voice.

There was no response.

Chenine rolled her eyes. *I think I need a computer overhaul...*

In the back of her mind, though, Chenine catalogued this little incident.

"Let's go..." she urged the craft on; she bent over her controls and brought the ship to supersonic speed. She pushed the ship on, urging it into weapons range, where she could pick at the wounded Sphinx with her photonic cannon.

Better than nothing... she remarked. *I should be able to eventually tear it apart...*

A green light flashed on her monitor. Chenine quickly checked the scanners: there were two or three friendly signals coming up from twelve o'clock: dead ahead. They were coming up *very* fast.

Then there was a fourth.

Then there were a half-dozen.

Then twenty... thirty...

...fifty...

Her eyes were widening. Despite herself, Chenine allowed a thin smirk to grace her pale lips. She immediately brought the *Gazer* into a gentle bank and returned the way she had come.

She left the incarnation to its fate. Her own fate had been saved for another day.

Push... hard... legs out... firm... fly...

It was hurt...

But it was alive.

It didn't know its name. It really didn't have one, not in the sense that we have names, or in the way we think of names. It didn't call itself anything, it didn't call the others that came with it anything, and it called the great mass that birthed it nothing.

It didn't know itself, not in the way a person knows him or herself. It did know a few things: dark, grainy images flooded its head, running like a broken film projector. It saw a twisted jumble of shadows and images: one was that giant rusting wheel in the water, Base-10.

Another was a large, steel-lined door...

...a door inside the wheel...

Behind that door...?

Chaos flooded its head. Its thoughts became more jumbled, more turbulent...

Legs... silver like platinum... arms, soft and tender... full supple lips, a feminine body with a silver lining...

...a grossly distorted belly...

A silver lady, with a silver belly...

...inside the belly, a womb...

...inside the womb... clawing, struggling, tearing, gasping for air, for daylight...

...churning... growing... growling...

...an eye...

Inside the silver lady.

It stopped, halting in mid-air. The Sphinx was about to loop back and drive hard and fast towards that thing that consumed its mind and its thoughts. It was ready to break open that rusting wheel on the water and savage whatever got in its way. It was compelled: this was its purpose, and it would see it though.

But now it stopped and, with a horrible, tilted head, looked at the mass of ships in its path. It looked at the mass of corvettes and fighters.

The thing growled, then it roared.

It had another vision; a dark, cold pool of swirling gasses and ethers. A mess of eyes and limbs. A feeling, a touch, a ripple in the pool. Dark, unnamed creatures dancing in the waters, merging, procreating...

Continuing...

A wall of artillery sailed across the sky, connecting with the Sphinx and shattering its vile body into a trillion pieces. It did have a thought, as it roared and disintegrated in mid-air.

Its mission... the silver lady's womb... was unreachable.

And its purpose?
To continue...?
Failure...
All failure...

Justin gritted his teeth. The *Love* was hurtling towards the base at ridiculous speed. His face was burned from the wind howling inside the cockpit. He squared his nose-off with the Sphinx who was tearing the outer hull of the docking ring apart.

There was no time to charge his cannon.

There was no time to shoot.

Justin piloted the *Love* directly at the thing and drew the arms of the *Platonic Love* forward as far as they would go.

There is no stronger heartbeat than that of someone in a panic. Justin's heart raced and pounded like he'd never experienced before: his ears pounded with each beat, his carotids bulged and his legs felt like jelly.

Wait for it... wait for it... He tried to control his breathing.

The *Platonic Love's* computer sounded the collision alert.

"Go!" He screamed. Justin threw both arms out to his side. The ship's collision system took over. All of Justin's seatbelts immediately snapped off. Justin sat-up in his seat, arms still extended.

The *Love* screamed towards the hull of the docking ring with Justin, exposed and unbuckled, riding in the open cockpit. He heard Wraith saying something into his canalphones, but Justin couldn't make it out.

He was screaming, loud and hard.

400 meters, 300, 200, 100, 50... Justin drew a very deep breath.

Instantly the cockpit was filled with a white foam; it blanketed the entire cabin, consuming Justin in the process, and some of it spilled out of the open front. It made the out-of-control ship look like the head of a rabid bat.

As soon as it emerged, the stuff started hardening like plastic.

Do bats foam at the mouth, or is that just dogs?... That was Justin's last thought from inside the sticky foam. Then, everything ground to a sudden, sickening halt. Justin's body quaked violently; a wave of nausea overcame him, and a sound like the world exploding rattled his brain.

Then there was nothing.

He held his breath (he had to: there was no way to breath in the tough, rubber-like foam). After an agonizing two seconds, the ship sent an electrical current into the foam. It disintegrated into a slimy, liquid gel.

Justin, prone in his chair, coughed-up a sticky mess of the goo and held his chest, panting. He was covered with the white frosting from head to toe. Three feet ahead of him, the mangled body of what was left of the Sphinx demon shuddered and spasmed uncontrollably.

Half of the *Love* was inside the docking ring; its arms had cut the demon at the belly and pinned its remains in place. Its head hung limply, just inches from Justin's feet.

"Have fun in Hell," Justin smirked, "you ugly son-of-a-bitch." He kicked the bowed head out of spite.

The dead demon's jaw opened in one last belch, vomiting black blood like an inverted volcano. Justin cringed as the syrupy fluids washed over him. He spit a black wad of miscellaneous goop from his mouth and hung his head, grinning ironically.

He could see the evening ocean from the side-window of his cockpit. There were seagulls flying in the distance. Some more goo from the ceiling of the cockpit splashed down on his head.

I really need a drink...

The sun was coming down on the glistening horizon. Sven Wraith watched it, diligently puffing his Carib cigar. He didn't care much for sunsets; Wraith preferred the twilight hours. The twilight was just more alive. The creatures of the night begin to rise and become active during that time. At sunset, though, the creatures of the day were the only ones around, and they were retiring. There's something depressing about that void, that lack of activity.

"There's no smoking on the observation decks, you know." Sam Roont appeared behind the RL. "Not that you tend to follow rules."

Wraith didn't respond.

"I suppose today's going in the books as a crowning achievement for the project?"

"It's a start." Wraith admitted.

"A start?" Roont smirked, "You're pretty good at understatements, aren't you? Every target engaged, and killed, by *our* Raidens? This should keep the brass off our backs for quite a while."

"I worry about the brass, Roont." Wraith reminded him sharply. "*You* worry about the project." He exhaled some thick smoke. "I do believe that the SJC will have no choice but to green-light the *Heart* after today, but I'm still concerned with your ability to handle the subjects' practical tests."

Roont glared at him darkly. The doctor had a smooth, clean-cut and boyish face. If questioned in a manner such as that, though, his scowl was too reminiscent of those Sphinx demons. "All my preliminary research is in place, and I *am* prepared for the job." He took out a cigarette and chewed on the end. "Don't you worry about *my* end of things, Antipathy will be ready to go as soon as we get the go ahead. Speaking of which, have you managed to get in touch with your friends?"

Wraith paused for some time. Then he said: "Yes, we've been given the green-light for that, too."

"Bloody fantastic..." Roont quietly said as someone came around the corner from Ops. The doctor nonchalantly walked towards the elevators and disappeared into the lift.

Sven turned his attention back to the window and the setting sun. Their secret was out now: the Bydo had discovered their operation, knew their dirty little secret, but had failed to stop them.

And the R-H units had made a dazzling, if slightly unorthodox, debut.

A grin spread across Wraith's cruel lips. Now those fools at the Superior Joint Command have seen the fruits of their labor, the glimmering tip of the iceberg, a lovely little song-and-dace.

Give them that old razzle-dazzle...

Let them congratulate themselves over the R-H's powers and abilities, have some cognac and pat themselves on the back for giving the project the go-ahead. In the meantime, Wraith could focus on other things...

It was time to initiate the Antipathy Project. It was time to begin all the backstage work, the *real* ballet, done in the shadows and the darkness while the marionettes danced onstage. Sven thought about that ancient verse he was so fond of:

*So now we send our hopes and joys out, naked from the nest:
A chill within the thatching lingers, quick to freeze the breast...*

Wraith stamped out his cigar on the glass pane as the sunset tuned to twilight.
I've shown them the fist of God... he thought, darkly, *but soon I'll show them his teeth.*



T I A