



With an Angel's Wrath

It took Base-10's ground crew ten hours to dislodge the damaged *Platonic Love* from the docking ring hull. The silver sphere was beaten-up, but still functional.

Chenine was ordered to take the *Gazer* on a final sweep of the area around the battle sites, running a concentrated scan for any remaining Bydo material that may have ended-up in the ocean. It was a futile task: nothing from the demons could have survived the pounding that the *Gazer* and *Love* had given them. Coasting on autopilot, she dozed in the cockpit, arms crossed over her midsection. It was three-ish, and the still night ocean was calm and mysterious beneath her.

Thirty minutes later Chenine was guiding the ship through the moonlit night towards the blinking lights of bay R-A. The metal arm on the ceiling connected with the top of the *Gazer*, making the girl flinch as she sensed the steel implement piercing the *Gazer's* hull.

"I'm cutting the sensation link..." she radioed docking personnel. Within seconds her senses returned to normal. Instead of smelling the oils and fumes of the bay, she only smelled the sterile cockpit interior. Instead of distantly feeling the metal claw digging between her shoulder blades, she felt the tough back of her pilot's chair.

A few seconds after the sensation link went offline, every ship system went dark.

Chenine drew a deep breath and sighed. The *Gazer* had taken a beating, a *real* beating. In one part of her mind, she didn't really care. In another part, though, she felt a vague sense of guilt. Chenine shook that thought from her head.

Just the product of sensation links and misplaced sentiment... she thought.

Scott Tabris watched from above as the *Gazer* was drawn into the bay. The male technician from Command Ops had left his post a few minutes after the 'Sphinx crisis' had been resolved. He watched from the upper scaffolding as the *Gazer* passed below him. Cautiously, he stepped onto the wing of the ship and tiptoed over to the cockpit canopy, keeping an awkward balance.

The young tech was wearing a white clean suit which gave him the uncanny appearance of a bunny-rabbit. He bent down and tapped the canopy glass. Chenine looked up at him.

He yelled loudly into the pane. "Hold tight, Miss Chovert. We need to check for any residual contamination on the ship, and then you can go on to debriefing."

Chenine nodded absently.

Tabris began dutifully walking around the wingspan of the *Chaste Gazer*, mindful that he didn't misstep and fall 15 meters down to the hard bay floor. There was a small smile on his stubble-ridden face: he liked Chenine. He *really* liked Chenine. Besides being absolutely gorgeous, she gave off this pouty, laid-back vibe that drove him wild.

"Ugh." He grimaced as he saw the major damage to the left wing. Pieces of the opal-colored outer armor were slit open and hanging-on to the frame like flaps of loose skin. There was no residual Bydo matter in sight: only pinkish stains of acid corrosion graced the elegant ship. There were stains everywhere, and gashes in the ship's armor ran like cracks in a sidewalk. The frame was critically damaged, and it really had no business being in the air at all. As far as Scott was concerned, it was a miracle that the ship could be flown back into the base at all (if Chenine had told him about her tight combat loop he wouldn't have believed her; that kind of move would be impossible for a ship in *this* condition).

Poor baby... he thought despondently. Scott's role in maintaining the Raidens was minor, it paled to that of Dr. Roont, but he still thought of the R-H's in an intimate sense. He lifted one of the torn armor panels to get a sense of the ship's internal damage.

His black eyes widened. Scott drew in a sharp breath; his pulse quickened.

There were footsteps above him. Sam Roont was walking across the scaffolding, wiping his face with a handkerchief. He looked disheveled and tired. "Goddamn pilot..." he muttered, "that jackass needs to be informed that R-Types are made for *shooting* targets, not smashing headlong into them..."

"D- Dr. Roont..." Scott called, uneasily.

"Bydo flesh *everywhere!* Five hours of decontamination. And he broke the goddamn canopy! The interior is *covered* with fluids. Lord knows how long the asshole'll be in decon. Serves the fool right; I hope he gets the hard-lather treatment, the bastard!"

"Dr. *Roont!*" Scott cried with urgency.

"What?" Roont glared down at his assistant.

Scott pulled the shredded opal armor up, peeling back the beautiful metal skin of the ship, and showed the doctor what was lying underneath. It was a crusty, flakey mess of rigid lines, like veins, and bulging mounds. The secondary armor had been entirely subsumed, *replaced*, with the surreal-looking mess.

It was a mess that had the pale, ashen appearance of death. But in its structure, it was unmistakably organic.

Roont's entire demeanor changed: gone was the tired, complaining laborer. He shot a quick glance at the half-dozen members of the docking crew who were milling about below the ship, waiting for it to be lowered.

"This bay is in immediate level-1 status." He called to the men. "All personnel without clearance are ordered to immediately leave the premises." Baffled, but adhering to procedure, the men left their stations and evacuated the bay. The shift supervisor pulled the status alarm and slipped out of the bay before the large bay doors shut with a hollow creak.

Scott motioned to the cockpit. "What about Miss Chovert?"

"Use the back-up crane to pull the cockpit out of the ship manually: she doesn't need to see this, understand?" His voice was deliberate and menacing.

Scott nodded and went to operate the crane. He maintained a calm demeanor, but his hands trembled as he worked the controls and salty drops of sweat rolled from his forehead down over his lips.

As he guided the crane, extracted the cockpit and lowered it to the mooring floor, Scott heard the doctor mumbling behind him. He turned to see Sam Roont grinning widely; it wasn't what he'd call a 'wholesome' grin. Staring at the battered frame of the *Gazer*, Roont whispered: "The first Impingement Effect... bloody fantastic..." The doctor noticed Scott watching him and snapped out of his dream-like trance. "Go extract the pilot and get her out of here." He snapped, annoyed.

Chenine stretched and yawned. She was cramped, and would be grateful to be out of the tiny cockpit. The landing on the mooring floor had been jarring and abrupt: whoever was working the controls was either high or drunk. She massaged her right knee, which had been banged-up in the rough landing.

The cabin depressurized and the crystal canopy rose-up. The lanky pilot jumped up and slid down the side of the cockpit, gracefully landing on the bay floor. Scott Tabris was there to greet her.

"Good show out there, pilot." He cheerfully said. "The two of you really knocked 'em dead."

Chenine shrugged. "But not without really damaging the ship."

"Forget it. The *Gazer*'ll be good as new in no time." He chuckled. "Just be happy that you're not a certain 'other' Typer right now."

Chenine tilted her head. "What's the status of the *Love's* pilot?"

"Oh, Storm is fine," Scott assured her. "but his *career* might not be. I was in Ops when he smashed his ship into the docking ring."

"The damage." Chenine remarked with a nod. "I saw the hull damage coming in..."

"Yeah, he pinned the incarnation between the station and his arm spikes, pretty ballsy, really."

"But the Aryl disapproved?"

"No, the RL seemed happy that the targets were destroyed, but you know how hard it is to tell what he's thinking. The Commander, though, oh boy..."

"Angry." The girl nodded.

“More like enraged, even for him it was quite a show. He was yelling something about court-marshals and the like. You could tell he wanted Wraith's head, but I got the feeling that he'd settle for Storm's ass on a platter.”

Chenine shook her head and walked towards the bay exit. “He'll lose that fight. He can't fire us; only the Aryl can do that...”

Scott watched her leave. Something inside him was stirring; he felt a little bit low and more than a little nauseous. “And your RL protects you, all of you, right?” he called, betraying some emotion.

“Ahem,” Roont coughed from the top of the *Gazer*, staring at the tech menacingly. “When you're ready, Scott, I can use your assistance.”

Tabris watched Chenine as she sauntered out of the bay.

“...of course, doctor.” He replied submissively.

The walls of the clean room were green, that sterile green tile found in too many hospital wards. There were no smells and there was nothing to see. Justin Storm was lying supine on the exam table, naked, staring up at the ceiling morosely. His contaminated flight suit was burning in an incinerator on one side of the room; the heat was comforting to Justin's bare body in the cold, antiseptic chamber.

One side of the room was a dark glass wall. On the other side, a doctor and her nurses operated the decontamination apparatus. Above Justin, several menacing-looking mechanical arms and scanners loomed over him. The scanners monitored his vitals and checked for infection sites. The arms did various unpleasant things. Harsh white lights glared down on his hazel eyes, blinding the pilot.

Justin was reasonably fit, even for an R-Typer. He had a swimmer's frame, although the muscles on his body were hardly ‘rippling’. Lying on his back, his bare stomach sunk far below his lower rib cage (which was slightly visible) and the dual protrusions of his pelvis also rose slightly above his retracted stomach. He was best described as ‘sleek’. His bushy eyebrows and black hair were completely disheveled, but he looked fairly decent when things were in place. His eyes, now scrunched in anticipation of the decontamination treatments, were usually bright. He had an honest face, though looks could be deceiving.

Right now he felt like a wet dog. Justin was soaked from the repeated cleanings. The doctor called him over a loudspeaker:

“Okay, Justin, get ready for another little wash...”

Justin tensed his muscles as a thin blanket of green water fell from the ceiling. He turned his head to the side as the liquid washed over him, biting his lip as the stinging, cold wave chilled him to the bone and stung his skin.

It's all my own, stupid fault. He lamented. *Losing my damn canopy... exploding that incarnation's face in my cockpit...*

The arms started working again, running harsh, bristly brushes over his stomach. *All my own fault...* he grimaced.

Justin temporarily checked-out and took his mind elsewhere. He had a low pain tolerance, and pain brought hateful ideas into his head, so he thought about the thing he hated the most.

He thought about the Bydo.

Humans are, above all else, extremely proud creatures. Some would say we have the right to be. By the end of the sixth decade of the 21st century, man had achieved much greatness: structures stood as tall as mountains in vast cities, rich and populous. Viruses and diseases were falling left and right, succumbing to advances in medical science. The solar system was dominated and tamed by advances in spacecraft and propulsion: probes scoured every inch of our heliocentric home from the molten rocks of Mercury to the frigid crusts of Pluto. Flags were on Mars and its moons; man had seen Jupiter with his own eyes.

It wasn't a totally idyllic time: there was still conflict among men and tension between nations. But it would always be looked upon as the brief, nostalgic, "Golden Age" of humanity. We reached for the stars themselves, but then something reached back.

Nothing could have prepared us for the events of 2069. Nothing could have prepared anyone for what came at us from the darkness, from the shadowy regions on the edges of our solar system. Something appeared on the edges of the solar system. It was something big, dark, and nasty.

The thing was later called the "Kuiper Mass", no one knew it was there until it was too late. On May 5th of '69 things were peaceful and calm on the Blue Marble, the day was typical and uneventful. That morning, some news outlets mentioned stories of sporadic radio interference and communications errors, chalked-up to a possible solar flare. It was only later that the term 'active-system scan' would enter human vocabulary.

And it was within minutes that humanity would realize the true horror of the Bydo Empire.

The first assault was disastrous. It's estimated that, in all, over 2 million bogeys came in to Earth, showing-up out of nowhere. They suddenly appeared on radar when within the Mars orbital, as if they didn't even *exist* before that time. The first wave appeared at 5:45 PM, Greenwich Mean Time. Scientists on Earth accessed a remote monitoring station on Deimos and broadcast friendly greetings, with mathematical formulas and other tools of basic communication. By 6:00 PM, the station was totally silent and unresponsive to commands.

By 10:00 AM the following morning, nearly one-quarter of Earth's population was dead.

The number of enemy dead was uncountable, and unimaginable. Ironically, conventional nuclear weapons saved the planet during that fight, but the nightmare was far from over. A second wave appeared six and a half months later.

By then, the fledgling "Earth-Perimeter Defense Network", or "Epdin", was under construction. These ravenous aggressors had united the planet in a way that no other thing could. The cost of Epdin was astronomical, but survival took precedence over any and all old grudges or feuds on the planet. And, for the second time in history, human survival was in doubt.

Several interesting details emerged out of this conflict. First, because the enemy was expected this time, many listening probes and satellites were stationed at the original point where the bogeys appeared (Mars wasn't there anymore, having moved on in its orbit). Those probes got telemetric data from the bogeys. They gave humans their first look at trans-dimensional travel, later affectionately called 'skimming'.

The second wave was destroyed at near-Earth orbit, with great loss of life suffered by allied defense forces, and heavy damage dealt to Epdin.

By this time, the American Department of Defense had created a scientific branch to investigate these strange opponents. Next to nothing was known about them: the first wave of enemies had appeared as strange, black, spear-shaped blobs, firing some kind of weak, charged particle shots from their undoubtedly organic skin (this was a precursor to the R-units' photonic cannons). The second wave was made-up of far more disturbing things: one detachment was a group of silver-skinned fighters, their shape identical to a type of fighter used by Earth's defenses at the time. Other shapes included bizarre, serpent-like things and grotesque amalgams of monstrous creatures.

Like something fresh out of the Book of Revelations... Justin mused.

The scientific group that began researching the 'Fallen' (as defeated and captured bogey corpses were called) provided an orgy of information to the public. But the reports produced many more questions than they answered.

The things were obviously organic in nature. They had the same type of double-helical DNA that was found in cells on Earth. Their cells, however, appeared to fluctuate in a state of 'constant totipotency', like an embryonic stem cell. In other words, they had amazing regenerative abilities, and their individual shapes were highly variable.

No one really knows who came up with the name 'Bydo'. It *was* coined by one of the researchers studying the creatures (that group of scientists later founded the prestigious 'Bydo Labs'). Many stories circulate as to why the word 'Bydo' was chosen, but most are likely apocryphal. For whatever reason, the name stuck.

The greatest breakthrough in Bydo research came with a quite accidental discovery. One day, late at night, a very tired researcher at the fledgling Bydo Labs was working on a small piece of recovered flesh, altering it and trying to manipulate its growth with various hormones and electric stimulation from a small prod. It was rendered into a harmless state and lay like putty on his desk. The yawning technician was downing copious amounts of cola in a vain attempt to keep awake. He failed.

When the technician awoke, he was startled by what he saw: his cola bottle had spilled all over his desk, the electric prod, still on, lay beside the puddle, sending electricity into the fluid. The putty-like Bydo flesh was spread across the table, lying sedately in the fluid. Lying like a thin, malleable film...

In 2071, the senior scientist at Bydo Labs, Dr. Shinto Kama, finally solved the puzzle. He figured out that certain acids in the cola, as well as the constant electrical current, could turn modified Bydo flesh into a flexible sheet, or a shield of sorts. He led an ambitious team with the desire to put this knowledge to practical use.

They took sheets of metal armor and painstakingly injected the Bydo-acid mixture into pre-cut tunnels in the metal. The armor was sculpted into an airframe, and a phased pulse of electricity was run through the structure, propagated by internal generators.

They made a small, slender ship out of this mess of denatured Bydo flesh, tamed by acid and electricity. Dr. Kama named his shot-in-the-dark effort after the god of thunder, in the hopes that it could perhaps be mankind's saving grace.

The first Raiden unit was born.

The cost of production was unheard of. One finding of production was that the constant electrical flow in the ship allowed for a massive build-up, and discharge, of large amounts of energy, exponentially increased and focused by the denatured Bydo flesh.

Thus, the first 'wave cannon' was produced. The ship was fitted with a prototype trans-dimensional drive (no one knew for sure that it would work) and a pilot was sent off into the blackness of space with a good luck wish.

That lone ship battled through waves of skimming devils, arrived at the Kuiper Mass, and single-handedly destroyed it.

Raidens continued to be produced, and production was refined. Much, much less Bydo material was needed in later models, and the most ambitious project came for the 'Orb Development Group', who produced a giant sphere of active Bydo material, actual *living* flesh, that could be tamed and manipulated with control rods on the Raidens. The orb both exponentially increased the power of the Raidens' wave cannons and had the ability to deflect frontal attacks by the Bydo.

Things looked bright indeed, but, as some people say, the sun always shines brightest just before an eclipse.

The next Mass appeared in lunar orbit. Humanity got its first close-up look at a floating sea of pure evil. History calls it the 'False Moon'. Epdin savaged the thing, and the Raiden squad finished the job. But the Bydo would win this confrontation.

Burning in space like the giant skull of some hideous creature, the False Moon hurtled headlong into the Earth, slamming into the Blue Marble with its dying efforts. At the time of impact it had about half the mass of the Moon. One continent was utterly devastated by the collision, it would later be called simply, euphemistically, 'the Gulf'. The oceans of Earth were tinted a sickly purple for years to come.

They never stopped coming. Every few years another Mass would rise out of the darkness, usually just outside the solar system or amongst the gas giants, always in the ecliptic plane. Massive conventional fleets from Earth always fought to crush the waves of hideous, morbid Bydo 'incarnations', but the Raidens, like vengeful angels, always struck at the devils' hearts.

Justin had to laugh. *Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem with an unstoppable juggernaut, the arrogant ass was confident he would slaughter every citizen by morning, since the Jews were no match for the Assyrian's force. Fat lot of good it did him. God rewarded his pride with the Angel of Death. That was how God punished his foes.*

And humans? They punished their faceless enemy with the Raidens.

One thing changed, however. After the False Moon incident, no other Bydo Masses were every engaged until destruction. They still appeared, they still attacked, but they would disappear into the darkness before they could be destroyed. To date, the Kuiper Mass and the False Moon are the only 'core targets' that have been completely destroyed.

The 'R-Types' (as they came to be called) were not the end-all, be-all of the war, though. Extreme measures were taken to stop the skimming Bydo targets from reaching Earth, and 'Bydo Labs' proved their value once again. They launched the 'Dissympathy Project', as it was euphemistically called. It's most widely referred to as the 'poisoning of the Belt'.

The project spawned a unique material, something moderately toxic to humans, but which had a strange and lethal effect on Bydo material. It appeared to inhibit their cells' trademark totipotency and spread through their layers, poisoning the flesh as it went. Most importantly, the fluid seemed to affect Bydo flesh even when it was in a

'skimming' state. It was an artificial pathogen, fairly easy to produce from natural Bydo material.

At this point the war was going badly; far too many enemies were coming in from the phantom Masses. The conventional fleets couldn't hold them all off in time for the Raidens to crush the Masses, and Epdin was overloaded trying to destroy all the targets that did get through. The remaining cities on Earth were savaged by the conflict. It was a dark hour that required desperate measures.

Two-thousand remote control probes were sent skimming through space, dispatched to various points in the Asteroid Belt. Their mission was simple: inject large rods into the largest of the asteroids. The rods, a marvel of science, made use of the Bydo's 'constant totipotency': they contained a blueprint on how to make the Bydo toxin, and a mini production cell which continually fed modified Bydo flesh through the rod, where it is altered into the actual poison. As the unconverted flesh in the rod continually re-grows, the tube never runs out of material to produce the toxin.

The large asteroids floated through space in their silent orbit, sending a constant stream of lethal poison behind them. These comets of death were later named 'Thantos Tails'. The average concentration of toxin in the Belt is almost negligible due to the extreme size and expanse of the area. But there is enough toxin at any given point to drop most Bydo incarnations out of their skimming states and inflict some measure of damage. The Blue Marble was not safe, but at least now it was defensible.

Justin opened his eyes: the ungodly lights above him had dimmed and the evil arms were still. Two large, red solenoid tubes descended from the ceiling on either side of his body. They radiated a lovely heat into his shivering skin.

"You're clean." The doctor called from the other side of the glass.

I'll say...

"You can proceed to debriefing when you're ready."

"Humph." He grunted indifferently. "I guess Chenine's already there?"

One of the nurses answered. "No, Miss Chovert checked out with us right after she landed. I think she talked to the subcommander and then went home."

Justin rolled his eyes. Her concern was touching...

He sat up and grabbed a satchel sitting next to the decon table. Before dressing, he rooted around in the bag until he found a silver pendant, which he dutifully placed around his neck.

I still need a drink... he thought.

The Bydo keep coming from out of the darkness of their home dimension. Why they come is uncertain; what they want is a mystery. Thousands of conventional ships and weapons keep pouring out of military depots, and the Bydo Labs keep designing the Raidens. There are currently three R-Type series ships in active production: the high-powered 'Strikers', the graceful 'Dancers', and the balanced 'Excels'. Today, the fourth R-Type series made its debut to the world: the 'Raiden-Hybrids'.

No one could predict that this line of Raidens, and their pilots, would eventually determine not only the course of history, but the fate of both the human race and the Bydo Empire. For now the squadron was a budgetary afterthought, unheralded and dormant.

When they awaken, they will become the path that will lead humanity to its salvation. But they will also have the power to bring about its damnation, as well.

Today, the pilot of the third produced model of the R-H series, the *Platonic Love*, narrowly survived his first major combat experience. His name is Justin Storm, age 25, graduate of the intermediate VR pilots' training program. He's the main character of this story.



T I A