



## Hierarchy

“Dive in three.” Chenine called.

“Understood.” Justin quickly replied.

Three seconds later the *Chaste Gazer* flipped over on itself in a tight barrel roll before thundering down towards the ground. Justin smirked at the girl’s graceful embellishment as he sent his own *Raiden* in pursuit. Both crafts swooped through a tight opening in a natural rock formation, screaming low across the rocky ground.

Chenine moaned quietly; the sound reached Justin’s canalphones.

“Still not quite 100-percent, huh?” He asked sympathetically.

“The frame is holding up fine,” she replied, “but every time we dive I feel like my arms are being ripped out of their sockets.”

The base doctor broke in. Her voice was scratchy and garbled. Chenine made the decision to start off the day’s ‘stress-test’ with a 500-mile sprint across the Gulf, so now the duo were flying through the central Dead Lands and nearly out of communication-range.

“How’s the area around your shoulder blades, Chenine?” She asked.

“Numb.”

“That’s not what I want to hear.” She sighed.

The doctor asked Chenine a few more questions about her body and how she felt behind the wheel of the newly-refurbished *Gazer*.

“I’m getting your physiological data now. It looks like you’re doing alright up there overall, but your sympathetic nervous system is getting a hell of a workout.”

“It feels different than before.” Chenine answered after a pause. Her words were slow and measured: it was the way she spoke when she wanted to complain about

something. Justin knew that Chenine wasn't the kind of girl that whined about things up-front and personally. Come to think of it, she really didn't like to complain at all.

"What do you mean 'different'?" He asked.

"I've got good control of my Raiden, and my link-devotion is pretty high..." she said before pausing again, "But something feels... *off*, like I'm doing what I should be doing but... I'm not sure how to put it: the *Chaste Gazer's* not doing what *it* is supposed to be doing."

Justin scrunched his face contemplatively: he didn't really understand this at all. "What do you mean by--"

Static exploded across the line; Samuel Roont's dry voice filled their ears: "Hey, there, Little Miss CR-, ahem, I mean 'Miss Chovert', could you please repeat what you just said?"

Chenine did.

The Bydo doctor's voice was excited. "Uh-huh. And, so, well, just as an analogy: it feels sluggish now, like you've gone from spurring-on a racing horse to, well, kicking at a stubborn mule, maybe?"

"It feels like something's missing from the equation." She quietly summarized.

"Really? Is that how you *really* feel?" The entire pitch of Roont's voice changed, as if he were elated. Then he calmed down a bit "Thank you very much," he quickly said, "and don't let it bother you: I'm sure everything will level-out eventually." He broke off the line.

"I didn't say I was bothered." Chenine coldly replied to the dead air.

The base doctor came back on to tell the girl that she was officially certified to fly again.

"Congrats, Chenine," she said, "but don't look for your 'grounded' status to change *officially* for another day or so: my head nurse is AWOL right now. She's been gone for the past few days. It's a real nuisance for me, but I'll personally log your data as soon as I get a chance."

"I understand."

Justin shored-up his seatbelts and sent the *Platonic Love* into a playful barrel roll. He felt good in the saddle today. No, scratch that: he felt *great*. The *Love* was handling like a dream. His devotion to the link was in the ether, and it was nearly effortless. He slowly spurred the *Love* forward, greedily licking his lips as he felt the cold air outside the craft part before him and collapse behind his back in a graceful, unending wave.

After a few minutes his canopy quivered and Chenine's face hovered across the crystal shield. It was a ghostly, transparent image. She looked far from springtime-fresh: her brow was furrowed and there was a tiny bead of sweat dangling on the tip of her nose.

"You're coming up on my tail." She complained as Justin's Raiden drifted closer to the *Gazer's* rear.

"Can't help it." He sighed with content. "I'm firing on all cylinders today. I feel like I could break mach 3 if I wanted to: everything's just 'clicking' for me."

"Good for you." She sarcastically replied.

Justin noticed the sweat on Chenine's face: she wasn't even *close* to 100-percent. She was struggling just to keep herself supersonic, and there was no way she could go hypersonic with her link all wonky like this: she'd lose control and wreck herself.

Again, Justin smiled deeply.

If they had a race right now it wouldn't even be close: he could actually beat his sister-ship in a speed contest. That thought made Justin pretty darn pleased with himself. He didn't give the girl a lot of sympathy in his next statement: "I'm really sorry, but you're being timid in the saddle today, and your pain is my gain, war-hero."

The girl grunted quietly when he said this and cast her eyes to the side. If he didn't know any better, Justin would've sworn she was embarrassed. Chenine wordlessly deactivated the video link.

Embarrassed or not, Chenine was becoming something of a celebrity at Base-10. After it was revealed she'd single-handedly crushed a legion of incarnations, well, there were quite a few people at the base that wanted to shake her hand. During the past few days Justin was swamped with a hoard of well-wishers. Suave base-fleet pilots and Korang fighters he'd never met before were trying to buy him drinks, all of them bearing false-smiles and platitudes, asking Justin to 'send their best' to the 'little lady'. Most of these space-jockeys seemed less interested in shaking Chenine's hand than they did getting into her pants, though. Anyway, Justin relayed few of these messages to the object of their adoration.

For her part, Chenine was a total recluse. She kept out of the cafeteria and the general lounge areas, choosing to keep close to the R-H bunks. That area was off limits to the general base staff and a welcome refuge for the girl. She only left to perform her duties, be they stress-tests in the *Chaste Gazer* or physical aptitude tests with the doctor (and these she had to do in order to regain full flight privileges). Besides these exceptions Justin had only seen her out of the bunks once: during one orange-tinged evening she perched herself on a strut above the wave-skim bays to watch the sunset.

Apparently she just wasn't comfortable in the spotlight. Naturally Justin had fawned over her a bit when he learned the news: he was genuinely amazed at her feat and wanted to talk about it. Unfortunately she was just as hesitant to discuss the fight with him as she was with everyone else.

"I really don't know." She replied when he tried to talk to her about it. "I don't remember much from the battle. There was the ship I was trying to save, the *Silver Halide*, I remember that, and I also remember a little about blowing-up the Memphisto chemical factory, then losing power and crashing into the tower, but everything in between that is a blur." She curled up on her standby bunk and held her shoulders with crossed arms, absently toying with a stiff pillow using her bare toes. "It was all very fuzzy: I saw red." She shook her head. "That's all I can say."

The whole narrative vaguely reminded Justin of Connor Trent. Trent said much the same thing about his own combat experiences: that they were transient blurs in his head that he could barely recall (let alone analyze) after the fact. It was something akin to auto-pilot, Justin reasoned: something you don't think about at the time, and don't remember after the fact because it's so *ordinary* for you.

Connor's words came back to Justin: *Maybe I'm too used to the combat*, the Scotsman told him in that dim-lit bar. He'd read somewhere about a group of ancient Viking warriors who would always strip naked, paint their bodies, and yell like banshees before a battle. They had only one tactic: to charge the enemy with blind rage, slaughtering them in droves, sometimes even killing each other in their indiscriminant

bloodlust. They were called the 'Berserkers'. Is that what Connor and Chenine are talking about: were they going 'berserk'?

Justin absently rested his chin on one hand and looked out the canopy to his starboard. He didn't physically man his controls: he let his noggin guide the ship through the link.

*So, is that what it takes to be a real warrior?* He thought. Was Chenine a warrior, then? And what about him? He never found himself going 'berserk' in battle. Justin had to think about every move he made in combat: it all felt so unnatural to him; the experience was so anxiety-provoking. It put a tight knot in his guts. Whenever he fought it was his combat jitters, not some innate drive, which dictated his actions. He'd never gotten any kind of euphoria or 'combat-high' from fighting like many of the Base's veteran pilots talked about.

Nonetheless, he considered himself a warrior, a genuine fighter, and Justin thought he was right about that.

*But if that's true, then what does it really mean to be a warrior?*

The pair continued testing their Raidens as the morning wore on. Chenine took the *Gazer* hypersonic twice, both times nearly losing control. On the third try, however, she managed to fly it straight as an arrow for three minutes at Mach 5.

"Atta girl! You'll be taking on another legion in no time!"

"Lieutenant?" Justin hesitantly asked as he heard Laura Hayle's voice on the line.

"I just thought I'd pop into your ears for a second:" she explained. "It's my turn to put together the weekly duty roster, and I need to confirm your schedules for next week. So, any thoughts? When would you guys prefer to come in for your shifts? Who wants time off, and when?"

"I need both Thursday and Friday off." Chenine stated.

"Hmmm.... prime-time, huh? That might not sit well with your colleague. Well, what do you say to that, Justin? And keep in mind, guys: I'm really not in the mood for a fight today. But then again, it might be kinda entertaining." The Lieutenant's voice was impishly mischievous.

Despite Hayle's prediction, there was no argument from Justin. He sank his head back in his chair and sighed. "I get Sunday." He said quietly. "I always get Sunday. Anything else Chenine wants is fine."

"What's this? Chenine just snatched up two consecutive days of prime leave-time and you don't make a sound? Are you really just gonna roll over and take this?" The Lieutenant sounded genuinely surprised.

"We... have an arrangement. My schedule's kinda inflexible, and Chenine lets me have Sundays off in exchange for giving her first-dibs on scheduling."

"Inflexible, huh?"

"He's a creature of habit." Chenine unexpectedly broke into the conversation. Her words were cool and weighty, as if they answered any other questions the Lieutenant might have and, thus, closed the subject.

The ladies talked amongst themselves for the next few minutes. Predictably, Laura was the one that did most of the talking, though Chenine was considerably less cold with her than she'd normally be. Justin thought it might be because listening to the effervescent Lieutenant helped Chenine keep her mind off the fact that she was nearly killing herself just trying to keep the *Chaste Gazer* airborne.

“So, what’s on for Thursday and Friday, then?” Laura eventually asked.

“Clubbing.” Chenine briefly answered.

“Not exactly life or death, is it?”

“And QT.”

“Quality time, huh? What, with your boy-toy?” She chortled.

“New... acquisition.” The girl answered slowly. “I have to make time for him.”

“Yeah, that’s important. So, is that time in the clubs, then?”

“That’s where we met. But he also likes to have a little alone time, too.”

“I’ll bet he does.” Laura wryly replied. Justin could almost *hear* her winking.

“Guess I’m less adventurous than you: Commander Faught’s giving the A-shift command staff a full-day breather on Saturday, but I’ll be spending it at home cuddling with my better half over a good book.”

“Romantic.” Chenine observed with indifference.

“Not really: he’ll probably be reading one of those juvenile fantasy/sci-fi novels he’s so obsessed with, and I’ll be pouring over the latest technical data for our new computer software.”

“I see.”

“What about you, Justin?”

“Mmm?” Justin was startled from his daydreaming. “What about what, now?”

“Sunday: what’s the big plan, huh? Got a date with a stone-cold fox or something? I’m thinking your type of girl would be pretty high-class, am I right?”

He considered his Sunday ritual, especially his midnight sessions with the cold metal of the UCP against his temple: all those failed attempts to keep Monday from ever coming.

*Well, I’ve got a date with a stone-cold something, Lieutenant. And yes, you could say that my date’s high-class, or at least she’s pretty high-caliber.*

Justin smiled. He put his head in his lap and snickered. Then he laughed. He laughed so hard that his nose started to run. He laughed like that for a good minute.

“What’s so funny?” Laura asked, baffled.

“What isn’t, Lieutenant?” Justin answered as he calmed down. The grin fell from his face quickly, almost like he was having a stroke. “Oh, I’m not gonna do much: I’m just gonna try to live through the night, that’s all.”

“You mean you party hard, too, huh? Both of you do, then.” She clucked her tongue in judgment. “Anyway: you don’t really strike me as the wild type, Justin.”

“Looks can be deceiving.” He half-heartedly retorted.

“They usually aren’t.” Chenine curtly answered him.

Justin sneered at the girl’s intrusion.

“Maybe not with you: you cold-hearted bitch.” He whispered.

“Sorry, I didn’t get that. Could you say again?” Laura apologized.

Justin’s face reddened considerably. “I said: that *could* be true, but that’s an old adage I pitched.” He scrambled to cover his tracks like a sidewinder snake. “And you know: those old adages are usually right-on-the-money. Usually, at least...”

Chenine and Laura gabbed for several minutes after that. Eventually Justin managed to excuse himself from their conversation. He claimed that he was getting interference in his long-range transmission equipment.

He cut the feed to his canalphones and switched the canopy to 'opaque' mode; the sky outside disappeared as the crystal shield darkened and eclipsed the terrain. He leaned back; for some reason he felt very content in the coffin-like darkness of the opaque cockpit. Justin closed his eyes and dipped his five 'perfect' senses into the Raiden, sharing intimately in the ship's flight experience.

Myriad thoughts and ideas danced through his head like echoes in a big room. They were echoes that reverberated and lingered, but they didn't stay put: there was another room in the equation, connected to Justin's noodle by a cumbersome, heavy door. That door between the rooms was now open, and Justin's mental echoes spilled over across the floorboards, disappearing into the endless, ghostly darkness of that mysterious other-room.

He grinned with satisfaction as he visualized his 'mental body' dancing naked above the seawater and thundering through the cold sky with unbecoming grace. Justin shared the exhilarating joy of flight with the *Platonic Love*, and as he did so, something was sharing the experience of his own thoughts.

His Impingement Factor broke 2.0.

*They discuss these things so casually.* He thought. *Cuddling, clubbing, 'alone time': it's all so blasé for them.*

It was something they did, and discussed, naturally. They could talk about it on auto-pilot, really, because it was so second nature to them. It was natural (for them, at least) to have someone to 'have-and-to-hold': someone to devote themselves to and receive devotion in return.

*To touch...* he mused, flexing his hand in front of his face.

So, is that what it takes to be a real human?

Justin had to think about every move he made around others: it all felt so unnatural to him. It didn't *put* knots in his guts: it *was* a knot, constant and unsolvable: the great Gordian knot beneath his skin.

*Humans are social creatures,* he thought, and he certainly didn't qualify as *that*. All the same, though, he qualified as a member of the race, if only physically.

*But is that actually enough?* How important was *physical* kinship in determining one's identity? Aren't humans defined by their interconnectedness? By their vast, web-like network of relationships?

*'Out of many: one', right?*

Physical relatedness was insignificant in the grand scheme of things: Justin couldn't rely on that alone to call himself a human. He remembered his C.S. Lewis: the Narnian donkey that dressed-up in a dead lion's skin couldn't say he was a real lion any more than Justin could claim that he was a real human just because he looked the part.

So that left him with the unanswerable question: what does it really *mean* to be a human?

He answered this deep philosophical question with a mature, stoic response:

"Fuck it." He muttered aloud.

If your average human was identified by their web-building abilities, a power that Justin ultimately lacked, then what did that make your average humans? They were a host of spiders in the sunlight.

Justin stared down at the floorboards of the *Love*: his sleek metal footrests glinted like white skin. He reached down into the link and again felt the air parting around him.

*All that air... it's like being underwater.*

He knew that he wasn't a spider.

People who chose to serve in the Allied Military were a peculiar breed in themselves: the hours were hellacious, discipline was strict and the entire culture suffered from a very unhealthy bout of 'groupthink'. Base-10 was more an exception than the rule: the only reason Justin's facility collected more than its share of oddballs (by military standards) was because it was the bottom of the barrel as far as command-posts were concerned.

*Where else could a 22-year-old pop-tart ever dream of making Primary Duty-Officer?* Justin considered their effervescent Lieutenant.

Most AM facilities were chock-full of bland, dapper grunts all aspiring to be the best soldier-clone they could be. Individuality, as it stood, was secondary, and the grunts all drifted through a sea of regiments, regulations and marching orders like blind, unthinking sharks.

That was the kind of life Justin tended to look down upon. Or, he would have looked down upon it, if he had any kind of alternative. As it was, he almost admired the lock-step marching AM soldiers; he was certainly in awe of their ability to fit into their respective niches.

*Their ability to conform to their environment.*

To adapt.

Justin knew for sure that he wasn't a spider: at this point all he wanted to do was be a decent shark. But even *that* plan had gone horribly awry: six months out of the academy and he was spirited away to this curious base, plopped down into a unit consisting of only a passive-aggressive, borderline-autistic girl and a blisteringly cold RL.

*No: you're a Typer now, remember? You call him Aryl.*

"Tch." Justin scoffed. He didn't feel like a real Typer. In fact, experience was starting to tell him that he wasn't.

At this point he only knew one thing: he loved the feel of the wind on his limbs.

He put the matter out of his head. Justin splayed himself out in his seat and sank down, down, down into the mechanics of the *Platonic Love*. He smelled the salt of the sea as his beloved Raiden rocketed out over the waters of the Gulf. His heartbeat sang as he willed the *Love* into a tight loop-de-loop, smiling distantly as his lips kissed the cold ether of the midmorning sky.

*Now that's tranquility,* he mused.

The *Platonic Love* danced across crystal clear clouds.

The sun was shining on a Sunday morning.

In a chest, in a human body, a heart was beating. In a bed, in a human's apartment, a human was sleeping.

In a human nose, the scent of scrambled eggs and coffee was lingering.

Justin sat up, yawned and stretched. He felt the pitter patter of feet on his back. Cars perched upon his shoulder, his spines tickling Justin's cheek.

"Morning, guy." He affectionately stroked the hedgehog's silky back.

He heard the clanking of pots and pans in the kitchen. Cynthia peeked her head into the bedroom.

“Oh, are we up early, today? Usually I have to put some coffee under your nose to get your lazy butt out of bed.” She smiled with angelic, pearly white teeth. Her teased blond locks dangled down her shoulders. The girl’s green eyes sparkled like emeralds.

Justin scratched his head, a small grin on his own face. “C’mon, Cyn: your eggs are the only reason for me to get out of bed in the morning. You know that.”

They breakfasted on the patio, Cars obediently perched on his master’s shoulder, accepting the occasional bits of egg and bacon that came his way from Justin’s hand. It had snowed the previous night: a nice thick blanket of Christmas-y goodness stretched as far as the eye could see across the ground, but luckily the temperature was still bearable on the enclosed patio.

“What’s on for today?” She asked him.

“Gotta go out and see what’s up.” He shrugged. “I’ve got errands to run out the wazoo: Carter needs me to help fix his ride, and I promised Corrine that I’d find one of those special teddy bears for her daughter.”

“Poor baby.” She gently teased. “You’re being run ragged.”

He shrugged. “Eh, I don’t mind. After all, it’s a little too cold to mess around outside, anyway.” Justin’s hand was splayed out on the table next to a big bowl of apples, his fingers wide apart. Cynthia put her own hand down on the table, her fingers resting between the spaces left by his fingers, her skin separated from Justin’s by millimeters.

She smiled warmly. “You just better be sure to get me my roses, or else.”

“Don’t worry: I’ll remember.” He said with a grin.

“And what *kind* are you getting for me?” She deigned to test him.

“Don’t worry: I know the kind.”

“Are you sure?” She seriously asked.

“Positive.” Justin nodded.

The sun was directly overhead in a cloudless sky. The neighborhood kids stopped him on the way out. The gaggle of children were lanky with spaces in their smiles where baby teeth once stood, baseball bats slung over their shoulders and gloves in their small hands. He could never get out of the apartment without playing at least one inning with them.

He showed them all his own special, patented ‘ultimate-swing’ technique and the children gazed with adoring eyes as he batted a few balls out beyond the apartment’s backyard and into the next.

“Woah!” One boy exclaimed.

“That’s super!” A little girl praised.

As the brat-pack crowded around Justin there was another little boy, well apart from the rest, sitting idly near the alleyway. He was perched on a discarded apple crate. He looked to be in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, or thereabouts. He watched the scene, unblinking, one leg casually dangling from the box, swinging like a pendulum. The serious-looking child’s platinum blond hair was cropped short, rising off his head and dangling at the ends like an extended, flaccid crew-cut. His skin was absolutely pale, peeking out through a generic tee-shirt and shorts combo. He didn’t look like he minded being out in the cold in such scanty clothing. He was very skinny. His limbs, devoid of muscle, dangled from a slender trunk. He was healthy-looking, but by no means an athletic specimen: the child looked like he could barely lift an aluminum baseball bat, let alone swing it hard.



The children's breath came out in visible vapor trails in the snowy scene, but there was no hint of steam or vapor rising off the solitary boy's lips or nose.

Carter's vehicle was a real mess. Neither Justin nor his pal really had the wherewithal to fix it, but it didn't really matter: they worked on the engine for a few hours, stained with oil and fluids like a couple of grease-monkeys, and talked all the while about their respective partners, their jobs, and whatever else came up. Belts of laughter erupted every few minutes as they lay on their backs and hammered away at the hopelessly broke-down vehicle. At one point Justin told an off-color joke and Carter belted with laughter, warmly slapping the ground a few centimeters from Justin's shoulder.

They gave up after a few hours. The only constructive thing they managed to do was replace the worn-out pine air freshener with a new one. It was in the shape of a split apple and also bore that scent. Despite their failure, Carter warmly thanked Justin for the help and he was on his way again.

A pair of royal blue eyes glowed in the darkness of the workshop, leering down on the scene from the corner. The boy with the platinum hair sat atop a disused locker. His lanky leg absently dangled from the spot, oscillating back and forth as if marking time to some unseen symphony.

It was nearly noon and Justin was hankering for some lunch. He made his way over to Eastside Square, passing a few acquaintances on the way, and found his favorite vendor, Colby, manning his fruit stand.

The tomatoes he'd pawned off on Justin last week were hard as iron rivets, and Justin told him so. Colby was a heck of a guy, but a tough nut to crack when it came to business. After a few minutes of haggling back and forth, and some good-natured ribbing, Justin managed to walk away with a small sack of oranges and a big, blushing, Red Delicious apple.

At half-past one he crossed a street in the café district, only to be called back to the other side by a familiar voice.

"Hey there, sailor!" He heard the unmistakable timber of Chenine's bright voice. She was sitting at an outdoor patio, a cup of steaming coffee on the table and a warm, half-eaten apple cobbler on her plate. "Pull up a chair, why don't ya?"

The girl was radiantly dressed in a thin white miniskirt and skinny halter top, which showed-off quite a bit of her severely-tanned skin.

Justin blinked a few times, vaguely surprised to see her dressed like that.

"What's the problem, huh?" She teased, coquettishly lifting a razor-thin pair of sunglasses off her eyes.

*Oh, yes, that's right*, Justin remembered. There'd been a heat wave recently, hadn't there? He looked around: yup, the people on the streets milled about in cutoffs and tees. The asphalt simmered; the sun overhead was brilliant.

The pair sat at the small café table, laughing and sharing sips out of Chenine's glass of iced coffee. The cross-legged girl's right foot was bare; her sandals sat neatly beneath her chair. Her naked right foot brushed against the hairs of Justin's exposed knee as she whimsically bounced it up and down beneath the table.

"Help me with the cobbler." She demanded.

"Can't." Justin apologized. "Cyn wants some roses, and I still need to get a teddy bear for Corrine's girl."

He stood to leave. The smiling girl sternly ordered him: “Don’t be a stranger, now, you hear?”

“Never.” He answered with a reciprocating grin.

Inside the café royal blue eyes watched the pair talk. The little boy, clad in his tee and shorts, sat at the counter, awkwardly holding a big empty soda cup between his small fingers. One of his legs still swayed in quiet cadence. His expression was ineffable, and it was fixed on Justin with unending attention.

Twilight descended on the town. It was a crystal clear night with thousands of stars twinkling in the sky. Justin walked through the firefly-lit night in his casual evening attire. He made his way to the scenic overlook at the top of the pedestrian mall. Cynthia was standing there at the railing, her arms resting on the metal edge of the precipice with moonlight beaming off her luxurious hair.

She sighed with content, wrapping her arms around her body. “I couldn’t believe how well they did the *Pie Jesu* tonight. The evening vespers at St. Dwywen’s are always so beautiful, aren’t they?” Her blue lips spread into a gorgeous grin.

“Yeah, they are.” He agreed.

The pair stood at the railing. They stared at the heavenly host of stars with nothing but the chirp of crickets and the twinkling of fireflies to distract them. Justin stood next to Cyn, smelling the apply-scent of her perfume and listening to her deep, content breaths as she stood close beside him. It was a silence too golden for words.

“Don’t you have something for me?” She turned her head towards him, her doe-like eyes probing.

“Ooooh...” Justin scratched his head and silently cursed himself. “God: your roses! I meant to pick them up before we left for the vespers. Oh, oh I’m sorry, Cyn, but...”

“But *what?*” Cynthia said with a smile. “You’ve got them right there: but are you really gonna make me bend down and pick them up in *this* skirt?” She impishly accused him, training a finger over the silky edge of her good, very short, evening skirt.

Justin looked at his feet and, sure enough, the roses were bundled beside his loafers with bright green wrapping paper. They were deep blue, the kind of blue you see in a cold, calm sky.

Or in exposed veins.

*Or in bodies too long underwater.*

*In their lips, maybe?*

“Oh, yes. I got them on the way up here...” He absently mumbled. He reached down to retrieve the bouquet, and then delicately handed it to Cynthia. “I... remember that.” He mumbled again.

Their fingers touched as he passed the cerulean roses to the girl.

Justin smiled as he looked back down at the railing. “It’s lucky I remembered those, wasn’t it?”

“It wouldn’t really have mattered to me if you didn’t, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” He nodded. “But it would have mattered to me.” Justin extended his whole arm out to one side towards the girl, silently beckoning. He kept his eyes closed, waiting to feel her luxurious locks press against his shoulder, her warm body fall against his, and her porcelain arm wrap around his waist.

A beach ball bounced off his stomach instead.

Justin opened his eyes: Cyn was down in the water, clad in that cute little red-and-white striped bathing suit. That suit really knocked him out: it was absolutely adorable. She turned back toward Justin and waved at him, a wide grin on her face. Laughing, she splashed through the surf along with a whole throng of people. The sun simmered overhead in an open, blue sky.

Justin sighed long and hard before falling backwards, landing on a patch of white play-sand. He spread his arms and legs, offering his tee-shirt clad arms to the scalding sun above him.

“Uhhhn... this is...” he mumbled with content, unable to finish the statement.

The swing set behind him squeaked: it sounded like there was a body in one of the seats. Justin craned his head backward. He stared at the playground upside-down. There was indeed a little boy on the swings. He wasn't really swinging, though: his body was stationary. He merely held the chains with his tiny hands and swung one of his skinny little legs back and forth like a timepiece.

“...pleasant.” The child finished Justin's thought. He couldn't tell if this was a statement or a question. The boy's blue eyes didn't betray an iota of emotion.

He did smile, though. It was a nice smile: a typical 'little kid' grin.

Justin rolled over and rested his chin on his hand. “You do get around, don't you, kid?”

The boy slid off the swings and traipsed over to a pile of rubber tires set into the sand. He stepped lightly over the obstacle course, his feet skipping between the rubber treads. “Sure do, I guess.” He stopped and faced Justin, his platinum blond hair shining like a diamond in the sun. “I kinda go where I need to go.” The child stepped across the sandy playground and approached Justin, who was still lying supine in the sand. “And I do what I need to do.”

“Isn't that the way all little kids operate?” Justin smirked. “Why so serious, huh? Anyway, why aren't you down there with the rest of them?” He dreamily motioned to the beach. “You're not afraid to have a little fun, are you?”

“No.” The kid mumbled. “Maybe I'm a little afraid of sharks, though.” The boy sat down on his knobby knees beside Justin and took up the Typer's arm. Justin lent it to him freely and the child pulled it toward himself, using both his small hands to support it. “Even if I am, though, that doesn't mean I won't get into the water.” He splayed the adult's limb over his childish legs, underside-up, and absently ran his fingers along Justin's inner forearm.

“Vein-reading?” Justin absently asked as he looked back at the beach. He was hypnotically content, his eyes half-open in dreaminess. Everyone along the beach had stopped; they were frozen in their tracks. A ball hung dumbly in the air. Water droplets sparkled around immobile bodies, large smiles lay frozen on the peoples' faces. They'd been that way ever since the little boy dismounted from the swing set: ever since he'd stopped swinging his leg.

In the back of his mind, somewhere, Justin thought that was a little odd.

But only a *little*.

“You're into the Dead-Land Mythos too, huh? You know, there's a little girl at the place I work at... um...”

“Piperel.” The boy absentmindedly answered as he looked at the vein in Justin's arm with a cocked head.

“Yes, that’s right. And, anyway, she likes to do the same thing. She takes peoples’ palms and-”

“What it is that you need to do?” The boy interrupted. He dropped Justin’s arm into the sand as he asked this question.

Justin tilted his head toward the boy, giving him a puzzled look. “What do you mean by that?”

The boy rose and stepped across the concrete floor of the basketball court, his tennies making a light pitter-patter sound as the late afternoon sun bathed them both in a ruddy yellow light. “I don’t really understand this.” He finally answered, scratching his hairless chin pensively. He splayed his arms out to either side in a wide-ranging gesture. “Why this? Why all of this? There’s no point! Isn’t it enough to want to continue? Isn’t that the *purpose*? It’s the only reason for *anything*... shouldn’t *that* be at the center of everything?” He said this last part to himself.

As soon as the child said this Justin’s head swam with intrusive daydreams. The images he saw were explicit and base: he smelled cheap scented candles and he felt the heat of a warm body gyrating beneath him. He squirmed, then his body twitched violently.

*Climax.*

His eyes shot open as he felt a euphoric pressure in his chest. He willed his body to be still as he listened to the pounding of his heart. With each beat the scenery around him throbbed and shimmered.

He thought that was a little weird.

But only a little.

The beating slowed, and finally his pulse returned to normal.

A puzzled look spread across the child’s face.

Justin rolled off the concrete, stood up and considered this odd little kid. “You’re a very serious little boy, aren’t you? Who are you, anyway? Do you live around here?”

“Here?” The boy asked, his blue eyes aglow, “No, not here. At least: not ‘*here*’ here.” He looked around at their surroundings: they were standing on the rooftop of Justin’s apartment, staring at the panorama view of sooty buildings and a smoky sky. Nash Ultima loomed in the background, but it looked different. It was ‘off’, somehow: the skyscrapers were wavy and shimmering, as if the towering city were built of living flames.

“Then were *do* you live?”

“‘*Somewhere*’ here.” The boy finally answered, a sly grin on his angelic face.

“And what does that mean?”

The boy stared at the ground with his royal blue eyes. “Well...”

“Who are you?”

“I don’t... really know myself.” The child answered, wandering over to an abandoned fruit stand and retrieving a blood-red apple. He bit into it; the juice that trained down his lips wasn’t golden and clear, but deep crimson. He wiped his face. “Thank you.” He finally said, raising the oversized apple in his tiny fingers.

Justin looked down and realized that he was cradling his right arm: he didn’t really know *why* he was doing that. He was holding his left hand tightly over his right forearm, and for some reason in the back of his head he felt a tiny, creeping horror at the

thought of letting go: a feeling that he shouldn't remove his hand, that he shouldn't look at his forearm.

Why was that?

*It doesn't really matter*, he thought.

The boy splayed himself out on a park bench. Birds were chirping overhead.

"What's your name?" Justin finally asked.

The boy looked down to his left, then his right, as if deep in thought. He looked Justin in the eyes and began to answer. "I don't have-" he said hesitantly, then he paused, his head tilted to one side. The boy looked up and grinned slyly again, his voice teasing: "What do *you* think my name is, huh?" He challenged.

Justin returned the smirk and scratched his own chin. "Hmmm..." he seriously pondered. The boy stood up, crossed his arms and cocked one knee, waiting.

"Well... I'd say that you look kinda like a Quint to me."

The boy considered this, his royal blue eyes pensive. "'Quint'?" He mulled the word over seriously.

"Yeah: 'Quint'. I dunno: it seems to fit, somehow. Well, how about it? Was I close?"

"My name..." the boy began, "...is Quint!" He finished exuberantly.

"Whaddya know," Justin smiled, "right on the money, huh? I guess I read you like a book, didn't I?"

Quint nodded casually. He traipsed across the white sand of the playground and scampered onto a rusty set of monkey bars. He dangled upside-down, holding the bars with his skinny legs. Even upside-down his face retained a very serious aura.

"Is that really so important? I mean, to understand people? What's the point, anyway? I can't quite understand this..."

"What's the point? Well, that's the point of *everything*, isn't it?"

Quint shook his inverted head solemnly. "No. Survival is, right?"

Water dripped down into the basement. The splashes echoed in the massive concrete catacombs below the Sixty-Nine Memorial Tower. It was dank, and very dark. There was barely any light in this lonely place. Only a few faint beams streamed in from cracks in the ceiling far above them.

Justin fumbled around in the dark: he could barely see his hands in front of his face.

"This is the point."

Justin swung around. Quint was sitting cross-legged on the cold concrete floor. He was chewing on something tough: Justin noticed a multitude of seeds scattered around the boy. Water dripped onto his head from the ceiling. Quint lazily craned his head up and, mouth wide open, lapped-up the falling liquid as it landed on his tongue. His exposed limbs were almost translucently pale.

Justin wandered over to the boy. "Survival? No. No, that's not the point. It isn't enough." He countered.

"Not enough?" Quint asked.

Justin swung around on his sofa. He looked up at Quint, who was now perched atop the pilot's kitchen counter. His back rested against a rather large pot of dirt. There was a cup of steaming coffee next to the boy, and he was wrapped in Justin's favorite comforter. It was a red-and-green blanket; the stuffing was all synthetic, though it had

served Justin quite well for several years. He often jokingly called it *The Comforter*, as he was both too cheap and too attached to the thing to trash it and get another one.

The front door behind the kitchenette suddenly snapped shut and locked itself with a loud click.

“Hmmm...” Quint grunted with content. He closed his eyes and held the blanket tightly against his body. The boy flared his tiny nostrils and inhaled the steaming vapors rising from the cup of coffee.

Justin made his way to the balcony and stared outside. The skyscrapers of Ultima True loomed all around them: they were about five floors up. Golden sunlight fought through the thick smog of the city, coming to them in pale rays. He heard the distant sound of footfalls below him: the dark streets were crowded. A sea of people milled around busily beneath the balcony like ants across asphalt.

Justin shut the glass sliding door; it was very cold outside. The basement had been sweltering, like a sauna, and the apartment radiated a lesser, ‘cozier’ heat. He put his hand against the thick glass pane, feeling his fingers tingle with cold as the glass fogged up around his digits.

“Is it enough?” Justin wasn’t very surprised to feel Quint’s breath on his hairless right arm: the boy stood behind him and wormed his way under the pilot’s arm, peeking his head out from under Justin’s body. The child’s body was utterly devoid of either heat or coldness and Justin scarcely noticed his presence.

“Is it enough?” Justin repeated, his head bowed. He looked back up with hard eyes. “Yes,” Justin said determinedly, “it is.”

There were shadows all around them. Justin sat on the floor; Quint across from him, Indian-style. Something shiny and metallic spun like a top between them. It spun lightning fast. The little boy stared at Justin with that all-encompassing glare, his hands lazily supporting his chin. The spinning thing slowed, slowed and slowed, until it was barely spinning at all, filling the empty room with an eerie screeching noise as it tore up the ruddy wooden floor.

It stopped.

The barrel of the UCP pointed at Justin, dead-center between his spread legs. He dreamily reached for the gun.

“It isn’t enough, then... is it?”

“It’s all I have.” Justin mumbled as he cocked the hammer.

“There is no point to this...” Quint whispered into his ear as he hovered behind Justin.

“It’s too cold outside. Don’t you think so?”

“There’s heat inside, though.” The boy countered.

Justin, the gun to his temple, considered this statement. From the corner of his bedroom, near the desk with an empty cage upon it, an old clunky radiator churned. Every second it rattled and shook more and more, and every second the temperature dropped. Frost began to glaze over the entire sliding glass door, creeping along like a slow death. The warm outline of Justin’s palm vanished beneath the icy coating.

Justin’s breath came in steamy gusts through his nose. His eyes glazed over. “No.” He conceded. “It’s not enough.”

*Inch... squeeze...*

*Click.*

Explosion.

*Climax.*

Colors flared in his mind. His body spasmed and his head flailed wildly, like he'd taken a bullet to the brain.

He opened his eyes.

Coquettish lashes fluttered beneath him. Justin supported his body with two palms planted firmly on either side of the bed, like he was doing naked push-ups. His bare skin twitched in the cold. The girl beneath him stared at him with a longing, satisfied gaze. He blinked, startled by the pop-tart's eyes, and when he did this a mini-avalanche of frost tumbled off his eyebrows.

His breath, and the breath of the girl, came in volcanic explosions of steam from their lips and noses.

The doe-eyed girl put one of her hands on Justin's bare chest. A sudden heat radiated across Justin's trunk; he felt it creeping over him, burning away the frost that was collecting on his skin. The girl's arm, blanched white and also caked in frost, began gaining color as well.

His heartbeat rose, sang throughout his body, then violently clamored in his head. Justin's breaths became erratic; he fought to pull back from the pop-tart's touch, scrambling off the edge of the bed, falling.

Falling.

He slammed into icy water; it surrounded his body, engulfed him and cradled his body with a numb, soothing embrace.

Quint hovered before him. The boy floated upside-down, kicking his little legs to offset his body's natural buoyancy. Justin heard the child's voice even though Quint's lips didn't move. He found it odd that the kid could speak while underwater.

But only a little.

*No, no no... that was it, wasn't it? What more is there?* The boy's 'voice' sounded exasperated. *What else could you possibly want?*

The black water shimmered and swirled. It was completely dark everywhere, like the abyssal zone of the ocean. Within seconds colors and light erupted all around them.

The Southland Watering Hole filled Justin's eyes: the oak-studded tavern was packed to the brim with people, men and women, most clad in flight suits. The image shimmered and glowed, like Justin was watching it through a crystal shield. As he watched he could see himself, seated at a table with an anonymous group. All of them were Raiden-pilots from the look of things, and all of them were raising their glasses, smiling, brimming with warmth. They were toasting someone.

They were toasting him.

Justin smiled: tiny bubbles curled up from his lips as they parted. He reveled in the scene, felt himself seated at a table in the midst of this squadron, this group, who considered him an asset. They wanted him. They *respected* him.

"Tranquility..." he muttered.

One of the Typers slapped Justin on the back good-naturedly. Instantly a shower of icicles fell from his limbs. The feeling was jarring. His whole body tingled unpleasantly: it felt as bad as when one jerks their legs apart quickly after sitting Indian-style for too long, when semi-paralyzed limbs scream with a half-feeling agony. He jumped up, startled, and realized that his own legs would not respond. He looked down,

his neck ached unbearably as he did so: his legs were cemented beneath a murky sheet of permafrost. He could barely move his back. His elbows refused to bend: the joints were frozen through-and-through. Quint sat before him, perched atop a massive stalagmite icicle.

“I don’t *have* any of this, though.” Justin muttered. He balled one fist and ground his frozen teeth.

The boy’s head rested on his hands. He stared at Justin with renewed interest; his blue eyes were intense. “But you desire it? Why don’t you have it? Is it because you won’t take it?”

“It’s because it’s not available to me.” He answered darkly. His body continued drifting into a cold numbness.

All around the pair a frozen sea stretched out to infinity. A cold white sun sat in the sky. Thunderheads formed all along the horizon. The salty smell of seawater was quickly replaced with the sterile scent of electricity; lightning danced from cloud to cloud overhead.

Quint sat up, excited. He balanced himself on his knees, wobbling unsteadily atop the giant icicle. “And this-” he said, spreading his hands at the turbulent scene. “This is another kind of-”

“-tranquility.” Justin finished, snarling like an animal.

“Succumbing...” the little boy nodded knowingly. “Yes, yes: let the lightning do the talking. Let the body-”

“-deaden.” Justin again snarled. All feeling had disappeared in his lower body as a steady streak of ice rose from the permafrost and crept over each of his legs.

Quint closed his own eyes and craned his head back.

Justin did the same thing. He sighed. “It’s like-”

“-being underwater.”

“It’s like being underwater-”

“-all the time...” the boy finished.

Suddenly Quint opened his eyes. Those sweet, royal blue peepers had changed: the sockets were completely gone; his perfectly rounded, Caucasian orbits were distended into two vicious, hollow slits. A faint yellow fire simmered within those fearsome slits: the light ebbed and flowed like the juvenile burning of a young campfire just lit and spreading across its kindling. Quint’s lips parted to reveal two jagged rows of baby teeth.

These ‘baby teeth’ weren’t the kind you’d find on any human baby, though.

Justin’s mind suddenly exploded again: he saw the pop-tart on the bed, her hand against his bare chest. He saw the Typers in the bar, slapping him on the back and congratulating him.

*No...* Quint’s voice echoed in his head. *That is not reality, is it?*

The pop-tart brushed past him on the street, wordless and without a glance in his direction.

The Typers mocked him. They ridiculed him.

They beat him down.

He could feel the blood on his lips.

Justin roared as the lightning fell all around him. The violent bolts vaporized the snarky flyboys in his midst. His numb body throbbed with exhilaration as the lightning mowed his aggressors down.



He laughed. He laughed long and hard.

Each bolt of lightning shook Justin's body. Quint, however, maintained his perch on the icicle.

The lightning pounded the earth. Justin felt his hand grasping the pop-tart's hair. His teeth were parted in an evil grin. The girl shrieked as he pressed her against the wall.

Quint was there, hovering behind Justin's back.

*Yes... I think, yes: I can understand this. This is a survival strategy.*

Justin pressed her even tighter against the wall; his pulse quickened. He pressed himself against her.

*Yes... to continue!*

The young woman grasped Justin's arms defensively.

He snarled with rage. The lightning fell around them, rocking them back and forth.

His body shook back and forth. Back, then forth. Back... forth... back... forth...

Justin's eyes shot open with a start: the pop-tart, lying on the bed, stared up at him with glazed eyes. Her neck felt sinewy and limp between his fingers. Slowly, with the dawn of realization, his eyes widened; his pulse quickened and a lump rose in his throat.

The lights over the bed fell until he could barely see the faint glow of the dead girl's eyes.

Quint knelt before Justin, his knees touching the girl's hair. His ruddy yellow eye-slits illuminated everything.

*The removal of painful stimuli: that's the prerequisite for life... the right of any living organism.* He considered the girl with a horribly tilted head. Then he looked right up at Justin. *Yes... I can also understand this...*

Justin felt hot vomit rising in his throat. It burned his esophagus as he stood there, encased in the ice, stuck in that endless sea of permafrost.

He could see the dead girl's face before him, hovering like a demon's skull. Her eyes suddenly, deliberately, rose to meet his and she spoke one word. Her lips moved in slow motion as she spoke calmly and deliberately.

"Traitor." She accused him.

Justin shut his eyes and screamed wordlessly into the ice that cradled him.

The frozen shell fell away and Justin slumped to his knees.

Everywhere the light faded. The sun shriveled up and died, and the arctic wind of the endless ice sea abated. Quint's stalagmite icicle cracked and fell apart: the boy landed hard on his rear.

"Rrrgh!" He mumbled with gritted teeth. His eyes and teeth had reverted back to normal. The child rose and pattered over to Justin, his tennies stomping angrily across the frozen water. He grabbed Justin's chin. His fingers were gentle, but his grip was forceful.

"No." He said. "No: I had what you wanted, didn't I? Wasn't that *it*? What *do* you want, then? What's the point?"

"Survival." Justin weakly answered.

"That's *not* enough." Quint sneered.

"How do you know?" Justin's head shot up to eye-level with the boy. This threw the child off-guard. Justin's eyes were more than a match for Quint's sharp gaze.

The boy's hands moved away from Justin.

"Answer me: how do you know, anyway!?" Justin screamed at the kid.

Quint put his hands behind his back and stared at the ground in deference. "Survival's not enough... you taught me that, didn't you?" He muttered.

Justin caught his breath; he wasn't sure what to make of that statement.

The boy continued: "but I don't understand any of the rest. What else is so necessary? *Why* is anything else needed?" he held up his palm: there was something moving slowly across his hand. It was oozing and swaying: it looked like either a slug or some kind of fungus. As Justin watched, Quint's whole hand 'morphed' into the junk. Then his whole arm did. The child's body shimmered, revealing a dark, pulsing shape. The shadowy figure looked like some kind of shell, or a big egg. Then the shape reverted back into a human child, but this time the boy was wearing no clothes.

Quint looked down at his own body.

"Not remarkable." He surmised, shaking his head. "Not amazing. It's not remarkable at all."

"Huh? What?" Justin narrowed his eyes in confusion.

"Sixty-five percent oxygen... eighteen-percent carbon... ten-percent hydrogen... calcium, phosphorous, sulfur, potassium..." he spouted all this with a sing-song timbre.

"What're you talking about?"

The boy's eyes shot back to Justin: "Globulins, hormones, thirty-three vertebrae ensconced... electrochemically-graded neuronal response..."

Justin sneered at the child as he continued spouting this drivel.

Quint again bowed his head. He absently scratched his right temple with one finger. "Frontal lobe, parietal, corpus callosum... one-hundred trillion operations-per-second..." Looking back at Justin he crossed his arms. "*Not* amazing." He said again.

Justin lazily flopped over onto his back. He shut his eyes and ignored the child's rhymes.

The hours passed. The pair remained on that frozen continent, Justin on his back and Quint standing near him.

Eventually a light rose on the horizon. Golden rays flickered over the ice. Then the sun emerged, bathing everything in golden light.

Justin sat up. His legs dangled off the edge of a massive tree branch. He was a good fifty-feet above the ground in the arms of a gigantic tree. The sunlight screamed out to them from across a wavy grassland. The scene was unabashedly picturesque: a sparkling stream ran from the base of the tree out towards the horizon, in-line with the rising sun.

"Funny," he muttered. "That river... kinda familiar, isn't it?"

Quint bounded across several branches and landed on the one supporting Justin. He was again clad in his shorts and tee.

"You infuriate me." He said as he stared at Justin with serious eyes.

"Then why don't you hit the fucking road, you little prick..." Justin mumbled quietly. He instantly regretted saying this: the whole feel of this place, the sunshine and the smells, all filled him with some kind of transient joy: he actually felt pretty good.

*Very good...* he thought. Kinda like he was firing on all cylinders.

"Because I like you." Quint answered. He produced an apple and absently spun it on his finger. It looked tree-picked fresh. "I don't understand you, though." He admitted. "You have the ability to confront or retreat... but neither appears to be sufficient."

“They aren’t.” Justin admitted. “It’s all about learning to confront when you want to retreat, and retreating when you want to confront.”

“Deference?”

“Compromise.” Justin said with a shake of the head.

“Then you have the answer.”

“But putting it all into play is the hard part.”

Quint lazily slunk down against Justin, nestling his body against the Typer’s arm. He put the apple to his mouth, paused with his teeth set against the skin, then pulled it out of his mouth and put it on Justin’s chest instead.

“Hmm. Nice piece of fruit. These things are pretty rare nowadays...” the pilot mused, taking hold of the blood-red fruit. “Thanks.” He absently mumbled.

“Apple for teacher.” Quint said, again in a sing-song tone.

All his anger and his annoyance towards the little child evaporated as he lay his head against the soft yet supportive bark of the tree branch. This place was *very* nice: the air was sweet with perfume and the sunlight simmered warmly on his skin.

Eventually he started to hear birds chirping. Butterflies landed all around the tree. One of them perched on Justin’s shoulder, another landed on Quint’s forehead. The boy appeared to be unconscious, or nearly so, and he mumbled absently as the butterfly landed on him.

“Tuckered out, huh?” he mumbled.

A noise rumbled along the ground. Justin started, picking his head up as the weird ‘whooshing’ noise filled his head. He looked out toward the horizon: the glistening river that flowed towards the tree suddenly dried-up, leaving an empty brown trench in its place.

“Hmm. How strange is that?” Justin noted.

Justin didn’t notice this, but ever so slowly the massive tree’s bark began to change color: it devolved from a bright brown color into a darker, more ashen shade.

Quint started mumbling in his sleep. The boy’s eyes suddenly shot wide open and he cried out in agony. He clutched his chest and panted like a dog. He stumbled to his feet and immediately fell off the branch, landing hard on the next one down.

“What the hell’s the matter with you?” Justin exclaimed as he leaned over to check on the boy. Suddenly he felt a sharp force ensnaring his right arm, near his armpit. One of his legs came under this unseen force, then the other.

“What the hell!?” He bellowed. “What’s going on?”

Quint, lying supine on the lower tree branch, seemed to be in less distress now. He didn’t move any of his limbs. He rested his head submissively to one side, staring up at Justin.

“You can’t stay here, I don’t think.”

“To hell with that! I want to!” Justin retorted, struggling against the massive pressure in his armpit and legs. Sweat danced across his face as the effort took its toll on him. “Goddamnit: help me out here, you little freak!”

Quint barely shook his head, once, very slowly, as if that was the only movement he was capable of. “I can’t. I’d be destroyed.”

Justin roared with anger as his entire body rose up off the branch.

Quint merely watched this scene unfold, a trace of sadness on his face. He called out one last thing to Justin:

“I... like your heartbeat, by the way. At first I thought I hated it: I didn't want to follow it, and I didn't want to do the things it wanted me to do. Maybe I still don't understand it, but for some reason when I feel it now it makes me kinda...”

Justin screamed again as the hooks pulled him towards the sun itself, digging into his skin as he was dragged towards that blinding light.

“...happy.” The child finished in a whisper.

Sirens screamed throughout the docking ring and red alarm lights flashed in every corridor.

Scott leaped up the rickety metal stairs in fours. He hit the Raiden bay catwalk and shot down the line as fast as his legs could carry him. He rounded the corner to Bay R-B.

“Fuck...” he muttered slowly as he looked down at the floor. His eyes were dinner plates. “Holy fuck!” He growled again as he darted into the bay's upstairs observation room.

Old Pyotr Frieze was holding down the analog controls for the Raiden mecha-arm with both hands: the joystick kept bouncing and jostling in his grip. Sven Wraith stood before the Plexiglas barrier, glaring down at the bay floor with the darkest of scowls on his face. Chenine stood beside him, still clad in her black flight suit. Her hands were folded neatly in front of her, and her face appeared relatively calm despite the situation.

“Where the hell is Roont!?” Wraith barked at Tabris.

“He's on the computer in the Development Center...” Scott panted, out of breath. “He- he said that he could ‘spike’ the *Love* from down there-”

“That doesn't ‘pear t’be the case here: you mangy gopher bastard!” Pyotr groaned with effort as he mashed one of his stubby hands against the joystick. “God-damned whory *bitch!*” He groaned. “I can't rightly lock the clamp!”

The *Platonic Love*'s fine-control engines squealed with unbridled rage as the Raiden bucked and struggled against the grip of its mecha-arm like a bronco at a rodeo. Donald Plinshine lay mere feet from the psychotic machine: he wasn't moving. A small stream of blood ran along the metal floor, trailing from his head. Over two-dozen technicians in thick hazmat gear circled the Raiden. They were armed with fearsome-looking metal poles; the sharp ends blazed with pent-up electricity.

“You should have let me try to access the cockpit.” Chenine listlessly declared to her Aryl.

“And have you wind up like Plinshine, there?” Wraith growled. “You've already been mangled by that Raiden once: I'd prefer to keep you in one piece for the moment, Miss Chovert.”

“I think that I could have prevented this from happening.” She disagreed with a shake of her head.

“Ah!” Pyotr yelled triumphantly as the joystick snapped into the ‘lock’ position. Below them the *Love* suddenly shuddered and its engines died. The ship slumped to a halt on the floor, resting unevenly with its nose on the ground since its landing gear wasn't properly engaged.

“No offensive action! No offensive action: I've got induced AW, you hear me?” Sam Roont's voice cried out over the general intercom. “It's in full AW, Goddamnit!”

Wraith slammed his fist on the intercom. "Control yourself, doctor." He growled. The Aryl glared at Tabris and motioned down to the bay.

Scott nodded and opened the observation room door. He leaned over the railing and screamed: "Move in! Move in, now!"

One of the heavily-armed technicians stabbed the emergency canopy-release panel with his spiked pole. The canopy shot off the Raiden and slammed into the opposite wall of the bay, denting the tough metal surface as it hit. Three techs swarmed the cockpit armed with long poles that had cruel-looking hooks attached to the ends. The trio dove into the cockpit and emerged a moment later carrying Justin between them.

The Typer was struggling and screaming like a banshee. He twisted and writhed in their grasp; hooks pierced his armpit and both legs, just above the kneecaps.

Chenine bit her lip and turned her head away as he was dragged off, kicking and screaming like a man possessed. A fourth tech approached the group and jammed a rod against Justin's head: it sparked, sending blue static out towards Justin's brain. He immediately stiffened, then slumped down, unconscious.

Seconds later the doctor and her nurses entered the bay and loaded both Justin and Donald Plinshine onto crash cots.

Sam Roont appeared in the observation deck seconds later, doused in sweat and visibly trembling. He didn't say anything: he simply glared at Wraith with intense eyes.

"Take R-H-AGP down to the Development Center for a full-diagnostic." Wraith announced as he walked to the door. He passed Roont, and then stopped. "And call-up the Experimental Tech Squad," he added. "Have them send us their best man, immediately..." He looked back at Chenine and Tabris, then down to the bay floor. "...it seems that we're in need of a Raiden pilot." He briskly left the observation deck.

Scott sighed and leaned against the wall. "Jeez... I can't believe it: Storm slipped into a full-blown Limerence Experience. He's gonna be automatically expelled from the Raiden program: you can't fly a link-based ship if you can't maintain control over the link itself. Too bad for Storm, huh?" He morosely opined. "Right, Miss Chovert?"

He turned to face Chenine, but caught only a fleeting glimpse of the girl's back as she rapidly walked down the opposite catwalk. Within a second the observation deck door slammed shut behind her.

