



Pajama Heroes

Adamancy...

It was so very cold. And dark, too.

He shivered: he was afraid. But then he stopped shivering, and when he did he felt even worse. Didn't it mean you had hypothermia when you stopped shivering? But then again, it didn't *feel* cold anymore, either.

But didn't he *always* feel cold? The world was such a cold place. He had to trudge through it, always shivering on the inside only. That was the way it was. So where was this strange warmth coming from?

Adam... ants: see?

He lazily draped his arms to either side, flexing his digits as he did so. No, he wasn't cold. How could he be? His skin was protected; it was metallic, impenetrable. Yes, yes this was so much better! Nothing like that thin, wrinkly stuff from before. Before this he was a mindless, puttering insect, weakened by flesh and sin.

But now?

Now he would never need shiver again, even on the inside. And what about that weakest of things: his little human heart? That weak lump of flesh was gone.

He didn't need it anymore. He didn't need it to beat, and he didn't need it to ache. And he'd never ever have to feel it break!

He smiled: this felt nice. His skin was firm and reassuring. It cradled his body gently, but tightly. It felt like being underwater: it was like being underwater *all the time*, permanently submerged in a tight, form-fitting protective coating.

“Tranquility...” he mulled the word.

Then he frowned.

The echo of his words wasn't right. It sounded off. It sounded strange. He opened his eyes.

There were tubes, and liquids, and gels, and needles, and fire, and ice all across his frame. His naked body was suspended across a great chasm. And below in the gorge, swirling in the dense darkness, there was something moving. It was something horrible. It was *a lot* of something horribles!

His lips quivered.

He felt a slackening on his shoulder: hands holding him aloft starting to give way.

He smelled the cloying sweetness of split apples. He turned his head; his eyes were bloodshot dinner plates.

To his everlasting horror a great, giant eye suddenly whipped around to his face. It was bulging and pulsing with terrible liveliness. The gigantic pupil widened as it stared him in the face, calmly considering his terror.

Adam: antsy?

His head fell backwards: was he fainting?

Then he saw it: stretched wide, splayed in front of the dark, swirling sky, as if it were pinned and hung in a display box: a moldy human skin, the face stretched and empty like a rubber Halloween mask.

His Halloween mask.

His skin.

His body trembled; he gibbered.

The hands let go.

And as he fell into the darkness below, he screamed and screamed and screamed.

Justin sprung up like a bolt of lightning. He panted harshly: his throat was dry as a bone and his muscles trembled. Saltwater rolled down his nose and kissed his lips: he was doused in sweat.

He was in a panic: he crossed his arms over his chest, feeling his digits, his *real* digits, wiggling them as he did so. He sat there for a minute, in the blackness of his bedroom, feeling his heart pound inside his naked chest. The only noises in the room were the overdrive pounding of his heart and the angry scampering of his hedgehogs, awakened from sleep by their master's cry and none too happy about it.

“Sorry, guys.” Justin apologized quietly. He threw all the covers off his sweaty, smoldering body and lay spread-eagle in bed. It was three-ish, by the look of things, and the sun wouldn't be up for hours. He sighed and let the coldness of the room take the heat from his naked body.

Christ... how real did that feel?

Very real. *Too real.*

He wasn't in the best of shape. At least, he hadn't been. He managed to recover from all the abuse he endured during the defense of Nash Ultima, but some things were persistent. These flash-hallucinations were one thing.

Stomach problems were another.

In fact, Justin was afraid that he was coming down with some kind of bug. He'd been sidelined with a long bout of diarrhea yesterday, and that was after some fairly serious vomiting. At first Justin assumed that it had something to do with his Raiden and that weird experience in the cockpit. But while he was standing over the sink, dutifully blowing his chunks, he heard a metallic 'tink' in the pan, and sure enough he found a tiny piece of shrapnel sitting there with the remains of his breakfast: he was puking metal.

I've gotta start paying more attention to the brands of food I buy.

That said, it simply wasn't typical for him to have nightmares. Justin slept much the same way he lived: in a foggy haze. If he dreamed, he never remembered it. It was a convenient system: he was never troubled by all the bad stuff that came from his dreams. The only tradeoff was that he could never remember any of the good stuff, either.

All too similar to the way I live, when you think about it. He thought dreamily.

And, with that piece of bitter philosophy in mind, he yawned and sank back down into the darkness, this time without the terror, or the screams.

Fourteen hours later he was seventy stories above ground-level, standing on the open-air patio of a grand skyscraper in Ultima True. He rested his elbows lazily against the concrete barrier between the building and the sky. Below him traffic was slowly but surely crawling back into the city. Mass transit was already back online, obviously. Everywhere around him repairs were ongoing. The City was really like a massive organism: forty hours ago it had bled vociferously, but already the clotting process had begun.

Several metal clicking noises sounded below him, and as Justin leaned over to investigate the sound a giant metallic sphere shot up from below, stopping inches from his face. The sphere was attached to a spindly metal body; tools studded its multiple appendages.

Normally Justin wouldn't be so surprised at the sight of the Raiser, but owing to the similar circumstances from his dream he recoiled slightly. The automaton inspected him with disinterest, then clambered across the face of the building like a massive metal spider, looking for holes in the façade that it could patch-up.

"Stupid metal bastard..." he growled as he collected himself.

Justin wasn't in Nash Ultima for any particular reason. He couldn't afford to shop here, even if the stores were open, and he wasn't looking for a gourmet meal, either. He never knew what to do with his days off, maybe if he had any friends he could think of something, but for now he was content to watch the bee-like buzz of repairs and reconstruction proceed in the city that he and Chenine had helped save.

He thought about all the people in traffic, each one returning to their place in the massive organ of the city. They were flitting back to their lives, their social network, that abstract and complicated spider-web that links the lives of humans together. Like hummingbirds, they'd only darted away long enough to let Justin and other military grunts battle, suffer, and bleed as they defended their world.

They would return to their web, and Justin would return to his little apartment on the outskirts: a land outside the web. He would again retreat to his self-imposed island, alone.

He briefly thought about all the faces in those vehicles; he thought about their laughter, and their smiles.

His fists clenched over the top of the cement barrier. He ground his teeth. Justin's thoughts were suddenly very dark. Back at Base-10, Justin told Chenine that he 'loved' humanity, and that was the reason he joined the Allied Military. In reality, his feelings were more mixed than that. He loved the *idea* of humanity: togetherness, closeness, even love, maybe. But he didn't experience any of these things on a regular basis. Even Chenine hinted at the fact that his speech sounded like it was coming from an 'outsider', and maybe she was right about that.

There was another side to Justin's personality: beneath his admiration of the human race there was an intense and bitter enviousness. The sour green glint in his eyes, together with his loneliness, smoldered within him like an infection. Whenever it boiled to the surface, it emerged as anger.

But as it sat dormant within him, it festered as something deeper, darker, and much colder. It was like the frozen wasteland in the center of Dante's vision of hell: a core of ice surrounded by flames: the land of traitors. And in that part of his heart his sentiments were treasonous indeed. They were filled with hatred for his fellow man. It was an adamant and immoral antipathy, rotting him from within.

Sometimes, in the cold light of morning, he really wondered about some of the dreams he must've had. It was a safe bet that not all of them were about blonds stuffed into cocktail dresses.

Some of them were much darker than that.

He was startled from his ruminations by three brief chimes in his canalphones. A forcibly sweet recorded voice declared: "This is the Allied Military communication system: please stand by for a message from Base-10." He rolled his head in exasperation; at the moment, he really wanted to be left alone.

"Lieutenant Storm?" A clear male voice asked: the on-call duty-officer at Command Ops.

"Speaking." Justin acknowledged.

"Sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you could do a little favor for me..."

Polite tone, apologetic words, and a whispering voice: none of that's typical.

Justin thought. This wasn't your average communication. Usually his orders from base were fairly terse, and consisted of phrases like: "Storm, get over here, *now*."

"What's up?" he replied.

The man on the other end was obviously covering his mouthpiece and whispering so no one could hear him. "Well, you see, the subcommander put out an order for Miss Chovert to report to base. He wants her to stress-test unit R-H-CRTS: they're trying to refurbish the airframe and they need her for performance simulations."

"The *Gazer's* ready for its initial tests already? Man, Roont's turnaround time for repairs is pretty admirable. I wish my landlord were so efficient." Justin cut to the chase: "But what does any of this have to do with me?"

"Just a sec-" the man quickly whispered. Then Justin heard him speaking in the background: "No, sir. Still no luck. Yes, sir: right away!" After a few more seconds he was whispering again. "We've been trying to reach Miss Chovert for the past hour. She's not answering us."

"I don't blame her: you guys are obtrusive."

“Could you just hear me out for a second, please?”

The duty-officer’s desperate tone swayed Justin. “Alright, alright.” He caved. “But what do you want *me* to do, exactly? I can try phoning her, but if she won’t reply to you-”

“-no, no, not that, exactly,” he explained. “Look, the subcommander’s been riding my back like you wouldn’t believe: he’s furious, and I just happened to notice that you’re on the outskirts of Ultima True right now, and since Chenine lives near there I thought you could pay her a visit-”

“-wait, wait, wait...” Justin growled, “how the hell did you know I was in True?”

There was a pause. “I may have hacked into the GPS locator for your Link Prongs...”

“You may have hacked into the GPS locator for my Link Prongs.” Justin repeated, not with outrage in his voice, but something very close to it. “How the hell can you say ‘I *may* have hacked’? Either you did hack or you didn’t, and if you did-”

“It’s against about a dozen rules, but I’m a little desperate, here. Look, just stop by her place and figure out what the hell she’s doing, alright?”

“What if she’s not there?”

“GPS says she is.”

“Of course it does.” Justin growled quietly.

“Look, either you go talk to her, or we send half-a-dozen MP’s in to collect her. Keep in mind that those guys have been working guard duty in the City for the past 24 hours: they won’t be the most accommodating escorts for her. Don’t you think it’d be better for everyone if you went in to pick her up?”

Justin sighed. “Fine. Where is it?”

“Where’s what?”

“Chenine’s apartment! Sheesh! What do you think?”

“Don’t you know?” he asked, a little surprised.

“No, I don’t *know!*” Justin spat. “What do you mean by that?”

“It’s just that the two of you are always together at the base, I assumed-”

“Well, don’t assume. We’re barely on a first-name basis, and we’re not particularly tight, either, so just tell me where the hell she lives.” He absently ground his shoes against the concrete floor as he spoke.

“Well, here’s the deal...” the duty-officer hesitantly spoke, “giving out confidential personnel information without consent is strictly verboten, you know? It’s like-”

“-like hacking into the GPS signal in someone’s augmentations?” Justin snidely finished, a threatening tone to his voice. He wasn’t in the mood for bureaucratic nonsense. The guy wanted his help, and he’d already grossly invaded Justin’s privacy to get it. If he wasn’t willing to breach Chenine’s privacy a bit, there was little more to discuss.

“Touché.” The duty-officer conceded the point. He pulled up the information: “She’s in the Suphemon Building, apartment 254-614.” There was some yelling in the background. The duty-officer pulled the mic closer to his face and whispered: “please be quick about it, too: Wraith’s gonna take someone’s head off eventually, and I’m afraid it’ll be mine!”

It was a glass elevator. Imagine the bad luck! Justin suffered from what he called ‘centiphobia’: the fear of any floor past 100. He was of the opinion that humans weren’t meant to live so close to the sky. Life, he thought, should take place on the ground. It was an odd sentiment for a pilot to have, but he believed it. The ground was where both saplings and vultures dwelled: where both life and death *should* happen.

And what about 250 floors up in the sky? This was the domain of eagles. Justin didn’t mind visiting it in a spaceship, but *living* it was a totally different proposition.

Man built a tower to heaven itself, and God, enraged at his arrogance, crushed the building and fractured men’s tongues into languages. He destroyed man’s unity so that they might one day learn to come together again, but this time without the arrogant dream of building such a tower.

Justin stopped at the tiny doorway marked ‘254-614’. He thought about the proud, difficult girl inside. Mankind got its tower-building skills back, but it looked like the whole ‘unity’ thing was still a ways off.

He rang the bell three times but got no answer. The retinal scan by the door didn’t recognize him (why would it, anyway?), so he was out of luck.

“Hey in there!” He called sternly, “Chenine! It’s, uh, Justin, from Base-10.” This introduction seemed weak at best, but it was the most he could muster on such short notice.

There was still no response from the other side of the door.

“Damn it to hell.” Justin cursed. He gave the door handle a little punch and turned to leave, but stopped as he heard the door lazily swing inwards: Chenine left her apartment unlocked.

Friggin’ careless girl... he thought to himself.

He called into the apartment, but no noises greeted him. He crept quietly inside. He stepped into a sparsely furnished living room/kitchen area. The first thing that really hit him was the walls: they were colored a bright red like he’d never seen before. They nearly glowed. To Justin the color looked like blood smeared over weathered green copper.

Interesting decorating scheme, to say the least... he thought.

The small kitchen had only a tiny fridge and freezer combo. A giant paper sheet was attached to the fridge door. Upon closer inspection, Justin realized it was a grid, sparsely populated with boldfaced numbers, about fifteen rows by fifteen columns.

Sudoku, he reasoned, but the grid was far too massive for any person to actually play through. Nonetheless, he noticed that there were several spaces where numbers had been scratched in. And they were penned in permanent ink, too.

There was very little furniture to speak of, although there were grooves in certain places along the floor, as if furniture had recently been there. It was a very Spartan and utilitarian interior. The walls bore only two framed pictures, both pathetically small, as if they were tossed-up as an afterthought. One was a bleak black-and-white shot of a leafless tree on a hill. Justin contemplated the picture: he thought the tree might be a willow. The other was a grainy colored print, terribly out of focus, showing a wind-swept sky. There was something blurry and distorted in the frame, either some kind of bird or an aircraft, Justin couldn’t tell. It looked like the kind of careless, whimsical photograph a child might take.

Justin quickly pulled himself from the art critique to focus on the matter at hand. “Hey, Chenine,” he called again, eyeing the half-open bedroom door, “if you’re not dead in there, then you’re in serious trouble. The Aryl’s been after you for hours...” Justin put his hand to the doorknob and, holding his breath (he didn’t know why he was doing that), he inched the door open.

The bedroom was centered around a large and spacious bed. It was king-size. Justin recognized the model: it was a Slumbergé “Fantasy” with actual goose-down in the linens and linings (Justin only knew this because he’d recently seen the model while out shopping for his tough little twin bed: this kind of bed would easily cost him a month’s salary).

Beside the bed was a simple secretary with Chenine’s laptop resting upon it. Beneath this was an old-fashioned bookshelf with a few care-worn books on it. There were only half-a-dozen of them, most with the name *Oliver Wendell Holmes* embossed on the spine. The girl’s liquid-crystal monitor was set up on the opposite wall. The screen was stuck on a text-based news channel. The headline read:

‘Investigators and military officials raid all remaining offices of ‘Parity’.

Parity... Justin thought in the back of his head, *that’s the Bydo-lover’s group.* Members of ‘Parity’ considered the Bydo a coequal form of life with humans and advocated a ‘cease-fire’, not to mention negotiations (or at least communication) with the Great Communion of Bydo in Dimension 26. In Justin’s book, those Parity wankers were little more than human traitors.

In any event, Justin realized that this room was definitely Chenine’s base of operations; the furnished and well-appointed room was a stark contrast to the disorganized and empty foyer.

Guess this is where she spends most of her time when she’s at home.

At first Justin thought the girl might be in the bathroom, but he quickly spotted her lying on the plush bed, her back to him. She was clad in a white gown which, together with the ultra-white linens on the bed, gave the girl a clean, angelic look. For all he knew she might be dead, or otherwise incapacitated. Only Chenine’s deep and regular breathing kept Justin from intruding any further into this, her innermost sanctum. He could see the hypnotic rise and fall of her belly from the doorway.

He coughed, which he thought was the gentlemanly thing to do, but that didn’t work. He knocked on the side of the door: still nothing. He called her name, loudly, and still nothing.

I’ve heard of heavy-sleepers, but God! Sleep this deep was usually knocked out of cadets in basic training. It had been with Justin, anyway. He remembered his boot camp training, especially that mini-survival course in the Dead Lands. These days, a mosquito’s sneeze was enough to wake him up from a sound sleep. Often the light rustling noises from his hedgehogs were enough to jolt him up.

“But not her.” He said quietly to himself, debating how awkward it would be to waltz into the room and shake the scantily-clad girl awake. That’s when he noticed another framed picture on the wall, beside the entrance to the bedroom.

Unlike the other two, this picture was big. Whereas the other pictures were framed in unremarkable plastic frames, this thing was sealed in a genuine display case. Justin ever so lightly tapped the glass and was not surprised to hear a reverberating tone: it was displayer’s crystal, not glass. The frame was woven bamboo.

Inside the frame was not a picture, or an abstract piece of art, but something Justin recognized immediately: a comic strip. It was printed on smudged, yellowed paper.

This was clipped from a real, physical newspaper. He wondered. *Now that's old school...*

It was intricately drawn (and obviously hand-drawn). Every nook and cranny was filled with garish artistic flourishes. Justin's eyes were most drawn to the center panel, which showed a pajama-clad little boy and some strange-looking frog dressed in formal attire with a massive top hat. The unlikely pair were sitting atop a bed that seems to have sprouted legs. In the panel they hold-on for dear life as the living piece of furniture leaps across a starry sky. In the frame, the bed careens over a densely packed row of tenement houses. Justin leaned in closer to read the caption:

'Little Nemo in Slumberland.'

It wasn't the type of comic he was used to: this thing was massively drawn. It looked like a lot of love went into it. The artistic influence was extremely surrealist; the eyeballed perspectives the artist created were perfect. If all this was surprising to Justin, he was even more shocked to see the date of publication, written in the bottom corner of the piece of art.

"This thing is two-hundred-and-three years old..." he marveled, passing a delicate finger over the protective crystal shield.

"Fingerprints." A voice whispered behind him.

"Oh, right, sorry..." He instinctively apologized, pulling his hand from the display case. Then he realized the significance of that voice and jumped back with a start.

Chenine was standing inches from his body, the white nightgown sagging lazily over her thin body. Her eyes were indifferent and clouded with sleep. She scratched her head and wordlessly moved between the newly-formed opening between Justin and the doorframe.

As she tripped over into the kitchen she cleared her throat and, one hand to her right canalphone, spoke calmly and clearly: "This is Chovert, calling Base-10. I apologize for the delay in response: I had a minor problem with my communication equipment, but it's all functional now. I'll be on-site in two hours." She paused, then wrinkled her face, as if either the volume on her phones was set too high, or someone was yelling at her. "Yes, Aryl: forty-five minutes." She corrected herself. The girl heaved a long sigh and turned her back on Justin as she rooted around in the refrigerator.

For his part, Justin didn't quite know *what* to do. He stepped forward awkwardly. "Um, your door was open..." he began to explain.

Chenine turned to face him again, a carton of orange juice in her hand. "I don't have apple," She said quietly, shaking the carton as she produced a glass for herself. "Sorry." She didn't sound apologetic.

"What?"

"Apple juice." She explained, pouring herself a tall glass of OJ. "I don't like it, so I don't have any. Otherwise, I guess you could have some."

"Apple juice? What do you mean?"

Chenine's lips were locked upon the glass in mid-sip when Justin spoke, and she didn't reply until she'd lapped-up her fill. She drank like a doe, he noted. "You always have a glass of apple juice at the mess hall when we eat breakfast there. I'm assuming it's

because you don't like orange juice." She set the carton in the fridge and closed the door without waiting for him to answer.

That done, she turned to him, her blue eyes ineffable. "Why are you here?"

"The duty-officer sent me to pull you out of bed," Justin answered after a moment. He leaned against the wall, attempting a casual stance to rival Chenine's indifferent saunter, but he was still quite off guard.

Chenine looked him up and down. "Why you?"

"I was in the area. What the hell was that back there?" He motioned to the bedroom. "Some kind of meditation or something?"

She didn't answer for a second. "Something like that, yes." She said evasively, her eyes askance. Justin followed her gaze down to his shoes: something was crawling around on the floor. It was a spider: a *big* spider. It was brightly colored with red-and-green hairs flowing over thick legs; the festive appendages were welded to a sizeable black thorax.

"Christ!" He spat, backing away with instinctual terror.

"Do not step on him." Chenine calmly ordered. She raced over to the tarantula and scooped it up with a deft hand. She carried it to the kitchen and dropped it on the counter.

Justin recovered from his horror, but not his shock. He considered the thing's exotic colors, and the girl's control of it. "Um... that's yours, isn't it?" He guessed.

Chenine nodded absently as she downed her orange juice. She finished it deliberately, very carefully. Justin noticed that she managed to keep her lip-gloss totally undisturbed, even after drinking such a large quantity of juice.

For some reason that brought a particularly dirty image into his mind: it was something carried over from his recent link-hallucination, and he quickly shoved it aside.

Later, perhaps... he thought wryly.

"He didn't bite you, did he?"

"Huh?" Justin asked, returning to the here-and-now. "Oh: the spider. No, um, 'he' didn't, I don't think."

The girl nodded. "No, he didn't." She confirmed. "You would know if he did." She set her glass in the sink.

Justin fished for something else to say: there really wasn't much else to cover. He'd mentioned his reason for barging in, and Chenine had reported in to the Aryl, so his 'mission', if you could call it that, was finished (he suppressed the whimsical urge to say: 'well, I'm spacesick again, and dead tired, but it looks like the mission to Chenine's apartment is complete'...).

He motioned to the framed comic. "I didn't know you liked comic strips."

"I like art." She answered simply. "Some kinds, anyway."

Justin nodded. He felt a little slighted by her snippy answer. "Still, that's kind of an interesting choice of material for you, isn't it? Are you related to the artist, or something?"

Chenine's face went from neutral to puzzled. "What do you mean 'interesting choice'?"

Justin swallowed nervously. "Well, that comic's about a little kid, right? And, well, you don't really like little kids, do you?" He coughed uncomfortably; Chenine continued to eye him. "I mean, I've seen the way you act around Pipkin..."

The girl shrugged her shoulders, which made the straps of her nightgown nearly fall off. She lazily cinched them up. "I guess I'm not particularly fond of them." She said simply.

"Sooo, then what about that?" Justin motioned again to the framed strip.

"*Little Nemo* is a lot like *Peter Pan*," the girl explained, shaking her head, "it's a story written *about* a child, but it's not written *for* children to read. It uses a child as the main character because it has to; he's not really meant to appeal to the intended audience."

Justin couldn't help but arch one eyebrow quizzically. Chenine must have noticed the gesture, because she continued.

"*Peter Pan* is about how some people can't deal with transition: like the children who hide out in a land of eternal youth."

"Neverland." Justin nodded.

"Mmm-hmm. The themes aren't really that deep, but the underlying ideas in the book are pretty much beyond the grasp of a child."

Justin nodded slowly. "I see your point." He scratched the back of his head.

"Mmm." Chenine sat at the kitchen sink, rubbing her eyes. "Was there anything else you wanted?" Despite the obvious harshness of the request, her tone was cool and unthreatening.

"Time." Justin answered after a second.

"What?" The white-haired girl looked up and tilted her head.

Justin smiled. "Peter Pan." He explained. "I'll give you a point for the 'transitions' angle, but isn't the book also about how some people can't handle the passage of time properly? And how their attempts to escape it can come back to bite them in the end?"

To reflect her puzzlement, Chenine tilted her head in the opposite direction. It was likely a subconscious move, but it made her look like a parakeet. "How do you mean?"

"The croc that ate the clock," Justin continued with a smile. "You know: time mercilessly stalking poor old Captain Hook."

The girl crossed her arms defensively. "I've never read the book." She confessed.

He shrugged humbly. "I did. Once: back in New England," He smirked, unable to help himself, "when I was a kid."

"Mmm." She grunted noncommittally. Chenine turned to sweep through her tiny kitchenette, placing dirty cups and plates in the dishwasher as she went. Justin was both puzzled by and admiring of her casualness. Just two days ago he'd saved her life, risking his own in the process, and two weeks ago he'd nearly *taken* her life in a docking accident. A normal person would get all worked-up on both scores. Chenine was different: after the accident she was neither bitter nor angry, and it seemed that in the aftermath of 'Spider's Falter' she was not keen to fawn over him or excessively praise his heroics.

She was just a girl putting away dirty dishes, and he was just an ordinary stranger in the house. In the back of his head he thought it was very cold of her to act like that, but there was another side to this kind of treatment: it made Chenine something of a divine 'known quantity' in Justin's life. She was aloof, but she was *dependably* aloof.

Sometimes he hated her for this, but on the whole Justin was beginning to adore that disinterested casualness with which he was treated.

I never get any sunshine, but when you think about it she also gives me very little rain. It's just something constant and consistent, calm and cold all over.

It was like being underwater, he thought.

He considered the girl, circlets under her eyes, messed-up hair and an overall vacant expression on her usually immaculate, thoughtful face. She looked far different from the poised, ballerina-type girl he knew at Base-10.

"You look like hell, Chenine." He playfully offered.

"Out late." She explained.

"Doing what?"

"Clubbing."

"Have they re-opened the clubs here, already? Where'd you go?"

The girl, her back to him, paused a second, then continued tidying-up.

Justin assumed she didn't hear him. "I said--"

"I don't remember." She curtly answered.

"Must've been some party..." he mused.

"Must've been." She agreed, coldly. She flipped two cups from her hands; they clanked menacingly in the sink.

Ookay. He thought. *Let's just back ourselves out of that nerve.*

Justin motioned back to the framed comic. "Then what's your analysis of the strip?"

The girl slammed her dishwasher shut. She nearly stormed out of the kitchen, slinking past Justin like he wasn't even there. She ducked into the bedroom and struggled with her bed sheets. "It's not an analysis: only an interpretation."

"Then how do you interpret it?"

Tossing her sheets, she retreated to the bathroom, leaving the door open as she stood before her mirror and the unforgiving lights. The blaring lights enunciated the obvious aspects of her beauty: her curves, her slimness and the blue sapphire glow of her eyes, but at the same time they highlighted the bags beneath her lids and the bleakness of that cold porcelain face she so often wore.

"It teaches us about segregation." She mumbled.

"Segregation?"

She looked over her shoulder at him. The girl's face was serious, even for her. "Deep down, people have two sides; did you know that?"

Justin scratched the back of his head. "Um, someone once told me that." He shrugged.

"People do. Little Nemo teaches us how to properly channel that one particular side."

"Which side do you mean?" Now it was Justin's turn to tilt his head.

Chenine pulled some miscellaneous skin cream from her cabinet: she didn't give him an answer.

Denied a response, Justin strained to fill the silence. "So you're saying that your comic strip over there is a primer on human psychology? Pretty deep stuff..."

"Not 'deep'." She said, shaking her head. "It's really just some pretty-looking scribbles about a boy who has..." she paused, her eyes contemplative, "overactive fantasies. But he only indulges them when he dreams. You know, when it's appropriate..." she looked like she was going to say something else, but stopped short.

“What, does that make him a role model, or something?” Justin was confused.

“No, not a role model. I’m saying it’s at least as helpful to me as a support group is to your average Joe on the street.”

“You mean it’s therapeutic.” He nodded. Justin put his head against the wall again. He felt a small stirring in his stomach: it was a butterfly. He’d never had such a deep conversation with Chenine before, and he felt like keeping it up.

What the hell, he thought, might as well try:

“You know, lots of people call a six-pack a support group.” He made a conscious effort to stare the girl in the eye, but couldn’t quite manage. “You wanna go get a drink or something later, Chenine? I mean, after your stress-test.” His face reddened. *Besides, I’m already undergoing mine, at the moment.* That internal quip helped him put a weak grin on the offer.

She stared at him for a moment, though it seemed like an eternity. Her eyes scanned him quietly before she whitewashed over the clumsy pick-up line. “I don’t like alcohol, much.” She turned to the mirror to apply her cream.

“Of course you don’t.” He nodded quietly, expecting as much. He absently scanned the framed strip again. “You can say that it’s just some scribbles, but still, they are *really* pretty scribbles, aren’t they?”

He noticed a very faint smile grace the girl’s lips. “Better than Michelangelo and Rembrandt combined.” She agreed. Her grin widened. “Even Picasso can’t touch it.” She self-consciously dropped the smile as she noticed Justin out of the corner of her eye. “Is there anything else you need from me?” She absently asked.

I’m not really sure, am I? And that’s actually part of the problem, you see...

Justin considered the pale, young girl in front of the mirror. Summing up all his current feeling towards her, good and bad, he felt a tiny, warm smile curl over his lips.

They were ‘copasetic’, after all, and in the end, that would have to be enough.

“No,” he said with certainty as he turned to leave, “there’s nothing else I need from you.”

He made it as far as the kitchenette before Chenine caught him.

“Wait.” She said.

“Mmm?” Justin turned to face her. To his surprise the girl was remarkably close: her toes touched his, and he could feel the vapors of her breath on his chest. Her cosmetic skin cream smelled of lilacs.

She was looking up at him, but with her head tilted downward. The overall effect was one of submission; it wasn’t a trait he was used to seeing in the girl.

“Is there... *anything* else you need from me?” To Justin’s infinite surprise she put her little finger against his chest and traced a small semi-circle around his heart.

“Anything?” She repeated.

That qualifies as a one-hundred-fucking-eighty... Justin struggled to keep enough blood in his brain to form rational thoughts. Chenine’s eyes were piercing. They were *eager*.

But there was something else there, too. Her eyes were eager, but they weren’t particularly hungry.

Justin wasn’t so good at understanding people. It was one of the reasons he lived that island-like existence of his, but he thought he could see something in Chenine, if only for a moment. It was something in those milky blue eyes, beneath the eagerness,

beneath the sexuality. There was something under the shell; it was quiet, and sad. It was like the dark abyssal zone beneath the crystal blue waters of the ocean.

Back when the oceans were blue, Justin thought.

He averted that gaze.

Chenine blinked once, then twice. She withdrew her finger, then averted her eyes as well. Within a few seconds she was back to her distant, normal self.

“If not, the Aryl’s waiting for me.” She brusquely declared, retreating to the bedroom, then the bathroom, where she securely locked the door.

Justin, blinking in surprise, stood in place.

Ooookay... he thought.

The girl called through the door: “Please do not touch anything on your way out.”

He arched an eyebrow.

“And I’m sorry about the apple juice.”

“Sure.” He muttered, dumbfound.

Chenine waited until she heard the front door click shut. She went back out to the kitchen and scooped-up her multicolored tarantula, carrying it back to her bedroom. The little spider’s two front fangs glistened with a milky white froth.

“Not now, Flip.” She declared, setting the creature down in a small bedside box. She inspected her bare right shoulder, found two tiny puncture marks and kneaded some skin cream into them until they vanished under the porcelain coating.

She flopped onto the soft bed.

Why did they send him? She thought.

Chenine resettled herself; she felt a bit uncomfortable. A sudden, blinding pain sized her midsection: she gripped her abdomen with both hands and doubled over.

“Rrrrgh!” She nearly screamed.

She’d had serious gastrointestinal problems immediately after the battle for Nash Ultima: it hadn’t been from the combat or any trauma to her body, but rather from something she’d eaten. To put it delicately, she’d been expelling tiny flakes of metal from both ends. The only thing she’d eaten recently was Base-10 cafeteria food, and of course those ‘Double-J’ rations she’d stolen from the base’s stockroom.

Bad batch, she surmised, *maybe they fired their quality control team or something.*

But those stomach complaints were history, now. This pain was different, and it radiated from a much lower part of her body.

What had she done this time? What had she *allowed* someone to do to her this time?

She couldn’t really remember.

Chenine flopped down on her back, ignoring the pain, and grabbed the little pill bottle from her bedside. She opened it and counted the contents.

...seventeen... eighteen... nineteen.

Four gone, she deduced. That was too many. It must’ve been a really unpleasant night.

These days most of them were pretty unpleasant. Her little hunt to replace her ex was slow-going. She’d actually been dragging her ass about the whole thing, although she didn’t really know why.

We can't have anymore dawdling, she determined. After all, she'd be out on the streets within a matter of weeks if she couldn't find a 'better-half' to keep up payments on the apartment.

Chenine 'oozed' off the bed and pattered to the bathroom. She started the shower and slipped out of her nightgown. The girl stared at her reflection in the mirror, not a trace of emotion on her face.

There's only two things in this world that you have to offer anyone, you know. For one, you've got an apartment. She absently trained a finger down her shoulder to her bellybutton. The girl gazed at her reflection.

And you've got your body.

Those were her cardinal assets.

No, actually, that's all you have to offer. They're the only things that could possibly give you any value to someone else.

Without those things, all she had were her capricious quirks and her violent mood-swings. Her abode and her bed were the only things that made her even remotely tolerable. Even then, they weren't always enough. Hence, the loss of her previous lover.

Chenine clenched her teeth as she considered the pilot of the *Platonic Love*. She knew that he wouldn't take her, even if she directly offered herself like that. It wasn't that he didn't want to. Far from it, probably: he likely spent quite a bit of time fantasizing about her. He was a male, after all.

At least, he's vaguely male. She thought with disgust.

More's the pity for him: he'd blown a golden opportunity for himself. Her limbs were still paralyzed from Flip's bite when he'd come in; if he had the balls to roll her over and screw her she could've given up the search, tossed him a spare set of keys and scheduled the day for him to move his stuff in. But she knew he wouldn't.

He's a timid little lamb, she thought. *Like a small child, or something.*

He'd walked in on her when her physical defenses were down and he'd blown the opportunity, and even when she turned around and dropped her mental defenses he wouldn't take the bait. He couldn't handle the abrupt change in her personality, she guessed. Changes weren't something he seemed adept at dealing with.

He's like a pathetic Peter Pan, she scornfully surmised.

He wouldn't take her, for whatever reason, and that made him worthless to her.

Somewhere, in the back of her head, the word 'copasetic' lilted through her brain. It danced in her head like a tinny lullaby. For some reason, she felt kinda happy when she thought about it.

For now, though, she ignored it.

After her shower, on her way out the door, the phone rang.

"Hiya: Chen!" A peppy female voice squeaked. "A little blue jay told me you were out on the town last night."

"I was somewhere." She answered.

"Woah! Lost your memory, huh? And I thought you weren't into the club-drugs! Must've been a killer time!"

"Must've." She agreed.

"Well, just so ya know, we're all hitting the Kit-Kat tonight, and we're gonna hit it hard, but it sounds like you've already managed to trash yourself pretty good, so..." the squeaky voice lilted questioningly, "I guess you wouldn't be interested in-"

“-I’m in.” Chenine cut the pop-tart off quickly. She looked at her little pill bottle, balancing it delicately on two fingers for a moment. Then, in one lightning-fast move, she flipped it in the air, grabbed it with her fist, then hurtled it against the hideously-colored red wall.

To hell with the lullabies, she thought with derision.

“...and of course, gentlemen, the defense of the Tower itself was no small feat, given the circumstances.”

The hard-chinned delegation of Allied Military generals toured the damaged Sixty-Nine Memorial Tower. Except for the occasional shattered window and sliced support beam the building was intact. The smartly-dressed generals’ boots crunched over a floor of glass shards.

“Well, cleanup here’ll certainly be much cheaper than in some of the other districts.” One man admitted.

The group halted in an elegant lobby, the giant shattered window giving them a dramatic view of Ultima True. Raisers clambered up and down buildings as far as the eye could see like flies dancing on toothpicks.

“We’ve still got to decide on appropriate sanctions for the Epdin Raising Committee.” One man pointed out.

One grizzled-looking bulldog balked: “*Sanctions*? That’s a sweet, rosy little word, isn’t it? We should be talking about *dismantlement*: those quasi-military dicks up there dropped the ball, *big* time. I think I speak for most of us when I say that Epdin has outlived its usefulness.” There were grunts of approval amongst the men: the Allied Military’s disdain for Epdin was a well-known fact, at least amongst the military’s more hawkish members. By its very nature the network was a defensive setup (and a massively costly one at that), but the military was, by its nature, an *offensive* body. The generals wanted to fight, not hide behind a sparkling shield in the sky.

The Epdin Raising Committee and its supporters preferred a more defensive mentality, to hide behind their glistening web: the ‘spider’ solution. The military hawks wanted to seek out and crush the Bydo wherever they roamed: they were commonly referred to as ‘sharks’.

Sharks and spiders don’t really get along.

“I wouldn’t call twelve-thousand casualties ‘dropping the ball’.” One of the generals, a solemn-looking man, rebuked his colleague. This man was extremely tall, but gaunt and almost sickly-looking, his face as long as a horse’s. He spoke with the voice of an elder statesman past its prime: the voice was hoarse, but it had a forceful timbre. “This was nothing less than a total disaster, but we *all* know the political consequences of moving against the Epdin Raising Committee; in the long run it’s far more trouble than its worth.”

“But at the same time the media is trying to hit us with the blame. Are you saying we should just bend over and take it with a grin?”

The solemn man scratched his chin with a black-gloved hand. “We need to go about this the right way: we shouldn’t go around simply blaming the ERC for this, even though it was obviously their fault. That kind of back-and-forth is a zero-sum game.”

“What then?” The bombastic man asked as he crossed his arms over his dark purple uniform vest, his medals and decorative chains rattling as he did so.

The men stood in an orderly semi-circle, deep in thought.

Finally one man spoke up. He was shorter than the generals, who all wore black platform boots. He wasn't wearing an elegant purple vest, and he lacked the generals' royal blue capes and medals. He was instead plainly dressed in uniform coat and pants.

"...maybe if we gave everyone a nice little hero story?" He whispered behind the solemn general's back.

The old general turned to him. "What's that, Kröterohr?"

The other men glared imposingly at the meek aide. He coughed delicately and spoke up: "Sirs, we could make some good examples out of the soldiers who fought in the battle, to spotlight our contribution to the City's defense."

"You mean we should focus attention on a hero within our ranks so we *all* look good..." One general nodded with a thoughtful look on his face, as if this was his idea all along.

The aide persisted. "Perhaps someone within the Raiden-fighter branch? After all, there were several units slugging it out down on the streets during the fighting--"

"Quiet, Kröterohr!" The obtrusive general bawled. "Be a good fellow and let us think a bit." He crossed his arms and bowed his head dramatically, but if there were any original ideals in that head they didn't come to the surface.

The solemn-looking general turned to his aide. "Do you have anything specific in mind?"

Kröterohr pulled out a data pad from his pocket. He made a pretext of calling up some data from the screen when, in fact, he knew exactly who he wanted to talk about.

"It seems that a Dancer-clone from Base-10 managed to eradicate an entire legion of Tove-incarnations not too far from here. In the process it saved a data-miner from destruction. That data-miner managed to record some of the Raiden's combat maneuvers."

One general waved a hand. "Wait, wait. What Dancer-clone are we talking about? I'm unfamiliar with the unit in question. It was Base-10, you say?"

Another general, quiet and reserved, raised his head. With encyclopedic accuracy he explained: "That would be a vessel from the Raiden-Hybrid program: unit 'Charlie-Rho-Theta-Sigma'." He said with a nod. "One of my RL's down at Base Leone reported that his data-miner was saved by that Raiden. It's from the new program."

"The Hybrids." Another man sneered derisively. "I thought we were going to scrap those abominations."

"Don't be such a sniveling worm." A relatively young general chided. "If you're upset about using Bydo flesh in our weapons then you should be prepared to decommission the entire R-Type fleet."

"But the Hybrids have *twice* the flesh of an average Raiden." The naysayer retorted.

The solemn general waved his hand. "Three-percent flesh: seven-percent flesh, the difference is negligible."

"Not too negligible, if it really did manage to ice 59 Toves. That kind of performance from a Dancer is unheard of."

The more skeptical general shook his head. "I don't care about the results we're getting out of them," he sneered. "The Labs've been very secretive with their status reports. In all honesty I don't know *what* the hell they've been doing with the Hybrids.

They've got far too much leeway to work with." He hocked a loogie and spat it onto the glass-covered floor. "And whatever those pencil-pushing lab techs are doing to build those aberrations, it's gone *waaaaay* over budget. And now they're ready to introduce another model! The Guys Upstairs are usually real tightwads when it comes to budgeting, but it looks like the SJC's refusing to apply *any* pressure to those poindexters, so where does that leave me?"

Kröterohr stepped forward. "Sir, it leaves you with a Dancer-clone that slaughtered a legion of incarnations. That's gotta be worth something to us."

The gruff general glared at the aide darkly.

"He has a point." The solemn one nodded.

The aide continued. "Sirs, we can use that footage to our advantage from a PR perspective. Plus, I believe the pilot of that Raiden is a female: if we can turn the lady into a 'sleeper-hero' it might also help with our recruitment of female soldiers. They've been on the wane recently, you know..."

"'Sleeper-hero'?" The younger general asked.

"The R-H program is still classified, or at least the pilots' identities are." The bombastic general explained. "So if you wanna turn this little girl into a hero, you'd be walking a fine line: no public appearances, no autographs, so to speak. We'd just put that footage out there and let it do the talking."

"And we could just mention, in passing, that this particular pilot doesn't have the balls for the job." The quieter general smirked.

"Agreed. We can't go around naming names, but letting people know her sex should be fine." The old general nodded sagaciously. "We *are* hard-up for recruits these days, and it's true: our female-recruitment division has been underperforming..."

"Humph!" The skeptical one growled. "Usually our combat pilots get put through the wringer when we decide to make 'em war-heroes; we're used to letting the media rip into 'em. The press enjoys eating 'em up like Fruit Loops. But this girl'll be a hero without even having to roll out of bed."

Kröterohr's black eyes sparkled with a dark, scheming fire. "Sirs, if we're going to publicize this incident, it might be a good idea to put the Hybrids in a prominent position during the campaign to re-take Jupiter. At the very least it would boost our troop morale to have a couple of quasi-celebrities on the frontlines."

None of the generals responded to this immediately. Finally the solemn one nodded. "That would make the most sense." The elder man turned to the more skeptical general. "How does that suit you?"

"I'm game." He finally answered, snapping one finger. "Worst-case scenario: the Hybrids get dusted, and the taxpayers are out a few million bucks. Personally, I could care less: not a lot of skin off my back. This little boondoggle is purely the SJC's baby, and with the way they seem to be ceding control over to the Labs, I think their interest is waning as well."

The quiet general smiled again. "And, yet, if those R-Types churn out a decent performance you'll trumpet your 'bold leadership decisions' to the heavens themselves, won't you?" He cynically observed. "It's not a bad position to be in at all."

The generals abandoned this topic of heroes and Hybrids, moving on to other matters. After a few minutes they were ready to move on, and the purple-vested men

began tromping off in an orderly phalanx, their royal blue capes flapping grandly behind them.

The elder general turned back to his aide. The man in black was not following the group. “Coming, Kröterohr?”

Kröterohr was near the large gutted window, his hand to his head. “One moment, please, general: I have to take this call.” He apologized obsequiously. “I’ll catch up to you momentarily.”

Nodding, the general moved off with the rest of the Allied Commanders.

Kröterohr turned his back on them. The golden sunlight from the busted window highlighted his wavy black hair and pale skin. His black eyes bulged from a head that was, in reality, too small for them. In his black dress uniform he looked like a wily raven, although with his pallid skin, thin frame, and too-large black eyes he had many of the qualities of an emaciated toad. He spoke quietly into his headset.

“I need to leave a message for a member of your command staff.”

“One moment.” A secretary’s voice answered. “Our executive duty-officer just reported in for her shift; you’ll have to leave your message with her.”

“Fine.” A blanket of white-noise filled his ears, then a perky female’s voice bounded across the line:

“This is Lieutenant Laura Hayle, Base-10 Command: how can I help you?”

“I need to leave a message for subcommander Sven Wraith,” Kröterohr explained.

“Ooookay...” Laura acknowledged as she analyzed the signal he was using to broadcast his transmission, “your authorization is ‘hemlock’, right?”

“Correct.”

“Very good: I’ll take that message now.”

“Please tell him the following: ‘the package has been scheduled for delivery’.”

The Lieutenant waited a few seconds. “Is there anything else?” She questioned.

“No, ma’am. He’ll understand that.”

“Alright, I’ll get that to him. Oh, and could you tell me who’s leaving this message?”

Kröterohr gazed out the window with his toad-like eyes. He watched the delicate ballet of the Raisers as they cavorted around the skyscrapers like spiders repairing their webs. He gingerly rubbed his nose: his allergies were starting to get to him.

There was a band on his wrist: a bright piece of silver jewelry. It had only one decoration: a small heart-symbol was carved into the silver, complete with a smoldering teardrop resting in the middle. There were three blank lines beneath that, like spaces in a game of hangman.

“The name’s Unitas.” he answered calmly, “My name is Johnny Unitas.”



T I A