



### **The Perfect Fifth**

Bubbles danced all around her.

The water was deliciously warm; Chenine could feel a quiet churn in the steamy pool. Blue froth glided happily around every nook and cranny of her body.

She opened her tiny eyes.

There were candles on the ledge. They burned with a lovely lavender scent. There's a lot of light coming in through the windows. And oh, so many bright colors, too!

The festival band played down below, outside the bathroom window. The comedy troupes marched in narrow streets; brilliant reds and blues and purples swam by the milky glass window pane.

Her tiny feet went pitter-patter, pitter-patter over the rustic tile floor.

So much festive style! Candles in the bath, banners on the streets!

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter went her heart in her chest. Everything's so happy!

There're so many bright colors everywhere! Even the water-

-Chenine opened her eyes.

Her head rose up in sudden alarm: she was floating, suspended in a hot bubbling liquid. A big mess of bubbles exploded from the facemask clamped down over her nose and mouth. She panicked. Chenine clawed at the mask, ripping it from her face. Then she

struggled, flailing with her feet until she found the bottom of the pool. She scrunched down against the floor and pushed up with her legs in a powerful kick, sending her body shooting up to the surface.

The base doctor and her nurses worked in the central admin room of the infirmary. The misty Karat Pool bubbled and simmered on the other side of a thick glass containment wall.

The doctor consulted one of her nurse's monitors. "Alright," she said, "give it another 45-minutes, then we can move her to recovery."

A tone sounded from the infirmary door. The doctor bit her lip. She didn't like interruptions, especially when she was with patients. "Yes?" she said with a razor edge to her voice.

The door slid open and Scott Tabris entered. "Uh, hi, doctor, is it alright if I come in? Dr. Roont wanted an update on Miss Chovert's condition."

"Oh, it's you, Scott. Fine." The doctor waved him in. "I thought you were someone else." She was relieved that Roont had sent his young flunkey instead of coming down himself; she didn't want to deal with that snake at the moment.

Tabris wandered over to the thick glass wall and stared at the large steaming pool on the other side. "Is she in there?"

"Yes. We put her in the Karat Bath because of her low heart rate and core temperature. It's really a wonderful treatment: not only does it decontaminate, but it'll also stimulate her body, which should help raise those vitals without us having to resort to drug therapy."

"Was she really in that bad of shape when they brought her in?"

The doctor shook her head. "Not really, per say, but she did go into psychogenic shock during the battle. That made her vitals drop like a rock." She shrugged. "I was a little surprised when the medics brought her all the way back here. Usually you'd get emergency treatment done right in the field for this kind of thing." She looked over at Scott. "It was Roont who ordered that, wasn't it?"

Tabris could feel her piercing gaze. "Um, I'm not sure..." he said. "If he did order it, he must have thought that it'd be better for Miss Chovert to get treatment back here."

The doctor scoffed. "Yes. He must have." She didn't know why that snake Roont kept the Raiden pilots on such a tight leash. One thing she knew for certain, though, is that it wasn't simply out of altruistic concern for his fellow humans.

One of the nurse's monitors beeped. "Doctor: the patient's vitals are rapidly rising. We're also getting gamma wave activity from her EEG." She declared.

"Very good, Angela." She nodded.

Scott looked over at the doctor. "Her vitals are up? So does that mean she's going to regain?"

Suddenly Chenine burst up from below the water. With one fell motion she slung herself over the side of the pool and set down on the septic white tiles of the clean room. Tiny wireless electrodes dotted her forehead, collarbone, chest and legs. Steamy blue water dripped down her body.

"*Heello!*" Tabris blurted. He quickly spun around to face the door, blushing like a schoolboy.

The doctor clicked an intercom button. “Welcome back, Chenine.” She called to the dripping girl. “You’ve been out for a few hours. Your body went into Link Shock when your Raiden crashed, but you’re doing fine now. We’ve got to finish your decon process, so I need you to pick-up your mask and get back in the pool, alright?”

The girl was breathing heavily; she had her hands on her knees. “No.” She shook her head. “Not that.” She motioned to the steaming tub. “*Nothing* like that.”

“Chenine-”

“No!” She stamped one naked foot down on the white tile, her narrow eyes blazing.

“Your body needs to be purified.” The doctor declared.

Chenine crossed her arms over her chest; it wasn’t so much an attempt to cover herself as it was a posture of defiance. “Not like that. No submersions, and that’s non-negotiable.” She ordered. The girl’s eyes blazed like coals: she’d regained her usual icy, emotionless voice.

The doctor sighed and shook her head. “Chenine, if you refuse the Karat Bath then we’ll be forced to go with the hard-lather treatment because I can’t let you leave here without being cleaned. I really think you’d prefer-”

“Hard-lather’s fine.” She interrupted. “Or whatever else you want to do with me, anything, I don’t really care; just *not* this.”

The doctor rubbed her neck in exasperation. “Angela,” she ordered her nurse, “have the techs prepare the primary clean room.” She gave Chenine a semi-threatening look, “and get the mechanical scrubbers ready.” Her tone of voice and her threat didn’t faze the girl; the young Typer remained stone-faced. Evidently, Chenine *really* didn’t want a bath.

The doctor turned to Tabris. “Run along, Scott.” She sternly ordered. “You can tell Roont that Chenine’ll be fine.”

The pale-skinned girl’s eyes flashed. “Is JG Tabris in there with you?” She asked, tilting her head slightly as she looked at the one-way mirror.

Scott flushed again. “Umm... yes, Miss Chovert, but, uh, I’m not looking...”

Chenine didn’t seem overly concerned about that. “Tell me: what condition is the *Chaste Gazer* in?” she asked quietly.

Tabris was thrown off by her lack of indignation. “Uh, it’s salvageable. She’s coming in on a flatbed later tonight, along with the *Platonic Love*. The recovery crews managed to get the R-H’s out of Ultima True before the Superior Joint Command cordoned off the area.”

Chenine’s eyebrows arched at the news that her sister ship had also been incapacitated. “What’s the status of the pilot of the *Platonic Love*?” She asked.

“What, Justin? Oh, he’s fine.” Scott answered. “He... well, he really damaged his Raiden during the recovery operation. You see, the *Gazer* was falling from the sky and he used his ship as a brace to lessen the impact.”

Chenine absently twisted water from the back of her hair as she listened to this, her eyes cast off to one side in a pensive stare.

“He saved your life.” Scott added after a pause.

“Enough chatter,” the doctor sternly declared. “You’ll get debriefed later, Chenine. For now, we’re focusing on your decon process.” She turned to Scott and motioned to the door. “You: out *now*.”

“That might be a good idea...” Tabris quickly agreed.

Jen tromped through the lower deck corridors. The collar of her starchy dress uniform was unbuttoned and her blouse was un-tucked. Her eyelashes were damp with water from the lavatory sinks. She was finally on break. It was about time, too. Laura Hayle might be a super duty officer, and she might be an excellent command operator (as military command operators go) but she was also a god-damned slave-driver. Jen guessed that it wasn't just the lieutenant who had a bug up her ass. The Allied Military was like a greedy pimp: it wanted all its grunts to whore themselves out to the best of their abilities.

*And I have a feeling that my legs're gonna be up in the air for a long time...*

She rounded a corner and tromped down a stairwell that led to the infirmary. She could hear a young child's high-pitched giggle coming from the lounge.

“Heh! Now that's very cool. That's a real hoot.” Justin Storm chortled. He was sitting on a bench in the anteroom, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. He was holding his right palm out to a very tiny girl who was standing in front of him. The girl was a curly-haired sprout who looked like she'd wandered straight off a Broadway production of *Annie*. She barely came up to Justin's chest.

“Nooo!” She giggled through buckteeth. “This is serious!”

“Of course it is.” Justin teased, grinning widely.

“Come on!” She ordered in that very serious tone of voice little kids get when adults patronize them.

“Well, then what's this one, huh?” He motioned to one of the veins in his hand.

“Let's seeee...” the child gripped Storm's hand and put her eyes very close to his palm. Then her head shot up and she beamed brightly. “That one's easy: that's the doo-lily line.”

“Uh huh...” Justin said, eyes arched questioningly. Then after a second: “*Duality* line?”

“That's what I said.”

“Of course,” Justin smirked. “Okay, I'll bite: what is it?”

“That's one of the lines that tells ya' about your essence.”

“Essence?”

“Yeah, this line is supposed to go straight through the middle of your heart.” She traced her little fingers over the vein in question. “The book says it'll tell you a deep inner truth.” She enunciated these last words with a reverent smirk.

“Deep inner truth?”

“Yeah. It says that the guy who first studied it got in trouble 'cause he didn't know how much energy is penned-up in it.”

“You mean *pent*-up, right?”

“That's what I *said*!” She sternly called. “He used a bunch of leeches to force out the power from the vein. That's when he got into trouble.”

“Oh. I see,” Justin nodded with overbearing seriousness, “he underestimated the danger. And what happened to him?”

The little girl grinned again. “He turned into a dragon!” She tittered.

“Of course he did.” Justin rolled his eyes. “So, what about me, huh? What can you tell from my 'duality line'?”

The girl scrutinized Justin's vein seriously for a moment before looking up at him. "You've got a *really* big vein." She declared. "You're gonna turn into a dragon, too!"

Justin nodded, as if he were deep in thought. Then he finally said: "Will I be able to throw-up fire?"

"Hey, c'mon! I'm serious!" The girl scowled and gave Justin a playful shove. Justin put one finger on her collarbone and pushed back with equal force. The girl tittered playfully.

"Hey, let's not get into a shoving match, here." Jen rounded the corner. She smiled at the little girl. "I thought the military was just stealing students from the universities. Now I guess they're snatching elementary kids, too."

"H'lo, private." Justin waved. He motioned to the girl, "Well Pip here's not a GI. Not yet, anyway." He smiled. "She's a tagalong. Her mom's working on Chenine in the next room as we speak."

"Ah, so that makes you the doctor's rug-rat, huh?" She nodded to Pip.

The sunny girl tittered happily in reply.

All of a sudden there was a low-pitch rumbling noise. It rose through the floor and shook the empty tables in the lounge. Justin eyed the small windows opposite the lounge. He leaned down to the girl.

"That noise is the flatbed convoy coming in, Pipkin. They'll be carrying those two really neat-looking spaceships on their backs." Pip's eyes brightened. She quickly loped over to the windows, her pink dress swaying as she scampered.

"Pip, huh? That's a pretty weird-ass name." Jen whispered under her breath.

Justin nodded with a sigh. "Just a nickname," he grunted, his voice far less enthusiastic than before. He sounded hoarse, and insanely tired. "Her real name's Piperel, but she hates it. Everyone around here just calls her Pipkin."

"Why 'Pipkin'?"

"I dunno." He shrugged. "I think Donald Plinshine came up with the name. He said it has something to do with rabbits, or some kind of thing like that. You can ask him if you want. Anyway, the name kinda stuck." He looked over at the distracted little girl. "Pip's the unofficial mascot of Base-10. She's allowed to stay here because the doctor has her own quarters on base, you know, so she can be at the ready 24-7."

Jen shrugged. "Well, with those buckteeth and the way she skips around, I get the rabbit analogy." She turned to face Justin and rested her right fist against her breast, lowering her head in that reverent Airen gesture of hers. "Anyway, I just wanted to say: you guys really rocked today. Even an anti-military solider-hater like me can admit that much."

"Mmm." Justin disinterestedly grunted. "It *was* some good combat, I guess. I figure I might as well have some fun behind the wheel before I turn into a dragon." He smiled.

Jen flopped onto a big cushy couch next to the pilot. "What, you're talking about that palm-reading crap? Your little friend Pip was quoting from the Dead-Land Mythos. It's kind of strange that her mother would let her read that mystical Regressor crap." She eyed Justin's wrist. "Although I will say that she's right: your veins do look plenty bulgy, don't they?"

Justin was surprised to hear that cultural slur from the private's mouth. 'Regressor' was a pretty vulgar word. "Eh, I think it's harmless. It's just one of Pip's

hobbies; you know how capricious little kids can be.” He absently flexed his right hand open and closed. “And, for your information my veins *are* big right now. They’re *all* big; it’s aftershocks from all the latent energy in the Raiden, that’s all.” He eyed the private. “But I’m a little surprised by your attitude towards the Dead Landers: aren’t you college girls supposed to be liberal and open to cultural differences?”

“Cultural differences? Oh, please.” She shook her head. “It’s one thing to be culturally unique, but it’s another thing to be fanatical zealots, like those mud-stomping troglodytes in the Dead Lands.” She rested her head against the couch.

Pipkin moaned with disappointment as she stood on her tiptoes at the windows. “Awww... That’s not fair! I can see the flatbeds, but they’ve got plastic covers on the back. You can’t see anything under them!” The girl lamented. She loped down the hall to the next series of windows, following the flatbed ships as they rumbled by. “There’s lots of men with guns sitting on the tarps, though.” She noted.

The ground rumbled even louder as the flatbeds, with their massive vertical engines, passed directly by the portholes.

The rumbling grew into a crescendo.

Justin’s head swam; he felt his body drifting dreamily through a dark void.

*Adamancy...*

He felt flames licking at his body. He shuddered. He smelled black smoke training out between gnarled lips.

Nearby lips.

Who’s lips *were* those?

*Adam-*

Then he felt nothing.

The rumble faded.

The flatbeds disappeared from view as they chugged on towards the R-H bays.

Justin’s eyes shot wide open. He started; his arms spasmed reflexively, the kind of spasm a person gets when they’re startled awake from a dream in which they’re falling. Jen looked at him with a furrowed brow. “What is it?” she asked.

The pilot’s pupils were big as saucers. He grunted and shook his head. “Nothing.” He said quietly. “It’s nothing. I had, well, a hallucination when I was up in the *Love*. It sometimes happens in ships with sensation-links.” He sighed. “And just now I had a little flashback, you know?”

A thin, conspiratorial grin covered Jen’s face. “Hallucinations and flashbacks? Yeah, I can relate.” She winked. “Regrettably, not as much since I was drafted, though, given the military’s love of random drug-tests...”

Justin gingerly pulled the two halves of his black suit down his body. The outfit fell away like a mottled layer of skin, leaving him bare-chested. He hunched over and hung his head.

Jen looked at the silvery spikes in the pilot’s back: they were encrusted with blood and sweat. She appeared mystified by them. “Do they hurt?” She asked.

Justin shook his head. “Nah. They only hurt when they’re pulled out.”

“And when they’re retracted?”

“Hmm?” He asked lazily. It was clear that he was running on fumes. “Oh, the ‘sheathing’. Nope. But sheathing them isn’t a cakewalk: the prongs have to ‘reconnect’ with my spinal cord when they’re shoved back in, both physically and electrically. On top of it all, while the prongs and my spine start to ‘talk’ to each other I lose all voluntary muscle movement, so I’m paralyzed. It’s temporary: lasts about five minutes or so.” Justin rubbed his eyes and yawned. “That means I need to be here at medical to have them put back in. Also, the doctor promised that she would put me to sleep as soon as she’d seen to Chenine.”

“Put you to sleep?”

“The only reason I’m conscious right now is because the guys on the flatbed transport offered me a shot of clean amphetamine.”

Jen smiled. “So you’re not here out of concern for your fellow Typer?”

Justin scowled. “Hardly. In fact, I hope this whole ordeal teaches her a lesson.” He lay down on his side, groaning as his aching torso rested on the springy couch. Justin covered-up his Link Prongs with his suit top, just in case Pipkin came by again. It was a big social taboo to show off one’s augmented body to little kids; it was almost like exposing your naughty bits in public. In modern society there are a few gross truths that children are protected from: they’re not allowed to see the corpses of the fallen Bydo soldiers and they’re not allowed to see the lengths some humans have gone to in order to fight them. It was really just a simple little prejudice: many people thought that modified humans (the ‘augmented’) were starting to become way too similar to the quasi-organic demons they were fighting. The Bydo were completely dependant on their non-organic parts in order to live: they had truly iron hearts. Justin understood that moving people in that direction, even if the changes were only ‘skin deep’, was a troubling proposition.

*Demons with iron hearts versus humans with iron skin...* He considered the idea briefly: it was a well-established philosophical argument with no clear-cut answers.

The pair were silent for a moment. Justin drifted back and forth between consciousness and sleep. Then Jen finally asked: “What’s it like?”

Justin’s head craned up. “What?”

She motioned to his prongs. “The link. You know: the interface between you and the Raiden.”

“I thought you didn’t care about Raiden-tech.”

“Well, I care about *technology*, and sensation-links are the cutting edge.”

Justin shrugged. “Well, I guess the link is...” he paused. “The best way to describe it... is to say that it’s... well...”

“Yeah?” Jen asked, leaning forward, eager at Justin’s dramatic exposition.

“Ineffable.” He quickly chirped, a wry smirk gracing his face.

“You could try to be a little serious.” Jen rebuked him.

“If I had to be totally serious all the time, with everything I have to put up with in the Raiden program, I’d probably go insane.”

“That’s melodramatic.”

“Yes, it is.” Justin agreed whimsically. He sighed. “Okay, what do you wanna know?”

“Well...” Jen thought pensively, “how does it work for *you*? What does it feel like to link? Is linking easy to do?”

“It takes practice.” Justin answered after a few moments. “Some people can do it right from the start, like pros. You know, like they’re just born to do it. For some people it takes a long time to train and learn. There’s a lot of trust, and fear, involved in a link. Some people have to kinda get their feet wet.” He shrugged. “And then there’re other people who are never able to link properly, ever. Not even if they really try. For them, the process is just overwhelming and they can’t muster the courage and faith needed to do it. But for the most part you get out of it what you put into it.”

“Hmm.” Jen grunted thoughtfully. “How does it work? I mean forming the link.”

Despite his weariness and his pain, Justin sat up and rested his prongs on the cushion of the couch. “You lose something of yourself.” He said. “It’s nothing dramatic. It’s a temporary, well, transfer of function. You surrender your own human senses to the ship.” He scratched his head. “Sight is the first thing to go.”

Jen nodded. “I guess that makes sense, doesn’t it? Humans are visual creatures, after all. Don’t we process something like 80 percent of the world with our eyes?”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“So it gives you a new kind of sight, and that feels nice, right?” the private assumed.

“Mmm.” Justin nodded. “It’s like walking down the street and seeing a nice blond head of hair,” he smirked juvenily, “and let’s say, for the sake of argument, that she happens to be stuffed into a skin-tight cocktail dress.”

Jen arched her eyebrows at the analogy. “Gives a whole new meaning to the term ‘eye-candy’. What comes next?”

Justin continued. “Well, when you’re able to see with the eyes of a Raiden it’s intense. It’s beautiful, even. Maybe it’s a little scary, but it makes you want more. It focuses you, makes you devote more of yourself to the link. You draw a breath, and realize that you can smell things so much more intently. It’s like you nose is, I dunno, coming *alive* for the first time...”

“The ability of a human to smell is piss-poor, right?” Jen asked. “At least in the animal kingdom, I think... so then smell comes next ‘cause it’s more subtle.” She nodded. “So since it’s a more subtle sense it represents more investment in the link on the pilot’s part?”

Justin shrugged. “The technical word we use is ‘devotion’. And yeah, that’s true, more or less. Once you seen a hot girl, for example, the next thing you do is sniff the air for her perfume, right?”

“Nose-candy.” Jen said with a smirk. “What, then?”

Justin tapped his ear. “All things auditory. It’s a tough step to master, at least for most people. Things can be pretty confusing in the cockpit; there’s so much acoustic information that it takes a lot of focus to filter it all. If the process overwhelms the pilot, he can’t expect to be successful at it.”

“To keep with the analogy: it’s tough to strike-up an actual conversation with our theoretical blond-haired hottie?”

Justin’s lips parted in a small grin. “Just so. Then comes taste...”

“Taste? You’re kidding, right?” Jen cackled. “No self-respecting strumpet would put out like that before the third date, at least!”

“You could try to be a little serious,” Justin threw the private’s own words back at her. “Anyway, taste isn’t anything special, at least as senses go. It’s just like smell; they



go hand in hand.” He waved his hands expressively, trying to phrase his words right. “If we’re gonna keep going with the ‘strumpet’ analogy, it’s not like tasting her-” he paused, his face flushing, “well, it’s not ‘tasting’ like you’re thinking of. It’s like how a guy can taste a girl’s perfume *as* he’s smelling it.” He paused, remembering his own initial experiences with the sensations-link of the *Platonic Love*. “It’s subtle, unassuming, and then it gets very intense. After that... well, it’s intoxicating.” His words drifted off.

There was a very long pause. Jen finally snickered and slapped Justin’s leg. “Seriously, pilot: you’re not trying to hit on me, are you?”

Justin pulled himself from his thoughts. With a blush he realized that he’d been staring at the girl. His mind had been elsewhere, but his eyes had been fixed steadily on her body. “No,” he said with a shake of his head and a smile, “not particularly.”

“Good,” she impishly nodded, settling her body back into the couch, “because, no offense to you, but I’d be more inclined to knock boots with your leggy little coworker than with you.”

*That* explained a whole lot.

“Tch!” Justin lulled his head back a bit. “My ‘radar’ must be a little off.” He said with a smirk. “I didn’t think you swung that way. I just didn’t get that vibe from you.”

“And you never will.” Jen finished with a reciprocal grin.

“Sadly for you, Jenny, neither will Miss Chovert.” The pair were startled by Scott Tabris. He emerged from the infirmary, leaning against a support column and shaking his head. “Sometimes I really worry about that girl. She’s so nonchalant about everything. And I mean *everything*. She doesn’t even share the shame of Adam and Eve when it comes to her own body. I’m really afraid that she might be asexual, or something.”

“Lack of attraction to *you* doesn’t add up to asexuality, Scotty.” Jen scolded.

“What’d you learn about her condition?” Justin asked.

Tabris shook his head. “Other than getting a pretty good idea about her natural hair color, I don’t know much. But she should be fine; she’s awake at least.”

“Hair color?” Jen said quizzically.

“Don’t ask.”

Piperel sauntered back into the lounge soon after Tabris emerged from medical. Jen could tell that Justin was having a hard time keeping his prongs covered and out of sight given his current condition, so she suggested that Tabris take the bubbly little girl up on-deck to watch the sunrise.

“That’s fine.” Tabris agreed. “Besides, the R-H’s are gonna be offloaded down in the dungeon soon, anyway. I have a feeling that Roont’ll be calling for me in a few, so I’ll just send her back down when I leave.” He took the girl upstairs with him, and left the pair to sit in silence for a few minutes.

“You left out one sense.” Jen finally said.

“Hmm?” Justin sleepily asked, then remembered their conversation. “Oh, yeah: sense number five.”

“Touch should be one of the easier ones to manage, right? I mean, it’s such a basic sense, so-”

“It isn’t.” Justin said quietly, shaking his head.

“Why?”

“Well, touch involves the highest level of devotion. There’s so much *trust* you have to place in the link. You need to surrender every inch of your body, from your head

to your toes, to something other than yourself. In essence, you kinda stop being *one* person and become something else. It's not something that's to be taken lightly: that kind of experience is frightening."

"Was it hard for you to learn?"

"I managed." Justin said quietly. That wasn't entirely accurate. He didn't 'manage' to develop an advanced link with his Raiden, he *excelled* at it. His initial training with the *Love's* Pragma-class link was cut-short due to his phenomenal progress with it. As a matter of fact, Justin's sense of touch in his Raiden was practically unrivaled.

There was something else he didn't tell the young private: their 'strumpet' analogy wasn't accurate. Even that euphemistic term they used to describe involvement in the link, 'devotion', wasn't a very accurate term. Forming a 'link' with a *human* involved devotion, but linking with a Raiden involved little more than 'active surrender', as Justin liked to call it. It was an eager and willing abandonment of one's own humanity, substituting it for something cold and metallic. The people most likely to excel at a link with a Raiden were those that were *least* likely to excel at a link with a human.

*The iron-skinned have little use for other flesh...* he thought bitterly. Since Justin ultimately didn't care about himself, or his own wellbeing, he was more than willing to surrender his senses to a machine, regardless of the consequences.

*Another Sunday's just around the corner, anyway, so why bother being afraid of a bucket of nuts and bolts?*

"You 'managed'?" Jen countered. "Scott says you did much better than that."

"Did he?" Justin growled. Tabris was nothing but Dr. Roont's grunt; he was a tagalong when it came to the R-H program, but that didn't stop him from talking nonstop about the Raidens.

*What a chatty, arrogant little prick...*

"He said something about you, once..." Jen tried to remember. "Yeah: he said that the team from Bydo Labs that trained you on the *Platonic Love* called you a 'perfect fifth', right?"

"Yes," he admitted, "that's what they called me." Justin didn't sound remotely proud.

"What does that mean?"

"'Perfect fifths' are people who manage to nail all five senses on their first five tries with the link." He looked to one side disinterestedly; Justin didn't really want to talk about this. "And this was all at the VR academy, before anyone in my class had the opportunity to get themselves augmented, so all of us were strictly au natural."

"How many perfect fifths were there in your graduating class?"

"Diapentes."

"Huh?"

"I'd really prefer if you called it 'diapente'. It means the same thing."

Jen shrugged. "All right, sure. So is the phrase 'Perfect Fifth' offensive or something? Is it kinda like the word 'typer'? I didn't mean to be offensive--"

Justin shook his head. "It's not offensive. It just sounds stupid to me. It always has." He scratched his head. "And, as for my graduating class: I was the only one." Justin shrugged. "Lots of us had 100% test-scores up until the touch-

test.” He smiled. “They shoved us into a cockpit simulator and ran a feather along the outer casing. One of the lab-techs called it the tickle-test.”

Jen looked at him, perplexed. “So you mean, to pass the test, you had to-”

“Laugh,” Justin nodded, “whenever they brushed the feather along the casing.

That’s all there was to it.”

“Well, how did you go about developing your sense of touch in the Raiden? I mean, if it’s really that intense-”

“Look, when I was in the link for the first time I could feel something out there; there was something to touch, I knew I *could* touch it, and I wasn’t afraid, so I did fine, okay?” He replied curtly and with a harsh edge to his words, indicating an end to their conversation.

*That’s not a nice thing to do... a little voice in the back of his head chided him. Just ‘cause you’re ‘iron-skinned’ doesn’t mean you have to be thin-skinned, too.*

The doctor emerged from the infirmary thirty minutes later with three nurses surrounding Chenine like a phalanx. The girl was clad in a paper gown. The group wordlessly walked down the hall, headed for the secondary exam rooms and the dreaded ‘hard-lather’ decon chamber.

The medical platoon ushered Chenine into the next room, but the girl noticed Justin lying on the couch in the lounge. She stepped towards him, her bare feet soundless on the ceramic tile. For his part, Justin stood to face her.

The girl’s hair was still wet from the Karat Pool. The chemicals in the water had stripped the blond streaks from her hair, leaving it all a stark, glaring white.

“I-” she began, then paused. She looked down at her bare toes, then up at Justin’s eyes. “Thank you, for the *Gazer*.” She slowly turned to follow the nurses, but then she turned back and, as an afterthought, added: “...and for saving me, as well.”

She still lingered, her feet nervously inching backwards; Chenine obviously wanted to head off to decon, but her cold blue eyes blinked with uncertainty: apparently she didn’t want to leave any unresolved issues between them.

*Well, this is actually the first ‘issue’ of anything between us.*

“I was following orders, but I could have been wrong, doing what I did.” She folded her hands neatly in front of her: it was what she did in uncomfortable situations. “So I jeopardized us both, and for that I’m sorry.”

Justin nodded wordlessly: he was shocked as hell to get any kind of apology out of the stone-hearted girl. He briefly looked into her dark blue eyes; her milky spheres bore into him like lasers. They radiated contrition, and even pain. He was very surprised to see any of that in her expression.

Chenine swallowed. She absently stared at a nearby lamp. There was a fatalistic look in her eyes; it was almost sorrowful. “So, then... we’re...?”

Justin cut her off. “We’re... copasetic.” He said.

The girl’s eyes flitted back to him, as if she were surprised. “Copasetic?” She repeated.

“Yeah, sure.” Justin spread his hands. “I’m not interested in fighting right now. Look: let’s just consider it all a tabula rosa.”

“A blank slate?” She asked, tilting her head.

“Even better.”

“A whitewash...?” she whispered to herself, looking down.

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” She said, her eyes quickly returning to level. “I... need to go to...” she pointed.

“Decon.” Justin helpfully finished.

“Mmm.” The girl gave him one last look as she turned and followed the nurses to the decontamination chambers. Her bare back was marred with twelve small burn-marks: her prongs had been sheathed, and the doctor had laser-cauterized the puncture wounds.

*Beams from eyes and beams from machines: it's remarkable the kind of wounds a laser can heal.* He thought.

At that moment little Pipkin bounded down the hall, tearing through the lounge at breakneck speed. She took a nasty tumble and rolled past her mother, landing at Chenine's bare feet. Slightly embarrassed at her undignified entrance, but warm nonetheless, she craned her head up at Chenine and, with a tooth grin, said: “Hi!”

Chenine considered the child with cold eyes and a vacant expression. After a few icy seconds the gown-clad girl crossed her arms and declared: “You're in my way.”

The doctor firmly grasped her capricious daughter by the arm and admonished her for the disruptive behavior. “You march straight back to our quarters, young lady!” She ordered, with a swat at the retreating girl's backside as she spoke.

Chenine, meanwhile, had already disappeared into the decon room without another word.

“Copasetic?” Jen asked after the doctor and her staff were gone.

“It's a crossword-puzzle word,” Justin explained. “She'll understand.”

Jen stared at the pilot's face, her brows furrowed.

“What?” Justin asked, uncomfortably.

“Aren't your eyes supposed to be green?” she asked.

“Last time I checked. Why?”

She leaned forward. “They look, I dunno, a lot lighter than I remember.” She gripped his chin with one hand and took a closer look.

Justin recoiled from her grasp. He masked his discomfort with a joke: “Who's hitting on who now, private?”

“I'm serious!” She sharply replied. “I mean, maybe it's a trick of the light-”

“You mean an ‘optical’ illusion?” Justin smirked. “Let's keep it at that, alright?” He flopped onto his side, shielding his face with one arm. “There's nothing wrong with my eyes, except for the level of light in this room. They must have the LED's cranked up to full power or something. It's bright as hell!”

Jen furrowed her brows. She glanced at the small lamp in the corner of the lounge, as well as the tiny overhead light above them. The room was moodily lit and swamped with shadows. “What do you mean? If anything it's way too dark in here. Like a cave, or something.”

“Tch! Who needs their eyes checked, now?” Justin retorted as he sank back down into a waking doze.



T I A