



### No Softer Touch

The sun was shining on a warm Sunday morning. It made the bloated and rusty wheel of Base-10 look practically angelic with its dazzling rays. The pretty day did very little for Sven Wraith's disposition. A flock of songbirds gathered outside the RL's small office window, bleating a pitifully cheery tune when they weren't muffled by the sounds of engine exhaust from all the aircraft coming and going over the water. The military presence had nearly doubled in this region since the recent Sphinx attack, as well as the sudden appearance of the so-called 'Raider-killers'.

Wraith was slightly amused by the strategic reports that crossed his desk: 'incarnations invisible to detection'... 'shrouded by an unknown camouflage'... 'successfully targeted and engaged an unprepared Raider unit'...

"'Successful' my ass." He smirked. The brass had their own opinion about those swan-like 'no-see-ums'; but they were only partially correct. The things were, in fact, Raider-killers, built to avoid detection and take-down an R-Type craft. But that little incident against the Salt-o-Scots was no successful engagement. These incarnations were not a simple commando unit.

They were an assassination squad. And assassins, by definition, don't kill any old target. An assassin always has a specific mark. Those things weren't looking to start a fight with a bunch of puttering Scotsmen. Oh no, they were looking to kill themselves some bona-fide R-H's.

*And as fate would have it, they happened to just miss their primary targets...* Wraith scratched his scarred cheek and adjusted his collar. The Jupiter Mass had made an almost comically inept move, and it could be seen as funny, if not for the fact that an entire unit was nearly wiped out, and one of the pilots in that engagement was killed in action.

The hard-eyed RL pulled a bottle from his desk drawer. With cool precision, he unscrewed the top and nimbly tipped it over until one drop of brown liquid fell from its lip and splashed unceremoniously on the cheaply carpeted floor.

“God’s speed.” He said, quietly and quickly, before showing the bottle back inside his desk. There was no more time for idle rumination: he had paperwork to get to and it was a fat pile, at that.

He didn’t get very far before being interrupted. The towering presence of Ron Faught darkened the RL’s door. The commander stood like an old golem, proud and tall, staring down his calloused nose at Sven Wraith.

“Sir.” Wraith acknowledged the commander. He didn’t offer the grizzled soldier a seat; he knew the man wouldn’t take it.

“Wraith.” He curtly replied. The old man eyed the RL’s pile of papers with faded grey eyes. “I see you’re playing catch-up with the latest logistics analyses...” he observed darkly. Faught hated procrastination and deviations from protocol, and Wraith, truth be told, thoroughly enjoyed how his work-habits irritated the commander.

“Sunday’s as good a day as any to take care of all the trivial parts of the job.” He answered.

“I’d have thought you’d want to take care of your pilots, first...” the commander replied gruffly. “I know you haven’t gone to see the girl at all in the two days since that unfortunate ‘incident’ occurred”, he rolled that word with venomous intonation, “but I thought that you’d be interested to know that the young lady will be getting out of the infirmary later today.” The commander’s eyes stuck into Wraith like swords, “that should interest you just a little bit, shouldn’t it?”

The RL could easily pick up on Faught’s harsh and accusing tone. Sven closed his laptop and folded his hands on his desk very calmly. *So you want to accuse me of being a careless, heartless bastard, eh?* He thought. *Well, you may be right about that, but that doesn’t mean I’m aloof...*

Deep down inside, the crippled Raiden-Leader felt like punching the commander; but instead he grinned. “You’re right, sir, that does interest me, or at least it did when I heard about it this morning.” He absently inspected his well-manicured fingernails. “Consequently, commander, I have to thank you for taking the time to stop by Miss Chovert’s room at 0816 this morning to check on her progress. Of course, since you only stayed until 0818, it was more of a symbolic visit, but it was very nice, nonetheless.” He reopened his laptop and started punching in a few commands. “It’s 0915 now...” he said, “if you’d like, we might be just in time to see the nurses change her bandages. Up until 1100 last night they were doing it every 15 minutes, but this morning they’ve been doing it every 45 minutes. That’s all very good news for Miss Chovert; the good doctor tells me that the osteoplasty in her shoulder is settling in nicely...”

The commander didn’t respond to this, but Wraith’s dagger-like eyes sent him a clear and curt message:

*I may not waste my time coddling and caring-for my pilots, but not a hair on their heads moves without me knowing about it.*

He was not by any means a typical Raiden-Leader, but when push came to shove he *was* a decent ‘Aryl’.

*Antipathy aside, of course...*

“Humph.” The commander sneered. He raised his head and squared his shoulders, getting into a power position. Wraith had to admit, for a man of his age, the commander *was* a powerful physical specimen. “The reason I stopped by is to ask you why you haven’t scheduled any flight plans with the duty-officer.”

“Because I don’t have any outgoing flights, today.” Wraith shrugged. “Is that a problem?”

“Hardly.” Faught said. “Only surprising. You and that Bydo Labs doctor seem to take a perverse joy in mucking up the *regular* base operations with your daily test-flights, not to mention those damned stress-tests and pilot evaluations...”

“Well, we try not to impose too much...” Wraith lied. “but day-to-day Raiden operations are kind of tricky to do when you don’t have a pilot to perform them.”

“No pilot? What about that other pilot of yours, the male?”

The RL shook his head. “Justin Storm is a Christian...” he said. “A dying breed, to be sure, but unfortunately for me he gets a little leeway when it comes to shift schedules, and one of his stipulations is a free Sunday, every week.”

“Nonsense.” The commander scoffed. “You wouldn’t see such lazy muck-about in my department. I’ve had a few of those religious-types work for me in the past, and they were at least content to handle a normal military-schedule, like everyone else.”

Wraith stuck-up for his pilot for the sole reason that he was defending *his* command as much as he was defending Storm. “Well, don’t think he doesn’t pay for it. Miss Chovert gets first-crack at all leave-time and shift-selection. Except for that one day a week, she can basically stick him with whatever scheduling arrangement she wants.” He spread his hands. “The arrangement seems to work out between them, and as long as everyone’s fat and happy, who am I to rain on the parade? Anyway, you can inform whomever it concerns that the docking rings will be totally Raiden-free today, alright?”

“Delighted to hear it.” Then commander scowled and turned to leave.

“Oh, commander, sir.” Wraith called to him. “One last thing.”

“What is it?” He turned to face Wraith with his stone face.

“I noticed that Miss Chovert offered you her breakfast roll. You really *could* have taken it from her tray, if you wanted to. She doesn’t seem to like the selection of breads in the infirmary, and she was being genuine when she offered it to you.”

The commander’s face contorted like a bulldog’s. He wordlessly barged out of the RL’s office with Wraith’s mocking grin following him. The RL went back to his mountain of never-ending paperwork. If he’d known the amount of fuss involved in a subcommander’s position, he’d have requested a more humble role from the Committee.

*Ah, well, he thought, the burdens of command never cease.* Nor did the burdens of heading-up a motley duo of pilots like Chovert and Storm. He was more than a little annoyed that he couldn’t run either of the R-H’s today. The dark-eyed RL briefly thought about the pilot of the *Platonic Love*.

*I wonder what the hell he does on Sundays, anyway...*

The sun was shining on a warm 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.

‘Beep, beep, beep!’

On a desk near that body, an alarm clock was ringing.

Justin Storm smashed his fist down on the clock, silencing its squeal. He sat-up, red-eyed and dazed. His expression was cold and bleak as granite. There was no jovial smirk or whimsical grin on the pilot’s face. For all intents and purposes, it looked like the spirited and good-natured young man was wearing a lead mask.

He wasn't. That was, in fact, his real face. As it happened, that warm, toothy grin he was so often armed with, his happy-go-lucky, agreeable persona, that honest, beaming, unassuming face, was his real mask. He sat for a few seconds, drawing in the silence of his bedroom. There were songbirds outside his window playfully chirping in the morning light.

*Who do I see about changing the tune?* He thought, sardonically.

Then there was a light rustling from atop the desk on the opposite side of his room. Amongst woodchips and hay, the hedgehogs were stirring.

"mornin', guys..." he hoarsely crowed.

He stumbled to his fridge in a quiet daze. Bleary-eyed and enervated, he pulled two small Tupperware containers out of the ice box. One was labeled 'Sigs' and the other 'Cars'. He spooned a brown sludge out of each container and put them into two tiny bowls.

"Bon appétit, mes amis..." his voice was horribly slurred with sleepiness. Justin shoved the food dishes into each of the hedgehogs' cages. It was technically one single cage, but it had a wire-mesh divider in the middle. Short of chemical castration, that's the most sensible precaution to take when one doesn't know the sexes of one's pets.

*The last thing I need is to wake-up knee-deep in hedgehogs...*

Justin managed to zap some instant coffee and drank it on his little verandah. The view from his balcony was depressing (it was a solid brick wall, as far as the eye could see, and within arm's reach, at that) but Justin enjoyed the light fragrances of the orchids and plants that he cared for. A light column of fresh air gushed between the two buildings, making his black hair dance in the morning light. To Justin, that air was stale and cold. It reminded him of the sudden gush of pressurized air that always hit him when his Raiden canopy was set into place before missions.

Two very strong, very black cups of coffee later Justin had a sufficient buzz to go get a shower. Thirty minutes later, he was wandering down Persephone Street and into market square.

He needed food. He always needed food on Sunday, and this was part of his Sunday ritual. Justin wandered into the festively adorned 'Market Square Grocer', nearly retching as he passed the happy, sunshiny cutouts plastered on the store's main logo.

He snaked obsequiously through the store aisles, rounding-up the bare-minimum foodstuffs he would need to survive another week. It wasn't much. These days Justin usually gorged himself on the free cafeteria food at Base-10. But he only ate there when he was doing standby and had no choice but to sit in the crowded, noisy mess-hall. Otherwise, he preferred to open his fridge and shove some food in his mouth at a million o'clock in the morning before collapsing onto his bed after a 12-hour shift. Like a reptile, he preferred to down a truckload of food in a few minutes and not have to eat again for a good, solid 24 hours.

*Enjoying the breakfast, lunch and dinner of champions...* he smirked.

By 9:00 he was back on the street and winding his way robotically back home.

He dropped his sacks of food on the counter, placing them diligently in the center. He did not, noticeably, put them in the fridge.

He crashed into his desk chair and, putting his feet up on the side of his small wooden coffee table, flipped up his laptop monitor and scanned today's newspapers (he

read three a day). Justin flipped through the headlines with disinterest: council elections... civil trials... celebrity foibles... upcoming movies...

There was really no worthwhile news to read, at least none that Justin would be interested in. After the Allied Military's intelligence department gets thorough censoring each day's digest, there's really not a whole lot there. He didn't care, though: Justin still read the newspapers with rabid attention, out of force of habit, if for no other reason. Then he got to the real meaning of life, the universe, and everything (as far as newspapers were concerned): the comics.

Justin went through each one with great attention. They were the highlight of his newsgathering day, in his opinion worth twice as much as the news stories that preceded them. Interestingly, though, if he got any pleasure at all from those whimsical and irreverent comics he certainly didn't show it. His face remained cold and stony as he scanned the funnies.

"Tch!" Finally a small, genuine smirk graced his thin lips. It was "Pearls Before Swine", his favorite strip. The premise of the story couldn't be more absurd: a fraternity of idiot crocodiles moves in next door to a wary zebra, with the idea of luring him into a ridiculous death-trap so they can eat him. The inept morons always greet the intelligent, wary zebra with the phrase: "Hulloooo, zeeba neighba!"

Justin laughed, showing his pearly-white teeth.

He snickered for a few more moments, then he put his head against his hands and killed the monitor feed. He spent several awkward minutes just staring at the blank screen.

Mass would be starting soon at St. Dwynwen's. The black-roofed and sooty church was a mere seven blocks from Justin's apartment complex. He imagined the bells tolling under the steeple, dutifully calling the faithful to the gathering. Those bells really knocked him out; not even in New England had Justin ever encountered a thing like that antique, copper-rimmed carillon.

He gazed distantly at the black computer monitor, thinking to himself. Finally he decided: true to form, he wouldn't be going to services today.

By noon he was up on the rooftop of his apartment. The area around Storm's suburb always had a thin, depressing film in the sky, hanging like a dreary shroud over the little 'burbs. It was all fallout from the dense smog of Nash Ultima. But when the sun was at its zenith, it always found a way to break through that intrusive haze. There was a tiny pool up on that roof, and one of Justin's rawest pleasures was swimming in the partial sunlight.

He swam freestyle for two hours nonstop, flipping his turns at each end so his head was never out of the water for more than half-a-second at a time. He glided through the chlorinated water, his ears soothed by the constant drone of the pool's filters. His eyes were half-closed in content relaxation, his vision blurred beyond recognition (it was a personal rule: Justin *never* swam with goggles). His strokes were hardly Olympic-quality, but he did slide through the water with a practiced swimmer's grace. His toned and tanned body spoke for his constant practice. While he never pushed himself hard enough to build any serious muscles, he had a modest athletic frame.

As the hours drew to a close he began to feel his heartbeat pounding in his ears. His body began to ache and his muscles throbbed with a dull, growing pain. Before quitting for the day Justin dunked his head underwater, drawing his body far beneath the

pool's glittering surface. He pulled himself down... down... down... until his stomach was almost resting on the bottom. Justin hovered on the floor of the pool with content; he blew oxygen out of his nose in a steady, disciplined stream. The bubbles were the only disturbance in that cool, wavy tranquility. There was no noise down here, nothing to see, no *one* to see, no cares or concerns at all...

*Tranquility...* he mulled the word with the smallest of grins.

When Justin finally surfaced he pulled himself out of the pool and lay panting on his back. He rubbed his red face until the tingling went out of it (the water was quite cold). After a few minutes he heard voices and laughter. A young quartet appeared on the roof. They were two couples, from the looks of things. Some of them might be neighbors of Justin's, but he couldn't tell for sure. The jovial group slipped into the shallow end, apparently intent on a game of water volleyball.

Justin watched the laughing group for a minute, then gingerly got up and walked over to the far end of the roof. It was the side that faced the stiff afternoon breeze. He slumped against the stucco wall and sat with his knees against his chest, waiting for the wind to dry his soaked body.

He stared out as far as he could across his little suburb (which wasn't far since his apartment complex was one of the smallest buildings around). The aesthetics of the scene were lacking. So much for the view. Tunes were out, too: his canalphones were waterlogged and couldn't receive any signals, short of emergency-band transmissions, until they dried. But it didn't matter: Justin wasn't really in the mood for music, anyway.

The happy group's shouts and laughter rang in his ears like nails on a chalkboard. Justin closed his eyes and imagined their antics, their fun and games. He pulled his knees closer to his chest and considered their camaraderie and joy.

*Tranquility...* he thought, his green eyes dark as the wind played with his hair.

After his second shower of the day Justin set out for East End. The afternoon drizzle was coming in from the sprawling Western Wastes, but no one in the streets seemed to mind. That light sprinkle was just a fact of life; you could set your clock by it.

The black-headed young man wandered over to his favorite fruit stand in Eastside Square, scrounging up two big, juicy neo-pomegranates. Justin was lucky that he actually liked the unwieldy fruit, and that he didn't mind all the meticulous work required in pulling the seeds from the rind. Ever since the False Moon's impact, the price of produce has been at a premium, and the neo-pomegranate is one of the few fruits around that can thrive in a regular, un-augmented greenhouse. In general, fruit was very expensive, and as a struggling pilot, Justin couldn't afford anything more extravagant.

He sat on a small stone recess in one of the buildings at the square, his body set into the side of the building like a gargoyle. He took out his Raiden-class utility knife (the military wouldn't be pleased to know he'd snuck that off base...) and deftly split the fruits. The pair of pomegranates bled a deep crimson. He munched on the red seeds as the carillon at St. Dwynwen's started up again with its lilting, haunting chimes.

Across the square children played on a rust-colored swing set. The little imps laughed and cavorted as they carried on with their silly games. People went to and fro around him. The wrinkled old street vendors peddled their wares, and Justin Storm watched them all, his ratty brown overcoat flapping in the breeze.

Eventually the sun fell down over the sprawl of shoddy buildings and industrial smokestacks further out on the horizon. Tiny, pathetic lights began to blink on in people's apartments. The streets became silent, and then dead. Night came.

Justin had a routine that he followed during the night, as well.

He was still up at eleven when the hammy late night talk shows started up. He sat on his couch watching one such variety show. Justin lay motionless with his bare feet up on his coffee table, shirtless and in his underwear. Sigs and Cars moved aimlessly around the pilot's body, though Cars generally remained close to its carrying pouch on Justin's knee. He was always the most timid of the two. On the TV, the gimmicky talk show host made a joke, and the studio audience laughed. The host cracked another joke, the audience laughed. And so on, and so on.

He'd brought out a fat little jug of vodka and a tall, slender bottle of Galliano. They were sitting on his coffee table next to a half-drunk carton of orange juice. Justin held a near-empty glass in his hand, complete with a little plastic stirrer. So far he was three drinks into the night, and his head was already throbbing uncomfortably.

The flat-screen monitor reflected off Justin's dark green eyes. There was no cheer or laughter in them. As far as anyone could tell, there wasn't *anything* in them. It's hard to describe it unless one actually sees it: his eyes were 'solid' in an unwholesome way; they were covered with the kind of heavy, lifeless film you might see in a junkie's eyes.

Or in a corpse's.

The host made a joke, and the audience laughed. The host makes a joke, and the audience laughs.

Host makes a joke, audience laughs. Host makes a joke, audience laughs.

Joke... laugh... joke... laugh...

The time was 11:45 PM.

Justin rose and quietly walked into his bedroom. He pulled on a white t-shirt and shorts. After dressing, he moved back into the kitchen. On the table there was a sack of food. It was the groceries he'd bought first thing in the morning, the food that would keep him alive for another week, but only if he'd put it in the fridge.

Justin pulled open a single drawer next to the refrigerator. What he pulled out of that drawer was a classic in both design and functionality. Everything about it was admirable, from the jagged-toothed design on the barrel to the heavy, rubberized handhold on the butt.

It was an HK P46, back in its heyday it was colloquially known as the 'Universal Combat Pistol'. It was an old relic, to be sure. Justin's granddad carried it through the desert sands during the Arab Wars. It hung on his father's wall at the family property back in the New England Territories, and now it sat in that kitchen drawer. The magazine was in the back of the drawer, fully loaded with hollow-point match ammunition, but Justin ignored it.

A single bullet rolled around aimlessly in the drawer. Justin plucked it up, with casual disinterest in his eyes, and brought it to the handgun. He pulled the side back and lazily dropped the round into the chamber. He set his fingers on the catch and the slide shot forward with a metallic snap, chambering the bottleneck bullet. During all this time Justin kept his dead eyes forward, unfocused and disinterested.

He pulled a pair of thick cotton towels out of another drawer and set them on the counter, in plain view to anyone who entered the apartment. He put the two Tupperware

containers marked 'Sigs' and 'Cars' next to the towels, also in plain sight to anyone who might enter. He grabbed a bottle of bleach cleaner from under his sink and put it next to the towels. Finally, he unlocked his front door.

The time was 11:50 PM.

More laughter from the television. The host was performing some kind of asinine sketch. There was delighted tittering and applause from the audience.

Justin flipped the firearm's safety into the 'off' position.

With a calm hand, he placed the cold metal barrel against his temple.

'Click'. He cocked the hammer.

The noise of the TV was eerily distant. Outside, on the patio, night-birds cooed and warbled.

Justin didn't lose a drop of sweat as he brought his finger to the trigger.

Host makes a joke... the audience laughs...

The vacant-eyed pilot's breath started to quicken. His eyes widened.

Justin wrapped his index finger around the cool, slick trigger.

He had tunnel-vision. All he saw was a dim, cold light in front of him. All he heard were the full, even breaths he drew. His breathing slowed, and Justin closed his eyes.

He started to squeeze the trigger. His slender digit inched its way along in slow motion.

Squeeze...

Inch...

Squeeze...

Inch...

Squeeze...

He got to the 'relief point', the part in a pull where the trigger starts to lose all resistance as the hammer gets within nanometers of its falling point.

Justin made it to this point for the first time last month.

He caught his breath. He waited, waited for what seemed like an eternity in the darkness of his kitchen.

The gun started to tremble in his hands.

The TV network signed off for the evening; Justin's monitor went blank and the room was silent.

Everything was silent. Somewhere, an owl hooted. The dark kitchen was a portrait in stillness. Cold, dead light from the bedroom fell across the pilot's face.

Everything was silent. Everything was dark.

Then a noise rang out.

The bells of St. Dwynwen's drifted in through Justin's patio door: the midnight sounding. He opened his eyes and looked at the clock over his oven.

The time was 12:00 AM.

It was Monday, the start of a new week. Justin lowered the gun and sighed.

"You still don't have it in you, do you?" He laughed sarcastically. Bitter tears trailed down his face. He popped the UCP's slide and kicked-out the bullet, casting it back into the drawer with disgust. He closed the gun's slide and dropped it in with the bullet, slamming the drawer shut.



For a few minutes he just stood there with a deer-in-the-headlights gaze. After a few seconds Justin glared at the bagged food on the counter.

It would keep him alive for another week.

He cast the sack into his fridge with disinterest and rounded-up his Vodka, Galliano and orange juice. He mixed one last drink and stumbled into bed, throwing off his shorts and shirt as he did so. He lay in the darkness, motionless and alone, until sleep finally took him.

It can be said that the only reason a human heart beats is so that another heart can hear it. That might be sentimental drivel, or it could be profound, who knows? It can also be said that the only reason a human has a sense of touch is to feel the touch, the warmth, and the heartbeat, of another. For someone like Justin Storm, those touches bring fear, and so he seeks the bare-minimum: the softest touches.

Well, in the end, there is no softer touch than none at all. And there's nothing more pathetic than a heart that refuses to break, not because it's strong, but because it refuses to beat in the first place.



T I A