



'Sympathetics'

There was an on-the-spot inquiry about the accident. Justin spent the better part of an hour sitting in a cramped interrogation room with Scott Tabris standing by his side. Opposite them, Wraith and two members of the base's command staff sat with cold eyes. Commander Faught stood in the background with rigid disdain in his posture. He hammered the pair with questions and accusations. The old soldier didn't care one bit for his base's Raiden program, but he *did* care about near-fatal accidents happening on his base.

As witnesses to the accident both Justin and Scott had to present their version of events. Protocol dictated that both should stand, but owing to Justin's wounded knee he was allowed to sit in a rusty chair during the proceedings. He spent the time averting the piercing gaze of the command staff and absently rubbing his knee, which was encased in a dermal-regenerative brace.

Wraith emerged from the meeting with an ineffable expression. He was met by Dr. Roont, who was running up behind him at a fast clip.

"I just came from the infirmary, Wraith: Little Miss CRTS looks like she was sliced up with a damn meat cleaver! What the hell happened?"

"At first glance, it looks like Justin Storm nearly got Miss Chovert killed." He answered. "The *Love* was being pulled into place by the mecha-arm..." Wraith scratched his chin as he invented a story on the spot, "and it appears that Justin forgot his post-flight procedure..."

"What the hell are you taking about?" Roont glowered. "That girl has a friggin' hole in her shoulder. That means she was hit by AGP's spike-arm and, if you didn't notice, that means the God-damn thing was in battle-position: the arms were *down*. You *know* that the hangar-arm can't grab a hold of that ship unless the arm is *up*. That means--"

"It means the arms came down and set themselves into battle-position right before the ship shot across the bay." Wraith finished in a bored, unemotional timber.

Roont seethed. "So what the hell was Mister AGP doing? Was he trying to kill the little bitch, or what? God damn it, she's got the *entire* first batch of solution in her bloodstream. For Chrissake: if we lost her..."

"It would be a minor setback." Wraith countered. "And I think you should know that Storm wasn't actually trying to kill Miss Chovert."

"Oh, that's right," Roont sarcastically growled. "You're gonna call it an 'accident', huh? How did you explain it: he 'forgot post-flight procedure'?"

"That," Wraith said sternly, "will be the official explanation."

There was a pause as Roont considered the significance of this statement.

"The difficult part, of course, is keeping the Commander off my back." Wraith motioned disinterestedly with his hand. "I may need the Committee to help flex their muscle when it comes to the cover-up."

"Cover-up of what?" Roont asked, hesitantly.

"The fact that Justin, or 'Mister AGP' as you call him, wasn't even sitting in the cockpit when the accident happened."

Sam Roont licked his thin, pale lips; they were suddenly dry. "He wasn't?"

"No." Wraith said darkly. "And would you like to know something else?" Wraith set his cold eyes upon the shaken doctor with that infamous smirk in full-force. He was viciously taunting Roont with the devilish grin, but like most of Wraith's smiles it hid his own personal discomfort. "The ship was deactivated *and* in full shut-down right before it went on its little joyride."

Roont's body seemed to go limp, as if his bones had been turned to jelly. He sat on a nearby bench. "T- that's not possible. It just *isn't*..."

"Everything's possible, Roont, if there's a willing fool out there who wants to give an idea a try." He sat next to him, resting his cane on his shoulder. "We're the fools, after all, so let's accept the facts, shall we?" He rested his head on his hands. "I was able to convince most of the personnel in the inquiry that an 'electrical fault' was to blame. Of course, you know what it really was, don't you?"

Roont glared at the RL. "Call yourself a fool if you want, Wraith, but don't lump me in the same boat as you. And yes, I know exactly what it was. There's only one explanation: emergence." He spat. "This can't be happening now, that wasn't part of the deal." He bowed his head and removed his glasses. "Not supposed to happen, not yet..." he repeated weakly. Roont shook his head. "What was the trigger?"

"Trigger?"

"Cause, the *cause*! Or was there even one?"

"As near as I can tell, two things were happening when the Raiden went berserk..." Wraith's voice trailed away as a pair of technicians passed them. They seemed to move much faster as they moved directly in front of the RL, as if there was an unpleasant chill in the air around him. He began again as soon as they were out of

earshot. "For one: Justin Storm was removing his dismount ladder from the Raiden's canopy."

"And the other thing?" Roont asked impatiently.

"Chenine Chovert had just walked in from her bay."

Roont swallowed and licked his lips again. Those lips had a bitter taste, like arsenic. "She'd just walked in?"

"Just... walked... in." Wraith rolled each word slowly off his tongue in a condescending manner.

"It targeted her." Roont stated, matter-of-factly, but with a face that looked like it had been crushed by a steamroller.

"Yes it did." Wraith agreed.

"Antipathy?" Roont quickly followed. "Does it know? Could it actually smell it in her... *on* her, maybe? Could it feel the... I dunno, vapors? Her *breath*? Maybe a scent in her sweat, or some odor, *any* odor, even vaginal..." The doctor regressed into an overly clinical mindset; he was considering fantastic explanations for the Raiden's behavior and ignoring Occam's Razor. He shook his head, realizing this. "That's ridiculous. It didn't sense the treatment. I mean, how *could* it?"

"I agree..." Wraith said. "After all, why wouldn't the *Chaste Gazer* have picked-up on it, too?"

"Yeah, especially since it's the one actually hauling her sweet ass..." Roont nodded. "Okay, if not that, then *what*?"

Wraith crossed his arms and leaned back, casually drawing in a long breath. "Tell me something, Sam: what do you think about 'Little Miss CRTS'?"

"What, Chovert?" Roont asked. Wraith smiled, having tricked the doctor into using her real name. "Quiet girl, I guess. Gorgeous, of course." He grinned lasciviously, then his face fell back into a scowl. "Look, what's this got to do with the Raiden?"

"Quiet girl." Wraith snickered. "Indeed. Miss Chovert's been in the military since she turned 18. She helped fight against the insurgents in the Keto Region during the uprising there."

"Fascinating." Roont sarcastically interjected. "But any outfit that would enlist that little girl as a GI is wacko."

Wraith shook his head. "Oh, she was nothing like that. She spent most of her time in supply-ops, then a little time as a secretary's assistant in logistics. Lord knows why she enlisted. She's not what I'd call an 'ideal' recruit. As a matter of fact, she's a vindictive and passive-aggressive little bitch, to be frank. Doesn't mean she's not likeable, I suppose. In fact most of the women I've been involved with were passive-aggressive bitches. They've got a certain charm, I guess." He looked over at the good doctor. "Of course: a tot like Miss Chovert is far too young for me. For both of us, I suppose."

"I guess." Roont spat, pulling out a bent cigarette and chewing on the end as if it were a pacifier. "Is there a point to this lovely little character analysis?"

"Imagine having to work with someone like that:" he said, "day in and day out. This is a girl who pissed-off one of her commanding-officers so much that he tossed her backside in the brig."

Roont was a little surprised by this and looked at Wraith, but the RL quickly shook his head. "He didn't press charges, though. Matter of fact: that's how we ended-up getting her. But you can see how irritating a co-worker like that girl could be: can't you?"

"Tch." Roont scoffed. "Well, if I had to be so... 'closely' associated with a person like that I suppose I'd want to put her over my knee, or something, but..." He suddenly stopped, his eyes wide. "But mostly I'd just try to make things work out if I had to see her everyday." His teeth absently ground the unlit cigarette until it snapped in two. "And..."

"And you'd leave the vengeful thoughts in your head where they belong, wouldn't you?"

"Where they belong..." Roont ended. "God in Heaven," he whispered, "you're talking about 'Sympathetics' here, aren't you? How- how the hell could *that* happen? There's no way, not this early on!"

"I don't know." Wraith admitted. "Maybe Storm did something to the *Love* up in Station Alpha that he's not copping to." He shrugged. "I'll be sure to debrief Miss Chovert on that after she regains consciousness."

"Hmm." Roont gruffly grunted. "What about Mister AGP?" he asked.

"What *about* him?"

"We can't let him continue piloting. Not after this."

"As a matter of fact we can, and we *will*. The Committee hypothesized that Sympathetics would become an issue. It's not something to get worked-up over, but it is something we need to watch. Besides, you know as well as I that we can't switch out our pilots this late in the game, not so long after terminal activation."

Roont nodded sullenly. "You're right, of course." He admitted with a scowl. "It's been what, almost a month since we put him in the AGP for terminal activation? If that Raiden's anything like CRTS, it won't accept another pilot, not this late in the game."

"You mean: this late in its *development*, don't you?" Wraith smirked.

"Screw it," Roont shook his head and stood up. "Don't talk about 'developing' anything. We don't say mold 'develops', and we don't say cancer 'develops'."

"You'd prefer grow, then?"

"I'd prefer it if you didn't remind me of the things at all."

"Denial, eh? That's not good for the soul." Wraith shrugged, "well, tell me this: if our man Storm actually does have Sympathetics at this point, won't it stand to reason that his trial run on Antipathy will be, shall we say, productive?"

"Oh, I don't doubt that everything will go through *very* nice and cleanly, *if* the link's Limerence Effects haven't torn him apart by then, of course."

"We'll just have to regulate the Sensations Link until then." Wraith retorted.

"In that case, there's a slight chance that his brain *won't* turn into scrambled eggs by the time we're ready to put him on clinical trials."

"Don't rush it. I'm content with just the one subject, for now anyway."

"Hmmp." Roont grunted and muttered something unintelligible. "You know I've never been thrilled about using a person like Storm for these tests. I've got a bad feeling about him, and what could happen if you don't keep him tightly under your thumb." He turned on his heels, strode down the hall and disappeared out of sight.

Wraith stayed on the bench for a few minutes, thinking. Sam was right, of course: no one expected to see emergence this soon; it wasn't supposed to develop out of *anyone's* Sensations Link. Those were all the good doctor's predictions, but Roont wasn't the one at fault. This accident wasn't a failure of the Committee, the Labs, or any else for that matter. It was the *RL's* job to watch out for friction and tension between his pilots.

Even though his two current pilots were woebegone misfits, they were adults and capable of handling the normal tension that ebbed and flowed between them.

But what happens when you add another mind to that scenario: a mind with the intelligence of a slow child and the firepower of an armada?

There's nothing more genuine and innocent than a child, he mused, and it's that innocence, that naiveté, that makes a little kid dangerous. It's a blissful lack of understanding, of ethics, that makes him roast ants on a sidewalk, repeat curse words he'd just heard, fantasize about sick atrocities with plastic army men...

And rudely shove classmates he doesn't like.

It wasn't a question of evil: it was a question of innocence.

"To hell with it all." He summarized. As long as things held together, for now at least, that was good enough. It may be that the *Platonic Love* would go the way of *Cross-the-Rubicon*, the first R-H ship produced. That ship's rusting hull lay dormant in storage down in the bowels of the loftily-named 'R-H Development Wing'.

Sure, R-H-AGP could end up like that, but until that time the Raiden, and its pilot, were viable test subjects.

Now, all he had to do was figure out how to put the proper spin on all of this when he spoke to the Committee...

