

One: The Pilot

Light. "Welcome to the world." Hands raised, face covered. "Pulse a little high, EEG and ECG both within normal bounds." Looking left, looking right. White masks, white gloves. "Let's get it out of the bioconstructor." Arms held, torso lifted. "All right, now the legs." Wh...who... "Doctor, I think it's trying to speak..." "Not possible. The memory transfer isn't complete." Mem...memory... "The neuroepigenetic enhancer mesh checks out. TRAC-1 levels nearly non-functional." I...I am... "Well, team. So far, so good. Now for the main stage." I know you...

The belt started. Slowly, at first. Number Ten shifted its weight, swaying backwards.

"It's OK," said Johann Heimann. "I'm right here next to you."

Number Ten leaned against him for support. Heimann staggered under the sudden weight. As the clone's right arm began to wrap around his neck Heimann attempted to direct the clone's hands to the treadmill's handlebars.

"Tanja..." he croaked. "Ten...so heavy..."

"Be right there."

A slender woman in a dark purple business suit glided across the laboratory, accompanied by two taller male assistants in gray. The two men held Ten's shoulders and the woman gently grasped the clone's wrist.

"Ten, let go," she said in a commanding voice. Expertly she applied pressure to the clone's wrist and knuckles. The hand immediately released and opened like a leaf. The clone looked at its upturned palm, then the woman, then back at the hand.

"Go on, grab the bar," Heimann gasped.

The clone slowly raised its right arm and turned the hand around, staring with a blank expression. Heimann relaxed as the pressure on his neck abated.

"Go on," he coaxed, his voice returning to normal. He smiled encouragingly. "You can do it."

The clone looked at him blankly. It attempted to return the smile, which Heimann found discomforting. Then it reached down to hold the walking bar. First step. Second step. The clone straightened as it gained confidence. Third and fourth steps.

"Doctor, are you all right?"

Heimann edged back from the treadmill, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. The other, he shoved into a white lab coat pocket. The pipe still lay there, hidden in a secret fold.

"Yes, Tanja..." he replied, nodding, "Or should I say, Doctor Beider."

"Oh, I don't stand on formality, Doctor Heimann," Beider said, smiling thinly.

She glanced back at Ten. The clone continued to look more confident on the treadmill, firmly grasping the bars with both hands.

"Number Ten looks much better now," she commented. She quickly jotted some notes down on a transparent touch pad with a digital pen.

"Well, then, Tanja," Heimann looked back to the treadmill. "Maybe it's time to prepare Number Eleven."

She gestured to the two lab assistants, who left the room.

Heimann sidled over to a wall monitor that displayed data from the treadmill. Nothing out of the ordinary. Same as the other clones.

"I wonder if Seth is doing all right," he muttered aloud.

Beider looked up from her pad.

"Seth?"

"Six. I meant Number Six," Heimann responded, a little sheepishly.

She shook her head.

"Really, Doctor, you shouldn't use the name Seth."

He opened his mouth to reply, but she cut him off.

"Or any other name."

He stopped, and grimaced.

"Sorry, Tanja. It's just...I can't help it."

"Doctor, I know how much this project affects you," she began.

"This has nothing to do with..."

"...Lieutenant Patel?"

He let go of the hidden pipe in his pocket and wagged a finger at her.

"That was pure happenstance. Patel was the most recent casualty. The most likely to succeed. The best choice. After all, we already had his flight operator brain scan."

"True," Beider said. "Initially I did have reservations about the viability of the subliminal programming."

"Well," Heimann said, "the insertion of the cranial neuromesh solved that. Combined with recordings of Patel's

flight simulator exercises and various sorties on Mars. An ideal test subject."

He almost winced at hearing himself say "subject." If only Lieutenant Patel's parents hadn't died in a minor skirmish when he was just a child. If only the Revolution hadn't...he pushed the dangerous thought away.

"Yes, I suppose so," Beider agreed. "Still, I must admit to some, shall we say, *concern* about your personal connection to this project."

Heimann did not respond.

His sister's son. Still a young man, his whole life ahead of him. Gone, so suddenly.

Heimann hadn't approved of his sister's marriage to his Indian research colleague. Yes, he was a good, honest man. But he held odd views on epigenetic inheritance, genetic "immortality," and scientific reincarnation. Controversial, considered heretical by the United Americas Council, but tolerated in allies. Barely.

Still, Heimann knew some things transcended political boundaries. He cherished his time with them on the old International Space Station. Despite their disagreements, he owed it to them both to take care of the boy. He just hadn't expected to be a father. Adoptive or otherwise. Hadn't expected a son.

He also knew he shouldn't have called any of the clones Seth. Armed Forces HQ had instructed him to give them numbers like any other sample. He disagreed. Even a genetically enhanced clone needed a name, but he couldn't use the name of the cell donor. The pain was still too fresh.

He looked over to Number Ten. The clone had increased the treadmill speed and was running without holding the bars. It wouldn't take the clone long to reach superhuman speed. Just like the others. All the other Pate...no, they weren't him. They couldn't be.

As much as he wanted to see the boy again. They were clones. His creations.

"There was no choice," he responded, finally.

"You saw the bioconstructor weave flawlessly," Beider said coolly. She snapped her pad cover shut. "Made, not begotten. Well-manufactured organic machines. Nothing more, nothing less."

Heimann nodded. Bone, sinew, nerve, and tissue, all created from donor cells. So vulnerable they seemed, so...human.

"You know," he offered, "if it weren't for the War, we wouldn't have even needed this project."

"Doctor, are you referring to the enormous losses our glorious Armed Forces have sustained during the liberation of the Mars Colonies?"

She walked closer, a questioning look on her face.

"Tanja," he slowly responded. "Surely the Council knows that tampering with human nature goes against the Will of G..."

"Doctor, I hope that you aren't having second thoughts about the sacred nature of this research."

"Sacred?" Heimann repeated, raising an eyebrow. He examined Beider's countenance and held back his next biting comment, sensing yet another approaching moment of danger.

"The Council knows your opposition to the cloning process, Doctor," Beider reminded him. "Even though it was you, yourself, who made the project possible."

He sighed. That much was true. He wondered whether the Council had seriously considered the ethical ramifications of cloning human beings, let alone using genomic modification to enhance strength and agility.

"My work was theoretical in nature," he said resignedly. "I had no idea that it would be put into practice. So quickly."

"The Mars Colony War happened quickly, too," she rejoined. "Nobody expected the Far Asian Consortium to break the treaty."

Heimann nodded glumly. "And so soon after the Ten Years Revolution on Earth! All that loss of life and destruction. All that scientific knowledge lost. Imagine what could have been..."

He trailed off, looking back at Ten. The clone increased speed and raised the treadmill's elevation. A slight whining sound escaped the belt, an indication of approaching physical limits.

"Um, maybe that's enough for a first time, eh?" Heimann called.

The clone glanced at Heimann.

Beider walked to the treadmill and pressed the off panel. The belt ground to a halt. Ten stared at the machine, then looked up in slow understanding. The clone stepped off the machine and stood at attention.

"Return to the creche," Beider ordered. "Recuperation cycle."

The clone saluted and turned to leave. The two assistants entered the room, accompanied by Number Eleven on a gurney.

"By the way," Heimann asked, as he gently pried open the clone's eyelids and shone a penlight, "back to Se...Six. What's the current progress report look like?"

He pocketed the light and lightly pressed two fingers against the clone's neck to check the pulse. Steady as a rock.

"Ah, Six," Beider replied, calling up a page on her pad. "Six is advancing steadily, a bit ahead of schedule. Already in the third simulator run."

"Good, good," Heimann responded. He motioned, and the assistants lowered one end of the gurney. The clone abruptly and unsteadily lurched to its feet.

"All right, Number Eleven," Heimann said, bracing himself for the clone's weight, "let's see if we can get you to walk today."

Rockets streaked across the deepening blue Martian sunset. The aircraft shuddered as explosions on either side buffeted it. Gritting his teeth, Six swerved to meet the oncoming attack squad. His Mars warplane shuddered again. Behind his head steam suddenly sprayed from a fractured coolant panel. Holding the throttle steady with his left hand, he rapidly flipped the switches on his right. The steam dissipated, but he still felt a burning sensation on his neck.

"Bogey at 5 o'clock," he heard from his helmet speaker. Without turning to look, Six yanked the throttle upright and to the left, executing a perfect barrel roll. He fired before checking to see whether the laser guidance system had locked properly.

Strange thoughts came unbidden: *First you got Hansen, be damned if you...I'm hit! Systems failing. Uncle...*

"Target acquired," the voice announced, five nanoseconds after the shots ripped a jagged strip into the adversary's fuselage. For some reason, Six had the impression that he had done this before. A vague memory surfaced, a memory of nearly blacking out from the g-forces. He felt disquieted.

The plane on screen burst into flames and began its downward trajectory to the Martian soil.

"Target destroyed," Six reported emotionlessly.

"Stand down and prepare to return," the voice ordered.

Tapping the control panel in front of him, Six plotted a course back to Mars Colony One. Without checking his instruments, he knew the ETA was five point four minutes.

He paused, releasing the controls briefly.

Where had he learned that? The educational machine?

He raised a hand to adjust his helmet. Suddenly an image appeared in his head: *upside down, careening across the rust-red rocky landscape, desperately struggling to eject...a stuck canopy...dislocated shoulder...pain....*

Father...

"Pilot, disengage. Computer, end simulation."

The same female voice as inside his helmet, only this time from a wall speaker in the outside room.

The clone blinked twice in rapid succession. The image disappeared. So did the Martian panorama. In its place stretched a series of connected flat screens with a raised fist holding a multicolored torch, the logo of the United Americas. The door to the simulator opened, and artificial light streamed in.

Removing his helmet, Six paused to stare at the logo.

The image had been so real.

Had he already been to Mars? Had he been shot down? No, it couldn't be. They said his training was not yet complete. A video, then? No, none of the training videos from the library were first-person perspective.

Six tilted his head, pondering. It made no sense. He didn't like things that made no sense.

"Six, log out and report to Doctor Heimann in five minutes."

"Yes, sir," the clone mechanically answered, withdrawing a thin filament from the panel in front of him. The filament smoothly retracted into the socket behind his right ear, and the logo on the screens disappeared. In its place, blackness, and the clone's faint reflection; his light brown face marred only by the number 6 in red on his left cheek.

Why had he imagined being stuck in the pilot's seat? That hadn't actually happened. Or had it?

Six closed his eyes briefly, shook his head, then opened them again. His reflection stared back.

Adam's Stepsons

He touched the red number on the screen, then his face. Was this...him? It seemed wrong somehow.

Uncle...Father...

Six stepped out of the simulator, holding his helmet loosely at his side. He considered heaving it across the floor, raised it head-level, and brought it down again. He frowned. Why had he done that? He was a soldier. A soldier controlled its emotions. A soldier obeyed orders. The UAAF was everything.

Who was "*Father*"?

Shaking his head again, he headed out the door into the white tiled hallway outside. Down the hallway, the clear polycarbonate windows of the creche lay in front of him, the educational machine visible. Seven had begun to disengage himself from his sleep bunk. A guard stood motionless just outside the door, dressed in full body suit and armed with a heavy taze gun.

He heard the voice from the room behind him: "Six. Report to Doctor Heimann. On the double."

"Yes, sir!" he shouted instinctively, snapping to attention. He strode off down the hallway, thinking. He needed information. That also was what a soldier should do. Perhaps the Doctor would be able to answer his questions.