

Episode Zero/エピソード零/Episōdo Rei

The Empress Begins her Reign

皇后は彼女の治世を開始

Kōgō wa Kanojo no Chisei o Kaishi

“...and while in our beautiful city, why not come visit the Tower of Babel. This magnificent structure, completed last year after two decades of work, is the spiritual heart of the city. Offering comprehensive tours to all ID-carrying visitors, and for all those yet to be registered in the ID Database, we have a special limited offer of tickets for exclusive see-all tours. Only two yuren per person. Come and see the glorious culture centre on the ground floor, where the daring sculpture and architecture of Rashid al-Khazim has been dazzling the critics and public alike. The ascending floors take you through our extensive map area, history museum and other attractions, while the top floor houses the so-called ‘Throne of Babel’, as well as offering a dazzling view of the entire city. So come and enjoy our city, and remember that the special edition ID-less tours are only available for a limited time. Thank you for listening.”

A cheerful chime played.

“And here is the Noontime News with Penny Fraser. There is still no significant update on the space shuttle which crashed twenty miles from Sigma City three days ago. The shuttle, a Type-G Cargo model from the year 2200 salvaged from the Lunar Scrap Recycling Centre, was apparently on a direct course to Lunar Landing Station Connecticut when it veered off course. All attempts to hail the craft were unsuccessful and it has since been established that the still-functioning communication system was sabotaged prior to take-off. The vehicle was unlicensed and no bodies or survivors have been found. The CIG ask that anyone who was within the area of the crash who saw anything after the shuttle landed should report to the nearest CIG station immediately. In other news...”

The news screen blared out its bulletins to the content public. Sigma City was the shining beacon of the New Civilisation, a pinnacle of human achievement, symbol of the eradication of sin from human society, a light for all to turn to. And it would soon be in ruins.

The central plaza in front of the Tower of Babel was bustling with people, enjoying life in the latest fashion, totally unfettered by anything so bland as the day-to-day toil of the off-world colonies. A woman was petting her collie near the bicycle stands, and somewhere else a man was logging into his gaming account while he waited for the bus. No-one walked in fear of assault, or death, or any threat from the offworld Colonies, or even from anyone passing by or standing next to them. This was the safest place in the city, and local officers of the Crime Intervention Group could be seen monitoring the scene with on-the-ground people and cameras.

But there was one figure that was put of place in the crowd, entering the square with a slow step. If no-one else had been in the square and the mysterious figure had been alone, her footsteps would have rung out in an unsettling, hollow way. The girl with the collie was the first one to take special note of her, when her dog looked up and out from his owner and

started growling. Everyone in the world knew better than to ignore the senses of dogs, so the woman looked.

This stranger was also a woman, with a hypnotic head of thick, rich, light blonde hair. It was natural, as all hair colour was in these times, and longer than was fashionable. Her clothing was a mixture of black and red, with a long skirt dragging along the floor. Her face was partially covered by a beak-like mask painted with a flame pattern leaping up from the sharp tip. Her large florid collar was trimmed with blood-red feathers, along with the buckle of her belt and the tops of her boots. Her boots were calf-high, short-heeled items that gave off a subtle message to anyone who glanced towards them.

The mysterious woman stopped about ten metres away from the woman and her dog, then looked round, a smile crossing her face. For a short time, she seemed relaxed, but then she pulled a mike from her hand and shouted into it.

“Attention, morons everywhere!”

Everyone in the square stopped and turned. The woman with the dog was angered by the use of such vulgar language, while the dog barked. The strange woman looked round and grinned. The mike was linked to the city’s speaker system, so her voice was being broadcast to everyone, including her confederates.

“This is the day when I make an announcement that impacts you all. It will change your lives, and perhaps even alter this blessed Earth. I have waited for this moment for a long time.”

A couple of junior CIG officers were approaching from the edges of the square, extending their shock batons. The woman glanced round, then grinned and raised her hand. The signal was given. Her three confederates activated the wide-band signal that went through all communication routes into the mechs stored in underground hangers. Each hanger responded, and the mechs went to their appointed lifts. One hanger was beneath the square, and as the doors opened, the people shifted away from it. The lift reached the surface holding three mechs. A single word from the woman triggered them.

“Kill.”

Bullets raked across the square, cutting everyone down. The woman with her dog cowered by the seat and closed her eyes, pressing her terrified pet close to her. All across the city, it was the same or worse. Mechs both used bullets and missiles to attack the flocks of people. Several turned their missiles on the buildings, tearing great lumps of masonry from their bodies and jettisoning them into the wider spaces where people fled for their lives. Everyone was crying out in shock or fear, while the stranger began laughing, extending her arms like Christ on the cross. As she laughed, she spoke, and her voice echoed through the square.

“Rejoice, people of Sigma City, for I have given you to paradise!”

The laugh became a maniacal cackle, and the pavement cracked from a nearby missile strike. One wounded CIG soldier got up from where he had fallen and attacked. A blast from a mech’s machine gun at close range reduced him to a long pile of eviscerated flesh and bone. The sound reached the collie woman’s ears, and she screamed. It took five minutes for the destruction to quiet down.

Only the shortest buildings, or those which extended underground, escaped the carnage generally unharmed. The Tower of Babel also remained unharmed, a tower of sanity amidst

the delusion. When everything had quietened down, the square was deserted, the buildings were in ruins, the square surface was cracked and pitted with bodies, and the sky was chocked with dust.

The woman with her dog opened her eyes and felt like she was losing her mind. The person responsible for this devastation turned and looked at her, causing both woman and dog to whimper. The woman in black slowly approached, still chuckling slightly. When she was standing over the pair, her voice changed to a softer tone. It was almost compassionate.

“You two can go. The main highway is navigable, and I’m sure someone will pick you up.”

The woman looked up, then nodded frantically, grabbed her collie’s lead and began running as fast as she could towards the main street with her dog. The woman in black watched them go, a sombre expression on her face. It only lasted a second, and she soon grinned again. Three figures walked out of the dust to join her from where they had magnified her initial signal and watched the devastation. A scarred man with a similar head of hair to hers in a darker shade; a white-haired woman with an eye-patch; a man in CIG uniform with a shaven head. The woman turned to look at the three.

“Listen, all of you. When I told you my full purpose, you pledged your allegiance to me on the promise that I would ensure your survival under most circumstances. I will keep my end of the bargain, but you must also keep yours. As my regional generals, you must defend this tower for the duration of my stay here. After I leave, or am killed whichever happens, you can do as you wish. Go back to your normal lives, pillage the remains of this city, or have sex together. I really don’t care what you do. What I do care about is that you don’t make life too easy for the infiltration group that will be sent here.”

One of her companions, the bald man, spoke.

“You really think the Parliament will do that?”

“They’re sure to. Their normal tactics won’t work, so they’re going to think outside the box. Well, they’re getting other people to think outside the box for them. They need the unorthodox, the undesirable, the dark grey edge of the moral spectrum. People from the other Solar System colonies, even people with chequered pasts that they can use. Do what you must to survive in the face of peril. The universal law of life. It applies to them, to me, to you, to the Parliament. If any of you want to back out, I will understand.”

They all shook their head. Nodded with relief and turning away from them, She raised her hand again in a regal gesture, using her mike to tap into all the PA systems in the city. She shouted to every conscious survivor, her smile turning into a slasher grin.

“Run, those who still walk! Run while you can! You have five days to leave the boundaries of this city, before I turn it into my empire of darkness! I, the Empress of Sin, proclaim my rule begun!”

Episode One/エピソード一/Episōdo Ichi

Humanity's Newborn Angel, Nature's Newborn Demons

人類の新生児天使、自然の新生児悪魔

Jinrui no Shinseiji Tenshi, Shizen no Shinseiji Akuma

“Steady. It's almost finished.”

“How is the sequencing?”

“There is still some fluctuation in the genome.”

“Damn. I thought we'd squashed that in the last phase.”

“There will always be some fluctuation, sir. To remove it all would inhibit the DNA's ability to evolve.”

Professor Taylor looked down through the perspex window at the naked woman on the operating table below, being subjected to the slow and methodical probing of surgical nanolasers. Volumetric displays hovered above the body and across the control panel in front of Taylor and his co-workers Rick Ames and Ada Wayne. The slow examination and alteration of the displayed genomes continued.

“Almost there. Almost there.”

“Sir?” Adams spoke warily. “If this one does turn out properly, have you thought of a name?”

“A name? No. Not yet.”

A pause, then Wayne spoke.

“It is wonderful. Beyond dreaming. It's like I'm living in a fantasy of early visions of perfection. And it's all thanks to it.”

Wayne nodded.

“The Second Human Genome Project. A new eye into what makes us human, and what can be altered at will. All 300,000 genes, all exposed to us and our followers.”

“Possibly many more.” said Taylor. “The technology of humanity is by no means perfected, and there may be even more layers of evolutionary information hidden from us. But from what we have now, we can create the generation that forms that new technology. How is the fluctuation?”

“Going down, but still present.”

“In which base pairs?”

“In the first, twentieth and ninety-ninth megabase.”

“So her genetic sequencing was not as perfect as I had hoped. But only three base pairs fluctuating? That can be balanced with the currently-installed nanotechnology within her. How is that stabilising?”

“Very well, sir. We have Grade-A synchronisation.”

“Genome fluctuation steady. No change.”

“Genome expression within desired parameters.”

“Nanomachine integration complete. All vital signs normal.”

Taylor glanced down at the figure on the table.

“That’s it. Stop surgery.”

The displays were gradually powered down, and soon only the standard monitors and the main lights were shining. The ultraviolet light bathing the woman made her look ghostly. Taylor was itching to go down there and speak to her, but there was one more test.

“Release virus simulators.”

A few buttons were pressed and a combination of manufactured, fast-acting virus substitutes were unleashed into the woman’s breathing mask. For a few seconds, everyone waited. Then the check results came in. No sign of illness, and eventually no trace of the virus in her. The immunity experiments had once again been a total success. After a few minutes of waiting while a man in hazard clothing removed the mask and took it away in a container to be destroyed, Taylor entered through another door and walked up beside the woman.

For a long while, nothing happened. Then she slowly opened her eyes and looked up at him. Her irises were a violent electric blue, with nanofibres working through the fibre of her eyes. The nanofibres ran through her whole being, strengthening her muscles, syncing all parts of her, including the different ‘sides’ of her brain, and heightening her normal senses to an incredible degree. To the man’s eyes, her slim and trim body was perfect, from the flawless skin to the unblemished interior. She frowned as her vision came into focus and she saw Taylor’s face, then closed her eyes again as if tired. Taylor frowned.

“Can you hear my voice?”

The woman nodded. Taylor smiled. The subliminal cognitive knowledge feeding worked wonderfully. Language, expression and understanding were all present.

“Can you speak?”

A long pause. Sweat was on Taylor’s brow.

“Yes.”

“Then I have questions to ask.”

“What?”

“Pay attention and answer what you believe is right.”

“I’m ready.”

“What is humanity?”

“The will to reach for the stars.”

“What is self?”

“That which drives for perfection.”

“What is dream?”

“The means of finding our truth.”

“What is spirit?”

“The sword to smite evil.”

“What is truth?”

“The new humanity, which will conquer the universe.”

Taylor smiled, and inside he both smiled and grimaced. She was what he wished to see, and yet....

“Come. Rise.”

He reached out. The woman opened her eyes, took his hands and slipped off the bed, taking a few ginger steps forward on cotton-wool feet. He slowly led her over to a scanning unit, where her face was registered in the ID database. He then led her through the third entrance into the small operating area and out into a larger room. She looked round and walked forward, her naked form beautiful in the sunlight coming in through the windows above. As she paused and turned, looking sidelong at her creator, Taylor spoke with a combined reverence and triumph.

“You are Crystal. The perfect woman, a multifaceted ark for the infinite pure colours of our kind. Progenitor of the new humanity. The second Eve. The world will tremble before you.”

A small tap on his datapad called in the dedicated helpers and assistants for this phase of the project.

“Crystal is to be given whatever is needed. She must be made ready for the grand presentation.”

Taylor stepped up to Crystal and took her hand, caressing it softly against his own flawed skin.

“I shall return when I can, my beautiful Crystal.”

“Is that my name?”

“Yes. I thought of it just now.”

Crystal looked at Taylor. His almond complexion, thin head of slick dark hair, heart-shaped face and wrinkled demeanour all suggested wisdom and benevolence to her young mind. She smiled.

“I’ll trust you. But what should I call you?”

“What do you want to call me?”

Crystal frowned, looking at her own skin-colour compared with his. There was only a slight darkening. Deep-rooted knowledge came to the forefront of her mind.

“Sensei. Will that do?”

Taylor frowned. He almost seemed disappointed.

“Why ‘Sensei’?”

“I heard something while I was asleep. I think it was something like... ‘I wish you could see me as your father, as I see you as your daughter. But if I must, I will be your sensei.’”

Taylor was stunned. He had whispered that into Crystal's ear when no-one else was around during her development stage. He had never dreamt that she had heard and understood it.

"Hmm. Yes. Sensei. Very well. Before I go, I thought you might like to get acquainted with this."

Taylor led her over to a table holding a VR headset.

"Is that VR tech?" asked Crystal at once.

"Yes. That's for your academic learning. You'll soon have equipment to train physically. Only the best for... my daughter."

Crystal laughed.

"Daughter?"

"Well... yes. In a sense."

After pressing her shoulder lovingly, Taylor reluctantly left her with her VR history logs.

Three weeks later, Taylor was heading to a meeting with Sarah Anderson, a representative of the Earth Parliament, in Paris. The meeting had been arranged several days in advance, but had needed to be brought forward from its original date due to an emergency meeting. Urgent rescheduling was going on through all departments due to this 'emergency', which seemed to concern Sigma City. The news had been giving vague reports, but nothing new had come to light since the incident the day before Taylor had first spoken with Crystal.

As he entered the office, he knew at once that he was going to be in for a difficult time. Sarah had often been sceptical about his work, and with new pressure on her, he was afraid she would use that as an excuse to push back the unveiling of his brainchild. He found her bending over her info-pad, her brow furrowed.

"Sit down, won't you." her voice was distant.

Taylor sat and waited for her to finish. After ten minutes, she put down her pad and rubbed her eyes. She had dark circles round them, indicating that she had not gotten enough slept in some time.

"If you need to reschedule..."

Taylor regretted the words as soon as he said them. Thankfully, she waved them aside.

"No, I'm fine. I just had a long evening. First this Sigma City thing, then I had to go check on my son at the clinic. Seems he's finally getting over his VR addiction."

"Good to know."

"Still isn't sure whether he's in the opening of a game or not when he first wakes up, but that will change in time."

"Sounds like you've been run off your feet."

"I've managed to get us a long free period, so you can explain your project in full."

“Why?”

“You want the truth?”

“Yes.”

“Expense. I’ve not been in this position for long, and I’m already used to seeing huge amounts of money invested in various science projects. But this one you’ve been handling... Total costs are currently estimated at 5.7 billion yuren. I realise that is not a huge amount compared to the national science research budget, but it’s still a large amount that could have been used in other areas. I wish to know in full what you have been doing, and how it merits this kind of expense.”

Taylor was wary of her monetary concerns, but he always liked detailing his work. After some time for thought, he began.

“Well, it started ten years ago. I was working on new techniques for stem-cell regrowth and culturing limbs for wounded soldiers in the wake of the Mars War. I had a certain knack for it. Eventually I was transferred to advanced culturing and ended up discovering a formula for creating a fully-grown, able-bodied artificial human.”

“Please elaborate on that. Sounds similar to a clone to me.”

“A clone is a copy of someone or something created using their DNA. This is different. Using the results of the Second Human Genome Project and Klaus’ theories on predicting genetic expression, I was able to theorise that it would be possible to create a unique individual using techniques similar to culture growth. This new being would not be a clone, as their DNA could be adjusted to be different from any other individual. In short, it could be possible create a unique individual, to create a new ‘life’. I called it a ‘new human’. I felt it could usher in a generation of humanity without the genetic faults of its predecessors.”

“I see. Ingenious, but that doesn’t sound like all of it.”

“Indeed not.”

“According to submitted records, you presented your proposal for this ‘new human’ scheme to my predecessor seven years ago, you were granted approval by my predecessor. You began your work under the codename ‘Project: Pygmalion’. Why choose Pygmalion as a name?”

“It refers to the ancient Greek myth of a man by that name who fashioned a sculpture so beautiful that he fell in love with it. He prayed to the gods to bring it to life, and his prayer was answered.”

“I see. I think I can understand now. Please continue.”

“After we established Project: Pygmalion, we worked towards cutting out the random factors present in previous attempts at this kind of work. In previous attempts, scientists had relied on artificial insemination into a surrogate mother. This decreased the amount of... observability of the new embryo, along with increasing the risks associated with surrogacy in general, such as transference of genetic defects and diseases through regressive genes.”

“That I can understand.”

“So we brought in someone else who could help: microsurgeon Rick Ames and nanotechnology expert Ada Wayne.”

“Nanotechnology?”

“Yes. We decided that the best way of preventing risks present with normal surrogacy would be to create an artificial womb environment. We created it using cultured organic material infused with nanofibres feeding into and growing as part of the foetus during this stage. Through the nanofibres, we could monitor development and use microlasers and other similar techniques to eliminate harmful elements. We also managed to perfect a means of determining genetic structure down into the lower levels. It meant we could eliminate any imperfections, adjust for adaptability in environments, and program in natural immunity to diseases. It gave us as much creative freedom as the human genome currently allows.”

“Sounds like it would have taken a long time.”

“It might have. But one of our other researchers, Anderson, perfected a form of harmless accelerated growth hormone. It meant we could create a fully-grown human in ten to fifteen months.”

“I trust this was all experimental. You didn’t run through a pile of reject foetuses to get here?”

“Of course not. It was only after we had perfected the simulations and practical growth elements using clone cultures that we asked for approval to go ahead. We received it, and got started.”

“So what did creating your new human entail?”

“First, we needed sperm and an egg from suitable hosts, people who were known to be in good health and be fertile. It took a little searching, but we eventually found the eggs of a woman who had donated healthy specimens before an illness took her life. I provided the sperm myself.”

“Your sperm? Wasn’t that a little selfish?”

“There were many others, but my sperm was deemed the best-suited to the egg by an independent test. Prior to this, we had the whole ectogenesis environment set up.”

“I see.”

“After fertilisation, we began the incubation process. The womb material was better than we had predicted, and the foetus developed at a remarkable rate. This was about two years ago. We eventually managed to grow a mature baby.”

“What sex did you choose?”

“Most of the staff were in favour of a man, strangely. But I eventually persuaded them to make it a woman. I felt that the world would look more kindly on a new Eve than a new Adam.”

“Makes sense. But there is something else here. The nanofibre infusion you gave her. Can you elaborate on that?”

“Of course. Well... when the child was in the foetal stage, we introduced nanofibres into her, which made their way through her entire form. We had originally intended it for monitoring and adjustment, but in the event it had formed a network that strengthened her bones and muscles, and connected her neural network in a way that was... amazing. We calculated that she would have an IQ of upwards of 180.”

“Hmm. Sounds a little risky, but from how you describe it, you didn’t kill her, so I’ll hear the rest of this story. But I will say that the IQ estimate sounds a little high.”

“I know. Anyway, when she had grown to the standard birth age of a human, we prepared for chamber growth. Over the next two months, she grew through into early adolescence. During this time, we decided to begin inputting information into her using a VR set while she was in an induced REM-sleep.”

“You mean you were feeding her information while in deliberately induced REM-sleep? Was that entirely necessary?”

“We decided that, at her rate of growth, it would be a more practical form of learning for her than that used for naturally-born children. Children grow and learn over many years, and even with her expanded intelligence, we calculated that she would find it difficult learning consciously at her rate of growth. We also wanted to ensure she had stabilised before having her moving around. You know how loose-limbed teenagers can be.”

“I can understand, I think. Go on.”

“Well, to put it simply, she was fully matured and entered a normal growth rate three weeks ago. Her gene pattern has been finalised, and we have taken an IQ test. According to estimates, her IQ potential exceeds 200, though we need to run more tests to be sure. She is fully capable of speech and coherent thought, her puzzle-solving abilities are within expected parameters, and her learning rate is amazing. She is also experiencing no troubles developing emotionally.”

Sarah looked down at her notes again, then up at Taylor.

“Now I can see why this project has cost so much money and taken so long. You can say for sure that she is a fully sentient human being, despite her origins and learning history?”

“She can be equated to a normal intelligent woman of her current physical age. I would stake my reputation on it.”

“What is her physical age?”

“Early twenties.”

“I see. Taylor, may I speak frankly?”

“Naturally.”

“This experiment is... unsettling.”

“How so?”

“I have grave doubts as to this woman’s legal standing. The main reason this kind of experiment has never been done is that creating sentient life within a laboratory may cause it to fall outside the boundaries of human rights laws as they stand. This in turn could open the floodgates for multiple violations. What guarantee have I that this will not happen?”

“My word.”

“The word of one man is not enough. And there is also the concern that you have grown too attached to this project to see the risks involved.”

“What risks?”

“Not biological or technological risks, but political and religious. There are still plenty of people in the world willing to believe that God created and grants life. How do you think they would feel if we showed them a fully-sentient human grown in a laboratory? Then

there are the potential political repercussions if we tell the world that we created life. The off-world Colonies will see enormous potential in this. If life can be created and fine-tuned to this degree, they could adjust the next generation of humans to live in environments our generation cannot live in. And that's not even considering those human rights issues. Taken all in all, this woman could alter the fabric of humanity's existence."

"That's partly the point. She is the new humanity."

"That's not for you to decide, Taylor."

"I know."

"Hence your request to submit her to the General Science Bureau for evaluation before a public announcement."

A very long pause ensued, and Taylor was afraid that he would be officially prevented from saying anything about his project, but nothing like that was said. Instead, she seemed to change the subject.

"Can you help us with something?"

"What? And why?"

"It is.... I thought that you might be able to help. That's part of the reason why I made space for you. It's about the Sigma City crisis."

"Well?"

"Come with me."

Sarah got up and led Taylor from the room via a side door, then into a private lift which took them down to the subterranean levels of the Parliament Building. After a lengthy descent, the door opened and Taylor was led along a spotless corridor into an incident room, where a large 3D projection of what appeared to be a ruined city was being shown on the central display table. Little markers were showing where dots were moving in regular patterns through its half-blocked streets. Taylor looked at it, hoping it wasn't what he thought it was.

"This is Sigma City."

Taylor looked at it. It had been two weeks since the incident was first reported. Details were still being kept quiet, and no satellite feeds from the site were reaching the net. It had become the new great mystery of the age, with forums blazing over what might have happened, thinking everything from earthquakes to extraterrestrial attack. Sarah turned to Taylor, looking grave.

"Do you have any idea what could have caused this?"

"Surely your experts have analysed everything."

"I want your opinion."

"First explain what happened."

"I think I can do that."

Taylor looked over to a figure who had been in a dark corner until now. It took him under a second to recognise her. Agnes Sullivan Farron, 145th Prime Minister of the Earth Parliament.

“Ma’am.”

“You can skip the formalities.” she said in her clipped voice. “We have little time. To put it simply, Network Security detected what registered as a Class-13 hacking code in Sigma City’s network, larger than anything we have ever sensed on Earth. When reconnaissance was sent to investigate, most of the city was in ruins. According to witness accounts, every single security mech in the city turned on them, wiping out an estimated 900,000 people and attacking nearly every tall building in the area. Due to the presence, sophistication and extreme effectiveness of this code, the chances of this being some random event are next to none.”

“Casualty reports are in the millions.” said Sarah. “All communications sent into the city have failed to provoke a response. The only substantial movement is from the mechs. Several groups of people managed to escape during and after the incident, and those that survived have since evacuated the area. We have people on the ground dealing with them as we speak.”

“No sign of hostile activity within the city.” the computer voice piped up above them. “Continuing to scan.”

“Some sensors are still online and transmitting.” continued the Prime Minister “Tower of Babel is still intact, but most other buildings have suffered severe structural damage. Main power, water and transmission lines into and out of the city, and all other major facilities, are severely damaged. Predicted incoming rain could compromise repair efforts for a substantial amount of time.”

Taylor listened as he and the members of the Earth Parliament listened to the various sections report in as their people on the ground forwarded information. He was given access to a secret satellite feed, which showed the scale of the destruction, along with previous and current network signals from the area. All of it suggested a concerted and merciless cyberattack on the city, but none of it seemed consistent with previous off-world disputes.

“Well?” asked Sarah.

Taylor asked the most obvious question.

“Why hasn’t this gone public?”

“We are treating the escapees from the city in safe zones surrounding the city, and we have put a gag on news from the area. When all this is over, it can be reported to be a tragic system malfunction, but we must determine the real cause. So, your opinion?”

“Only one. It’s a deliberate attack, but it’s not from a known source. I would need to have an expert look at the hacking code, but that kind of devastation is way beyond anything the Colonies are capable of.”

“Define ‘way beyond’.” said the Prime Minister.

“Designing the entire Earth Network to run smoothly and without any bugs at all for ten years straight.”

“Hell.”

“Almost.”

The computer voice sounded again.

“Direct feed from exploratory team incoming.”

Taylor frowned.

“Direct feed?”

“We’ve sent in an exploratory team. Since the mechs seem docile, we can hope that—
Shh.”

The display of the ruined city faded and was replaced with a direct feed from the helmets of four commandos. The destruction was even worse close to, and as the ships continued, nothing moved but the occasional rock dropping from its fragile perch. It was another minute before they saw movement. The ships halted and focused ahead. Coming up ahead was one of the city’s ten assigned Tier-5 crowd control mechs. After getting its call sign, the commando leader spoke.

“Attention, CC-Mech R434, this is Commander Derekson of R&R Unit R. Please respond.”

No response.

“I repeat: CC-Mech R434, this is Commander Derekson of R&R Unit R. Please respond.”

The drone levered itself up, then two guns extended and opened fire. The leader was shredded in seconds, taking down his camera feed. The other commandos beat a hasty retreat, and the mech returned to its patrol. In the command room, the Prime Minister was livid.

“Just who ordered live guns installed on those things?!”

One of the analysts spoke up.

“According to records, they always had them in case of trouble with elements sympathetic to the Colonies. It was done under orders based on Earth Parliament’s Executive Amendment 9.”

“I have no objections to that under normal circumstances. But couldn’t they not have been attached as standard!?”

“They weren’t, Ma’am. Someone must have—”

“Someone must have attached them recently? Say people under my control and in my employ? Maybe even taken the safety functions off so they could only fire lethal rounds? Entirely possible.”

The disguised female voice came over all channels. Taylor frowned while Wayne scanned through the signals. The Prime Minister seemed to be doing the same on her end with the help of an unseen aid.

“What’s happening?” snapped Sarah. “Who is that transmitting?”

“It’s a narrow-band hack feeding directly into our local communication feeds.” said the analyst. “Caller ID unknown. Caller location.... They’re transmitting from the Tower of Babel.”

“Where?”

“Inside. Central comm relay.”

“That was quick work.” said the voice. “Of course I could have arranged it so you never found me, or blanketed the entire world. But I would rather keep this between enemies for

the time being.”

The Prime Minister had had enough.

“Who are you?! If you can hear me, show yourself at once!”

“As you wish.”

There was a momentary fluctuation in power, and the projectors altered to 3D display. The woman appeared before them, a distorted vision hiding her detailed appearance. She looked around her, then smiled.

“Well, well. I have long waited for this moment, to speak and be spoken to by such illustrious persons.”

The Prime Minister and Taylor both stared at her while the analyst continued to scan the transmission.

“Who are you?” asked the Prime Minister.

The woman’s smile broadened into a grin.

“I can get to introduce myself? Splendid! I am the one responsible for the destruction you have seen. I am the end of one world and the beginning of a new one! I AM THE EMPRESS OF SIN!”

She proclaimed it like the beginning of the world and bowed theatrically, sweeping her long cloak out behind her. No-one was impressed. She shrugged and straightened up.

“Worked on that for days. Oh well, worth trying.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Very simple. I hold a grudge against certain people who were going to do something very nasty, while of course disguising it as a good thing. Sigma City is little more than a testing ground turned into a home base. I intend to do this, or something similar, to every major city on the Earth. Should make quite the display.”

“Are you working for one of the Colonies?”

“Don’t group me with them. I’m working for myself out of a pure, old-fashioned personal grudge. No high-falutin nonsense about political and social causes.”

“So you’re working alone?”

“Oh yes. Me and the few who helped me with the little things like the hacking and issuing install orders for guns on the city mechs. Though there might be some of the remaining survivors in this city who currently think I’m the most wondrous creature alive. I must be like a breath of fresh air to their sin-starved minds.”

“We must inform you that we will use all the forces at our disposal against you.”

“And I should tell you that your forces are nothing to me. I have analysed the tactics of Earth’s peacekeeping forces. Any attack made against me I could counter in a few seconds. You can’t stop me. You have two weeks before I launch my second attack. You won’t be able to hide that from the public. See you!”

The Empress waved a hand and the projectors shut down. Everyone was silent for a time, then Taylor looked at Sarah. She was frowning in deep thought, stroking her chin.

“Is this for real?”

“You’re better believe it.” said the Prime Minister. “Order a Red Alert, mobilise all sections, get–”

“May I speak with you a moment?”

Sarah’s voice hissed into Taylor’s ear. They left the room and went out into the corridor.

“What?”

Sarah hesitated for a second before answering.

“I may not be satisfied with your project now, but I may be once I have seen it perform under live conditions.”

“What are you–” it took under a second for the dots to connect. “No, absolutely not. No, no, no.”

“Would you protect a program you had written from testing? This is the best test to show whether she is truly the next generation of humanity, or merely one of its steps along the path.”

“But–”

“No buts, Taylor. Either you submit her as a part of our efforts to stop that lunatic, or I’ll pull your funding.”

“But–”

“No buts!”

The two glared at each other for a long minute, then Taylor rubbed the back of his neck.

“What do you propose?”

“We monitor her all the way. This seems like just one woman’s mad bid for power, nothing more. If we can get to her, silence her, we can rebuild from there. Those would be the ideal conditions to test her. Not the constant turmoil of a war zone like Venus or the sensitive environments of Mars, but on home ground where we can get in and grab her if we must. You can be on the team monitoring her if you wish.”

“And in return?”

“Should the mission and trial be a success, I would be more than willing to grant your requests and would consider these considerable expenses well worth it. But only then.”

The word Taylor might have used would have been ‘blackmail’, but he knew that there was no other way open to him.

“Alright.”

“Good. Now I must return to the Prime Minister.”

Sarah left without another word, returning to the operations room to see the Prime Minister bent over a set of displayed personnel files. Sarah went over and looked at them. The careers displayed before her were not flattering, and she was surprised to see the Prime Minister looking at them with such rapt attention.

“What is the matter, Prime Minister?”

The voice that replied was contemplative.

“I know what you were planning. I’ve known about Taylor’s pet project for some time,

and I had an idea about it. I thought it would never come to it, but maybe now it will.”

“What?”

“What if... we created some kind of special squad for this. They would be the best of the best, but if they died protecting Taylor’s ‘daughter’, it would not be such a great loss. We need only do this once. As with Sigma’s true fate, no-one need ever know.”

“That’s rather old, isn’t it?”

“The oldest ideas are sometimes the best. My thinking is this. We find the people whom we would otherwise not touch. People whom our forces are totally unable to work with, but at the same time people who could eat our people for lunch. If we use people like them, we could take back the city. And if we use freelance and... undesirables, we can avoid personal losses and it will not be such a blow if some or all don’t make it back alive.”

While Sarah did not entirely approve of the Prime Minister’s thinking, she had to admit its merits.

“You mean hire from off-world colonies?”

“Yes. From the Black List, specifically. That’s what you see before you. Discharged soldiers, criminals, contract killers, people whom many among my peers consider the scum of the Colonies. We’re not used to this kind of thing any more. But the people of the Colonies are. When you want to take down an assassin, use another assassin.”

“And who do you have in mind?”

The Prime Minister smiled. That smile was unpleasant, and made Sarah dislike the idea even more.

“Oh... I have a few names that would be perfect. Hopefully.” she selected three names. “Find them, and bring them in. By any means necessary.”

*

Guts flowing out of his torn abdomen, blood gushing in great spurts, the sand muddied by their detritus. The man’s eyes beginning to glaze even as he tried to save him, gently slipping his guts back in through the ragged wound. The injector with the local anaesthetic is still embedded in him, and his cries are drowned out by the sound of shells firing overhead and impacting. He was still dying.

“Damn it, Johnny! Don’t die on me, you son of a bitch!”

“I... Sorry, Danny. I... guess I’m not strong.”

“Like fuck you are! Just stay with me. The medic will be here soon. Medic, get you goddamn butt over here now!”

The medic is a few metres away, still tending the walking wounded.

“Come on, Johnny. Don’t give in! A true Mars Marine doesn’t give up because of a little nick like this.”

Johnny coughs, causing a fresh flow of blood. There’s more blood out of him now than in. Danny tries, tries, tries... No good. The eyes close and a final trickle of blood oozes from

the corner of his mouth. For a few seconds, Danny wants to jump up and get his own brains splattered across the ground, but he stops himself. He flattens himself against the wall through a new barrage, gripping his assault rifle in bloodied hands, tears streaming down his face as he let out a scream of emotional agony, muffled by the sounds of battle.

It was then that Danny woke up, starting up from the bed and glancing out through the window at the brightly lit scene of Downtown New Tokyo. The woman beside him also stirred, but only to turn over in bed, unmoved by his rude awakening. Glancing at her, he slowly slipped out from under the bedclothes and into the adjoining room. He didn't bother putting anything on. He quickly found the ventilator and opened his flask. Taking a deep draught of the liquor it contained, he leaned against the wall, feeling its slight narcotic effect fill him.

For a few minutes, he leaned against the wall by the vent, naked in the multicoloured nightlights. Ten years and the nightmares still wouldn't leave him alone. A brief respite was all he could hope for. The woman sharing his night woke and saw him in the light. She quickly slipped on a dressing gown and came through. Danny's eyes were closed when she entered, her bare feet making no noise. She approached and pulled the flask from his hand before he realised she was there.

"It may not be spiked, but it's still bad for you." she said, placing the flask on the windowsill. "You know my rules. One night, any tricks, cash only, and no boosters."

"Sorry, just—"

"The dreams. I know. A few of the girls told me about it."

Danny turned to the woman, forced a convincing smile and approached her, pressing close. The woman smiled in turn, a genuine invitation.

"It's nothing that a little exercise won't cure."

Danny wanted to refuse, but the woman reached between his legs and squeezed. Endorphins rushed, and he pulled the woman to him and pressed his lips to her neck. The few hours left until sunrise passed in an energetic blur of motion, groans and rushes of ecstasy on both sides. When the sun was touching their faces, the woman opened her eyes and looked at Danny with a smile of pure pleasure on her face. Danny was sweating and parts of him were hot, but he looked happier.

"How was it?" she asked

The woman reached down between his legs and squeezed again, the flesh so hot it seemed painful to both of them. He grinned.

"It was something I needed. I daren't have a steady girlfriend, so these little adventures help do what a man needs to do."

"Selfies not good enough?"

"Oh, they help. But not like this."

In a few minutes, the former Mars Marine was dressed and gone, grabbing his flask before he went. He left a woman puzzled, still slightly annoyed by his bending of the house rules, but pleased to have a customer with such stamina.

After buying a few bare necessities for when he went back home, Danny went up to the midtown park, standing on a large hill at the centre of the domed city. The sky looked

convincing enough to a cursory glance, but anyone from Earth would have seen the drastic light difference. Daytime on Mars was still like later afternoon on Earth, with the city's nightlights providing a substitute for moonlight. He sat on a bench, cracked a can of pop and took a swig. For a few seconds, he looked up at the sky free of his demons, wondering what the Lunae Planum looked like before New Tokyo was built and the land around cultivated.

Then different memories came. Sitting naked in a chair, held by Martian Intelligence after the trench débâcles. He had been utterly insolent, and was now suspected of treachery. All that time, he had felt a gap in the small of his back, where the chair was not backed and he was regularly shocked in that region, along with other parts of him. By the time he was exonerated and Mars Intelligence reprimanded severely for their prisoner treatment, he had been given his share of mental scars.

Seeing that no-one was around, he reached into his jacket and pulled out a 2333-issued service revolver, marked with his name and former military ID number. He held the gun in his hands, hanging his head and visualising his possible future. Him being discovered lying across the bench, the top back portion of his head blown up and away, scattered across the ground behind him in a crimson spray, perhaps even his eyeballs pushed from their sockets by the pressure of the bullet passing through. He sighed, holstering his weapon again. He could never do it.

As Danny glanced around, oddly comforted by the feel of steel against his side, he saw a figure coming up the path towards them. Every sense told him that this was not the normal visitor to the park, nor was it a resident of the city. Surreptitiously grasping his weapon, he got up nonchalantly and walked past as the figure, a woman, approached. As she turned to glance at him, he quickly struck out, twisted her arms behind her back and pressed her against a nearby tree, pushing his pocketed gun into her skin so she could be in doubt what it was.

“Who the hell are you and what the hell are you doing here?”

The woman didn't turn. She answered in a cultured voice.

“I could just be a tourist?”

“With that walk? That look in your eye? You're no tourist. Now spit it out before my finger gets twitchy.”

The woman was not intimidated.

“Earth Secret Service, looking for former First Lieutenant Daniel Redfield. Hero of the Siege of Elysium Mons, I believe?”

Danny froze at being addressed this way.

“Yeah, you could say that. Not that I'd call myself anything but ‘a lucky survivor’.”

“You're wanted. An emergency on Earth. Only you can help us.”

Danny released his captive.

“You want me on Earth? I'd have thought they'd rather eat their own shit than have me there.”

“They would, but they have no choice. It's an emergency. Others like you are being found and brought in, willing or not.”

He smirked.

“So it doesn’t matter whether I say yes or no.”

“Not really.”

A moment’s pause to think. They would only come to him for the dirtiest job, maybe something like urban warfare. His eyes flickered with the sudden excitement this brought to him.

“Alright. I’ll come.”

“Good. And I’ve read your psyche after they freed you from Mars Intelligence Headquarters. Give me your gun.”

Almost sheepishly, Danny handed her his gun, which she expertly broke up into three parts and slipped into her bag. She then produced a shuttle ticket for Zurich on Earth.

“The shuttle leaves in two hours. I trust you can make it.”

“Sure.”

“Good. I will be waiting.”

And turning briskly, the woman left, allowing Danny a moment to collect his thoughts, and once again remember his hellish origins.

On another part of Mars, in New Dubai, a dark-skinned woman was seated at the bar drinking her third Mai Tai cocktail. She had been waiting there for twenty minutes, and her client was fifteen minutes late. The bar’s view of the Valles Marineris was stunning, even though the sun was setting in the west, casting its meagre red light along the canyon. As she took a sip of her drink, she glanced towards the doors for the thirtieth time, and finally saw her client walking in. He looked too furtive, bound to give himself away if anyone was watching. She had seen a couple of notable unusual characters in the bar so far.

Her client came up to her, slipping off his goggles.

“I... That is... Erm.... The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late.”

The woman smiled and glanced at him.

“That I fear it is impossible to accede to your request.”

The man sighed, relieved that he had remembered the pass phrase.

“You’ve got all the intel?”

She sighed.

“If you’re going to be this obvious, we might as well end our business here and now. You’re far too... furtive.”

“Sorry. It’s the first time—”

“And don’t say the ‘a’ or ‘h’ words. That’s a sure give-away even in a booze-sodden place like this.”

The client shifted uncomfortably. The woman smiled.

“You need some stimulant. Scotty, gin and vermouth with ice for my friend. Only the best and extra ice.”

The drink was duly served and delivered to the welcome addition from the woman of a tip on top of the Earth liqueur's high price. After the man had downed it and coughed a little, the woman relaxed.

"You needed that."

"I don't understand how you can drink this shit."

"That drink is something I don't drink as a rule. This one is great." she waved her drink a little. "For the true connoisseur."

"I didn't know you were a dipsomaniac."

"How could I do what I do if I were that drunk? Besides, I have a very high tolerance for it, and I know when to stop. I could cite two thousand people by name who could do neither." a pause. "Now, why don't you give me final intel and organise payment. Oh don't worry about him." she had seen the man glance at the barman. "He's one of my... friends."

The man hesitated for a while, then bent close. She tried to make it look like they were clandestine lovers, just to decrease suspicion and increase the rational for his unease.

"The target is in the villa on the other side of the canyon. He's going to be in his living room from 10 until 11:00 PM. It's a clear shot."

"And the payment?"

"We're monitoring his vital signs. Payment will be transferred when the target is dead."

"Good. And the amount?"

"As agreed."

"Excellent. Now you'd best get out of here. Make sure you don't come to see me again."

"But we're lovers, aren't we?"

"I've got that planned."

The woman pulled away, then slapped him hard across the face.

"Don't ever come near me again, you little shit!"

A few raised eyebrows and several turned heads ensured she was noticed leaving him, and several witnesses could swear that they were lovers having a dirty weekend at the hotel and he had just dumped her. As she entered the lift, she smiled and admired the wall design. When she was back in her room on the top floor, she locked the door, went into the bathroom and pulled off her dress and wig. As she glanced at herself in the mirror, she felt relief at seeing the long-haired blonde disappear and the short-haired brunette emerge.

After pulling on her chameleon jumpsuit, she picked up an oblong case, slipped into the unoccupied adjoining room and went to its balcony. She put the case on the floor and opened it, assembling the specially-acquired long-range rifle stowed inside. With it assembled, she lay down on the couch and adjusted to its colour and texture. She waited, and as 10:00 PM approached, her target came into view. There was a woman with him. He kissed her on the cheek and she left. He went to the sofa, sat and activated the viewer as the title screen for Mars TV sensation 'Mass Point Reaction: Scions of the Ninth Planet' appeared on-screen.

Everything seemed to have been set up perfectly. The time: correct. The target's

position: as expected. The visibility: perfect. But as with any hit on Earth, winds could play tricks and alter the path of a bullet. She waited thirty minutes, her eyes blinking little, the wind blowing around her silently. The stars above flickered, the bright pinprick of Jupiter shone amid the stars, and she waited. Finally, the time was right. The conditions were right. She levelled her sights, then halted. The man was shifting, moving to get a drink. He was gone for a minute. One precious minute of these ideal conditions lost. When he returned, she wasted no time. She levelled her sights once again, checked the wind, and fired. The bullet did its work well.

She quickly rolled onto the floor and onto her weapon. She could just see the figure of the woman rushing into the room and finding the man dead, and as the tragic scene played out, the assassin quickly placed the destruct charge on the gun and hurled it over the balcony into the canyon. She then activated her watch and waited until the gun had fallen a sufficient distance before detonating. The slight boom as the gun was obliterated a few hundred feet below brought a smile to her face. Getting up quickly, she re-entered her rooms.

“Excellent shooting.”

With the speed of a snake, she reached behind the closet she had moved to stand by the adjoining door, yanking out a pistol from its hiding place and pointing it at the source of the voice. It was a man in white and grey, wearing dark glasses and speaking with the cultured, accented voice she always heard from those fresh from Earth.

“Who are you?”

“Earth Secret Service. It may sound strange, but it is nice to meet you in person, Miss Blanxart.”

The woman started, then relaxed, motioning for the man to sit on the sofa. She sat on the corner of a small table opposite.

“First, how do you know that name? I’m registered here as Miss Abigail Laura Winchester. And second, how can I be sure you’re a government agent, or even from Earth? The accent is absurdly easy to imitate for anyone with half a brain.”

“We have ways and means, Miss Blanxart.” he brought out a small pad and flipped through the displayed information. “Jirou Blanxart. Mother from Earth, a Catalan, and father from Mars, a New Tokyo man. Inherited your mother’s surname, got your maiden name from your father. Moved back with him to Mars when your parents separated twenty-two years ago. Fluent in over twenty languages, trained as a sniper during the Mars War and became the best shot in the Elysium army. After the Wars, you became notorious for carrying out multiple assassinations on Mars, Earth, the Jupiter moons, and the Venus Hellcraft. Preferred method is sniping, but has been known to use other methods. At least that’s what’s written here. I can’t guarantee that it’s entirely comprehensive or accurate.”

“So you know my resume. Anyone from a dozen other agencies and syndicates could have gotten that.”

“There’s my ID.” he showed it.

“Stolen or forged.”

“My DNA record.” he showed that.

“Again, stolen.”

“Then what about this?”

He pulled back his sleeve and pointed to a tiny microdot on his skin. Jirou approached slowly and looked at it. To the untrained eye, it would have been a mole. To her, it spoke volumes.

“Yes. It would take a lot of effort to make that realistic. Too much for someone like me. Alright, I’m convinced. So you’re an Earth agent. Why are you here? To run me in?”

“Not at all. To recruit you.”

She chuckled.

“Half the independent governments established in the Solar System want my head, including the Earth Parliament. Why should I believe you want my help?”

“Haven’t you seen the news?”

“Not recently. Why?”

The man activated the room’s display screen and Jirou saw a newsflash play out on the destruction of Sigma City.

“You, and a few others like you, are the only ones who can help us.”

Jirou looked at the aerial pictures of devastation, then turned towards the agent and holstered her weapon.

“Keep talking.”

“Attention please. We will be docking at Ceres Prison Dock Number 2 in ten minutes. Please fasten safety straps, seal all containers, and ensure all possessions are secured.”

Agent Carter tightened her belt and closed her water bottle. As the shuttle slowed and the docking arms reached out to clamp on, she considered the absurdity of what she was about to do. She knew that Earth were looking for unconventional and expendable forces to send against this ‘Empress of Sin’, but did they really need to go to a Class 10 prison? They could easily have gone to one of the remaining armed forces on Mars or the *Zelazny’s Halt* PMC on Venus. This place was for the worst offenders in the Solar System, from syndicate enforcers to terrorists to psychopaths.

Once the ship was docked and after-flight checks were completed, the pilot sounded again.

“You may now disembark. Please ensure all luggage is declared and passed through the scanner. Any objects possible to use as offensive weapons will be confiscated. Anyone found in possession of prohibited items or substances will be detained.”

As Agent Carter passed through the security checks, she flashed her ID and was escorted out of the main line of new officers, prison visitors and other legal visitors. The illegal ones came through different means. She was led via a secure passage to the warden’s office. Warden Kramer, a surly-looking woman with many years of duty on her brow, sounded both jolly and tired.

“Good to see someone new around here.”

“It’s a pleasure, Warden Kramer.”

“I understand you’re here for... our special guest.”

“Which one? Ceres is famous for them.”

“Them and the mines. Run by the inmates.”

“At least they let us have the ore they mine.”

“They don’t really have a choice in the matter.”

“But to get back on track, how is my... target?”

“He’s in his cell. Been there for the past two days. Solitary after getting into a fight with another prisoner.”

“Any weapons?”

“Unless you count fists, no.”

“Can you give me any details?”

“Don’t you have access on Earth?”

“I was just given a name and sent here. They said you would give me all the details here.”

“Alright. I’ve got his file ready.”

Kramer brought up her screen and displayed the file for Carter to see. The face of a man in his forties appeared, a face scarred across the upper left side by flames. Kramer talked.

“Aiden Jonas. Born on Ganymede, emigrated to the Venus Hellcraft *Archer’s Folly*. Got in with the wrong crowd, became a roughneck for the local syndicate and earned a reputation for his hard-hitting technique. While in the syndicate, he developed a taste for creating explosives and hacking into security systems, and he eventually joined the *Zelazny’s Halt* PMC group. Two years later, there was an incident which resulted in the destruction of *Archer’s Folly*, killing everyone on board. After that, he became the PMC’s best bombing and hacking expert, and a strong soldier with a reputation for unprovoked violence against POWs and some callous bomb placement in the Mars War. He became a war criminal after one of his bombs destroyed a refugee shelter, killing thirty refugees and twelve soldiers allied to his employers. Over a hundred injured. After the war, his PMC dumped him and he received three consecutive life sentences, to be served here.”

Carter shifted in her seat.

“Quite the history.”

“And you need him for... what?”

“The Sigma City incident. The rest is need-to-know.”

“Isn’t everything. Want to see him, or do you want him wrapped and sent in a plain shuttle?”

“I’ll see him first.”

“I warn you, he’s a little... loopy.” she circled a finger over her temple to illustrate the point.

“I’m surprised you needed to tell me after showing me his record.”

“Good point. I’ve arranged for him to be in Open Cell 3. That’s two floors up from here. I’ll come with you.”

“Thanks.”

The two women left and entered the lift. It took them two floors up and one section across. The hallways they walked along were well lit, contrasting with Carter’s ideas about the Ceres prisons and mines.

“I always thought these places were dark and dingy.”

Kramer grimaced.

“You haven’t seen the toilets after an off curry.”

This was their final exchange until they reached the doorway of Open Cell 3. The doorway was designed like a two-way mirror, so Carter got a good look at the man on the other side. Wearing the dark boots and jumpsuit that was the prison uniform, he was seated in one of the three chairs with his hands secured behind him. The picture she had seen had been taken when Jonas first entered the prison ten years before, and he had changed little. His off-blond hair was longer and tied in a short ponytail, his scarred face was stoic, but his bright eyes darted round the room, and his mouth was twisted by an unpleasant smirk.

“Not the most wholesome of characters.” said Carter.

“No. But compared to some of our inmates, he’s not that bad. Just don’t get too close to him.”

Carter nodded, and the two entered. While Carter sat down opposite the man, Kramer remained standing, a hand on her weapon. For a while, there was silence. Then Carter spoke.

“I am an agent from the Earth Secret Service. On behalf of the Earth Parliament, I want you to—”

“Hang myself?”

Carter was taken aback. Jonas’ build had not suggested such a light voice, airy like a tenor yet with a cut like steel.

“Yeah, I’d bet you’d like that. Choke-gargle-gurgle until there was nothing left but a corpse. Eyes bulging, piss and shit coming outta my—”

Kramer frowned angrily.

“Remain civil, Jonas.”

Jonas looked at Kramer with his bright eyes.

“Yeah. I remain civil while being worked like a slave. I’d rather rot here than take orders from some lousy government. Work here... letting people watch me while they suffer. Seeing the pride, the fear, the pain on their faces.” the smirk returned, broader now. “Seeing their reaction as I tear through rocks for ore, breaking muscles and cracking bone. Letting all fall away until there’s only the sensation of the moment. Me, and their fear and awe around me. Let’s be thankful I don’t eat livers, string up bones or do anything sick like that.”

Carter was already feeling uneasy. It wasn’t his words so much as his attitude and tone that made her skin crawl. She shuffled a little.

“You are to accompany a team of operatives inside the Sigma City cordon to deal with the person behind the incident. Your skills as a hacker will be needed, and possibly your

knowledge of explosives.”

“What do I get?”

“What makes you think you’ll get anything?”

“Because I’m doing three life sentences with no chance of getting parole. You must have some kind of good offer. If not, then you can take a hike back to your cushy little office job and leave me to rot here, as I’m sure they would rather do.”

“Since you’re so pointed, yes there is a reward for your efforts. If you perform well, we can authorise your transfer to a prison on Mars. Better working conditions, and pure air to breathe rather than imported stuff in tanks. You could also receive other perks if you are nice and tell us about your contacts, but that’s optional. The transfer is your reward, take it or leave it.”

Jonas thought for a while, then smirked again.

“Mars. The place of dreams. The red sands flowing beneath you like blood, the little pieces of ore you find on the surface, sign of veins running deep below the surface, just waiting to be torn apart. The fragile balance between man’s place and the planet’s will.” he looked at Carter, and his smirk became an almost cordial smile “When do we leave?”

*

“Sensei, I’m nervous.”

“I know, my dear. I know. But it’s the only way.”

Crystal and Taylor were being escorted down a long passage towards the general briefing area.

“You said that I would be with others.”

“Yes, but don’t let that affect you in any way. I’ll be with you all the way in spirit. You can have a special comlink to me.”

“Thank you. But...”

“Yes?”

“These clothes.”

Crystal looked down at herself. She was dressed in pale grey, in a skin-tight suit which hugged and supported her. Being used to a looser gown-like dress in her old room, this new slightly restrictive clothing was difficult to get used to.

“You can go back to whatever you want when the mission is over. This is part of your combat gear, and you will be wearing it as a protective skin during the mission.”

“I see.”

She still didn’t look happy. When they came to the main containment area, Sarah was waiting, and as Crystal passed through the doorway, Sarah held up a hand to stop Taylor from following her. As she entered and the door closed behind her, Crystal had a chance to take in the three others who were in the room. Two men and one woman, all wearing dark colours. The woman was fidgeting as if she would rather be working on something. One of

the men, the one with dark hair, also fidgeted, tapping his heel and rubbing his neck. The blonde man had his hands cuffed behind him, and when she saw his stony and scarred face, the expression in its eyes made her feel unwell.

She walked forward slowly. There were several seats in the room, and she took the one furthest from the group. The blonde man followed her with his eyes, then deliberately sat down a few feet from her, continuing to stare fixedly. The other two ignored them. During the next few minutes, there was no sound apart from the slight ones made by their movements. Crystal tried to ignore the blonde man's intense stare, but she eventually had to glance at him. Those eyes bored into her, and the emotion behind them was nothing she had experienced before.

“Wanna die?”

Crystal was surprised.

“Eh?”

“You wanna die?” he glanced at the other man. “He does. Just look. Knife in the gut, bullet in the eye or spleen, something somewhere that's painful and lethal so he can leave this world.”

“No, of course I don't want to die.”

The man turned to her, smiling unpleasantly.

“Then we have something in common. We're the only ones in this party that know life.”

“Attention, attention! General Stein will now brief you!”

The announcement over the room's PA stopped any further attempts at conversation. The four rose as a panel slid back from a window, where the titular person stood in a uniform. His face was badly scarred by flame, but his charisma was still incredibly potent. As he spoke, Crystal felt swept along by his words.

“You four have been chosen for this mission, and have chosen to accept, much to our gratification. Sigma City has been attacked by a person calling themselves the Empress of Sin. So far, all we know about her is that she and others unknown caused all the mechs in the city to go berserk. We have reports of widespread structural damage and a high number of civilian and CIG personnel. We are sending you in as a strike team to take down the Empress of Sin before she can carry out her threat of a global strike on other cities. You will be sent in via one of our Sikorsky Stealth Helicopters. Once there, you will make your way by any means necessary to the Tower of Babel, there to take out the Empress and stop her from fulfilling her threat. Any questions?”

There was silence for a second, then the blonde man stepped forward and spoke in a blasé drawl.

“I can't raise my hand, but consider it risen. Why the hell don't you guys do this with a bomb or two? The city's already in ruins.”

The General's voice was cold.

“Because, Jonas, we want what's left of the city intact, and her hacking codes can easily cause our own missiles to explode in our faces. Any sensible questions?”

“Yeah.” the man Jonas again. “How the hell am I gonna do anything useful with my hands cuffed.”

“You’ll have your hands free for the mission, but you’ll also have a shock collar on your neck, which will trigger if you go outside the city perimeter once activated.”

“And I’ll die the death of Bundy. Got it.”

“Right. And if you do end up dying during the mission... well, as you known, shit happens. And again, any questions?”

There was silence. The General nodded.

“Right. You’ll be ready to head out in one hour.”

The panel closed, and there was silence. Just before people came in to escort the four for their separate preparations, the dark-haired man muttered something under his breath that Crystal only just caught.

“Yeah. He was right. Shit happens. And I’ve hit the bloody jackpot.”