

BEGINNING

SOLDIERS: A TALE OF XX CHROMO WARFARE

NEW

All dreams, good or bad, must come to an end.

The dream that Emily had existed in for seven days came to an abrupt halt. She broke through the surface of unconsciousness with a deep inhalation and a gasp, and found that she was sitting up on her bed. She had been in one position for so long, the bed retained an impression of her body. The room was nondescript in every way, and poorly lit, the walls a

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dark, dull gray, the floor a slab of some cold synthetic stone.

She was wearing a loose, single-piece garment that barely covered her body. Amazed at how little pain she felt, she examined herself.

Her skin was darker now, a shade of deep brown met her eyes instead of the paleness of before. The laser etchings covered her body, countless, continuous grooves which stretched across her skinscape as if her epidermis was one big electrical circuit. She traced a groove in her forearm with one finger. That brought a little pain, but it paled in comparison to the pain of the laser creating that groove. Those same grooves ran down her legs, over her feet, and between her toes. Lifting her shirt, they were on her belly, swirling around her navel. She felt them on her back and on her neck. She touched her cheeks. They were there too, running all the way back across her ears. They were everywhere, just like she had told them.

Her fingers, which were running over her body, feeling her own skin as if for the first time, stopped at her hairline, tentative to move further up, hesitant to feel what was up there.

She shook her head.

There were...*clinking* sounds.

Emily smiled wide, and plunged both hands up into her new hair. It was wiry, composed of countless, metal tubes, and unfamiliar, but it was hair. *Her* hair! The Species had told her that her hair would never grow back after the damage the pyre-nuke had done to her scalp. They had been right at the time, but now they were wrong. Emily had made them wrong.

Her fingers found the small casing at the base of her skull, just above her MIU, which controlled her new hair, setting growth rates, color, and other attributes.

Between her fingers, the hair felt foreign. Emily knew that feeling would pass. She just had to get used to it.

She had to get used to a lot of things. Changing her appearance was just one of the ways she was avoiding detection by the Species. She'd had to have her MIU replaced so that she wouldn't be picked up the next time she jacked into cyberspace. She had started talking differently. She didn't swear any more, and she had adopted an accent associated with many of the Free States.

Exxy and Ky Lin had helped her with all of these things, comforting her, giving her ideas, telling her where she was going wrong.

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It was a new life, and she was a different person. If she was going to stay alive, she *had* to be different.

She swung her legs off the table, and stood, feeling that she was at a pivot-point in her life. Events, both the future and the past, spun around her, waiting for her next move. The experience made her a little dizzy and a lot giddy. She laughed to the empty room. Ky Lin and Exxy laughed with her, feeding off her energy.

Whatever would happen next, Emily knew that she would be ready.

BECKON

“I want you to do something for me,” the familiar matrix-husk said.

Emily ignored him, instead concentrating on the realspace environment around her. She was at the top of the tallest building in the city, standing at the edge as if daring a wind to push her off the edge.

Looking down, she surveyed the realm that she had inhabited for the past six months. Down there...she was just another freelancer. Another mercenary for hire. She avoided wetwork, and didn't do assassinations. She didn't mind taking out the dregs of humanity if it was justified, but she stayed away from the killing jobs. So, then it was protection mostly. People. Cargo. Data. Didn't matter, as long as it paid, and...well, Ky Lin and Exxy

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approved, of course. She didn't take jobs without their consent. She didn't always agree with them, but she always acquiesced. She had loved them too much when they were alive to refuse them much now that they were dead.

The city buzzed and glowed. Emily wondered how long it would continue to do so. Would it someday come crashing down around itself? She supposed it would. It didn't seem likely that out here, on this island, a city could survive forever. It was the isolation—it brought out the worst in people. It bred dark things.

In cyberspace, Alien-E waited for her to respond.

“Not interested,” she said.

“When you accept the job, you will be compensated half a year's pay. Upon completion, you will receive a duplicate amount.”

Emily grunted. “If you don't know why I'm doing what I'm doing, then you don't know as much about me as you would like me to believe.”

Alien-E's matrix-husk grinned at that, beckoning her closer, as if he wanted to tell her a secret. “You will be traveling to Black Vale One. When you arrive, I will provide you with further—”

Emily jacked out, sighing from the peace that came over her at the loss of the cyberspace connection.

She listed to the wind against the building. It combed through her hair, the metal strands *clinking* and *clanking* against each other.

She knew he would contact her again. It would be soon.

Ky Lin gave her a look that made her think that he believed she was going to give in. Maybe not the next time Alien-E called, but eventually.

Interestingly enough, Exxy agreed, and, with his own particular smirk, implied that she was enjoying this game that was beginning between her and Alien-E—that perhaps she was enjoying it too much. In fact, if she enjoyed it much more, he believed that she'd begin to have something bordering on feelings for Alien-E.

Emily didn't know what to say to that. It wasn't as if she were going to fall for a matrix-husk—which was all he really was at this point. How ridiculous! Emily gave them both several obscene thoughts to shut them up.

Ky Lin just wagged his finger and reminded her that she had another job to do.

Ah yes, Helix's husband. Ok, so there was one last wetwork job she'd allow herself. It would be easy, and it would be a freebie. No charge for this

one, Helix.

But first, before she could do that, there was the small matter of choosing a new name.

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NAME

E*mily* just wouldn't work anymore. She couldn't think of herself that way, and conduct herself effectively as a freelance mercenary. It would get in the way. It might slip out.

*Goddess...*no, that part of her life was over too. Using that would be a guaranteed method of attracting Species attention. She had been watching and searching for an appropriate alias over the past week. She had run across

the name during a cyberspace scan through a language databank. When the data suggestions from the languages spoken in Athara had streamed back in, she knew that she was close. After that, it didn't take long.

The alias she finally chose was a combination of the Atharan words for *fire* and *pain*. Together, the words implied that fire was the origin of pain, but also that pain was the source of fire. It seemed to be a contradiction, but she thought it was quite appropriate.

She tried the new name on for size, saying it in a whisper at first, then shouting it, hearing it echo out across the city. Ky Lin and Exxy nodded. They approved.

That done, Kiiziiziixii walked away.

THE END