

Chapter 1: Security Breach

Urban marched into Gene-IQ, one of The Asian Federation's many AI training facilities. Cursing New Beijing's summer heat, she removed her mask and wiped away the sweat that beaded on her chin. Her all-black attire, from her heeled boots to her leather jacket, even the motorcycle helmet in her hands, clashed with the garish walls of the facility as she strode forward.

She ignored the hundreds of other stoop-shouldered employees shuffling past her on all sides as she drew near the rows of Extended Reality Domes, or XRDs. The rows of domes were wider than the Forbidden Palace, stacked ten stories high, and hundreds deep within the harsh florescent cave. Ice-blue electric light shone out through frosted glass, silhouetting the employees inside the XRDs.

Urban climbed the ladder like one of the temple monkeys, dexterous and with little regard for the sharp drop below. She could have chosen the lift but loathed the stench of so many bodies pressed together. This way was faster, even if it wasn't entirely safe.

Something rammed into her shoulder.

"Hey, watch it," Urban snapped, turning around.

A towering Super shoved past her but stopped at Urban's voice. He turned slowly and studied her with loathing.

Several of the other employees scuttled away, not wanting to be drawn into any trouble.

Urban's eye narrowed. Supers were genetically modified to be larger and stronger than everyone else. They typically served in the Guard or in the Metropolis and weren't seen in the tech facilities of the Outskirts. This one was probably only here for the flag ceremony.

"I suggest you watch it, *Soup*." The Super said with a sardonic smile.

Urban's cheeks burned. Calling a naturally born person without "evolved" or genetically modified genes, primordial soup was a racial slur Urban was well familiar with. Being addressed as such, however, was not something she was familiar with.

Urban had several retorts at the tip of her tongue but bit them back. Not that she was afraid. Supers might intimidate the naturally born, or Naturals, around her but not her. However,

she didn't want to attract any more unwanted attention. She'd made it through the whole summer without giving herself away. She wouldn't jeopardize that on her last day.

Instead, she stuffed down her anger and spun away from the Super. The employees around her shot Urban curious looks.

The Super made a grunting noise and his huge feet clanged on the metallic walk way as he stomped off.

With a flick of her wrist, Urban waved her tatt over the scanner to XRD 115424. The dome chirped in response and two metal panels slid open allowing her to climb inside. As the door closed behind her, she let out a breath. Why did no one ever stand up to the Enhanced?

She wanted to kick something in her frustration. Everyone was too dependent upon their employee scores. Too afraid. Then again, maybe she would be too if her circumstances hadn't been different.

She surveyed her cube. Decorations were strictly forbidden but the confining ash gray walls were like a crematory to her. She'd taped up pieces of paper with colorful quotes and sketches on them to brighten her environment.

Urban eyed one of her favorites, a sketch of a Crain flying free in the sky, then straightened. Time for another day, another ten-hour nightmare before this prison would be forever behind her. Gene-IQ may have owned all its other employees but not her. The next few weeks would be crucial but if she survived them, she'd never set foot in the Outskirts again. Least of all, a soul sucking place like this that sapped your energy and left you with little more than a few crypto points in return.

She donned her helmet and slipped on her XRD suit. The system scanned her face and booted up. Her internal screen transformed into a live city penthouse view. Warm terracotta and apricot light reflected off of tall glass windows. A black flag with a golden hammer and sickle billowed in the wind.

The sun's rays warmed Urban's face as the gentle breeze tugged at loose strands of hair. She tucked them behind her ear and relaxed in the moment. XR or not, she'd take all the sunshine she could get.

She sighed. "Gene-IQ on."

Instantly, her view changed to display four avatars waiting in a virtual lobby. Urban used her implanted retina display in her eyes to zoomed in on them.

One woman had jagged dinosaur spikes that ran down her back and onto her tail. Another had translucent sea-green wings tucked neatly behind her. A man near the back sat rubbing his eyes. He looked ordinary enough but Urban's system identified him as having modifications in the frontal cortex lobe—enhanced intelligence. Urban hoped he wasn't one of her clients. Smart ones were always trouble.

The last person in the room had fangs, cat eyes and retractable claws. She also had some sort of skeletal enhancements that enabled her to take hard hits and falls without injury.

Scanning the logs of their social scores, or soshs, Urban found them to be 37, 34, 46, and 42 respectively. White collar workers, but easy enough to handle on most days. *Good.*

With a flick of her wrist, Urban signaled the system to put her into the virtual office. Her screen changed to display a spacious room with a desk, two chairs, and a few tasteful scroll paintings of pagodas hanging on the walls. Urban found herself sitting behind a mahogany table as a door swung open. A voice announced her first client.

It was the woman with the dinosaur spikes. Her avatar ID read: Yu Susan. "Good morning Madam Yu. How may I help you today?" Urban used her professional voice reserved for this job or meeting new people.

"There's this crazy blinding light that keeps filling my vision. I can't see ANYTHING." Susan slammed her hand on the desk so forcefully, Urban felt her suit vibrate. "If you don't fix this problem within the next two minutes, I'll blast your sosh so low you can't afford to buy toilet paper!"

Words appeared on her retina display—a script for Urban to read. She already knew it by heart. "I'm very sorry to hear that. Let's see how we can work together to make your experience with Gene-IQ a great one."

A voice only she could hear suggested several possible problems detected with Susan's system. The AI training for this software had been quick. Soon, live representatives would be obsolete. Urban wasn't sure if it was just her imagination, but it seemed like the AI was getting smarter and faster.

Urban quickly located the problem. "You enabled nature mode. This means, instead of seeing a person's genetic makeup and their enhancements, you requested to see the genetic makeup of everything around you. The request overloaded the system. That's why you're seeing

the light. This will only take a minute to fix but will require a manual override. Please close your eyes.”

Susan obeyed.

“Gene-IQ nature vision on. Code 36011.”

“Gah,” Susan yelled in annoyance as a blinding light flashed.

“Gene-IQ nature vision disable,” Urban said.

Susan opened her eyes and blinked. The timer in the corner of Urban’s screen showed one minute and forty-six seconds had passed.

Susan harrumphed as her avatar vanished from the room.

A moment later, Urban’s rating displayed a satisfaction score of 4 out of 10.

Urban snorted in disgust. The constant influx of angry customers was only part of the reason she loathed the job. More than that, it was the claustrophobic feeling she had the second she stepped foot into the building. How did so many Naturals do it every day, all year, for their entire lives? There where to go from the AI training facilities. Showing up to do the same routine, easy problems for an entire summer had been enough to harden Urban’s resolve. She would *never* end up here.

Urban helped several more ungrateful customers before classical music began playing outside of her dome. Her system sent a message reminding her to exit her XRD in the next three minutes.

Urban logged a couple more notes then scanned her tatt as she exited. The blaring music grew louder by the minute. Employees climbed out of their workspaces all around her. Here, there were no exotic colorings, facial features and abilities. No one working at the AI factory had parents who could afford enhancements at conception like the Enhanced could.

The music stopped.

Down below, at the very front of the factory, the Super that had bumped into Urban unfolded a flag with great pomp. He tied the flag to a string on the flag pole while another Super stood straight-backed watching. Being the only enhanced people in the building, the Supers towered over everyone else.

An employee next to Urban stared at the Supers with loathing and muttered curses under his breath. Urban watched them with mixed feelings of anger and longing, envying their slender legs and perfectly proportioned muscles.

Only members of the Guard were allowed to conduct flag raising ceremonies. Since Naturals were no longer strong enough to compete against their genetically enhanced peers, they couldn't enlist. As a result, they had been banned from touching the flag. Flag ceremonies, however, were minor losses compared to other changes that came with the Genetic Revolution.

Urban winced as the Federation's anthem blasted over the speakers.

The black and gold flag snaked up the pole. Everyone saluted, their tats glowing gold as they sang along with the music.

"Rise up, you who refuse to be slaves!" Their voices reverberated off the domes in harmony.

"With our flesh and blood, let us build a new Great Wall!

As the Federation faces its greatest peril,
From each one the urgent call to action comes forth."

Urban's voice joined in the crescendo.

"Braving the enemies' fire! March on!"

Urban sighed. How the times had changed since the anthem had been written.

"Resume work," a robotic voice announced over the intercom. Urban climbed back into the stuffy dome.

As she was nearing the end of her grueling shift, there was only one person left in the virtual lobby. Urban considered taking a quick break before she noticed the sosh of the waiting customer.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Ninety-five.

The client looked like she was in high school and the tips of her wavy hair were dyed bottle green. And yet, she wore a tailored suit and stood in the center of the room as if she owned it. Her fingers drummed against her leg.

A quick scan of her genetics revealed more enhancements than all the other customers Urban had seen over the last four months. She had the usual traits of an aristocrat: symmetrical and enhanced facial features, strengthened bones and superior immune system with several expensive, but not uncommon, brain enhancements.

After that, there was a long list of improvements Urban had never seen before. Obscure things like Obsidian Residual which allowed her to change the shape of her pupils, and Retractus Flameous which converted her hands into flame throwers.

“*Wakao*,” Urban breathed in Federation Mandarin.

Her heart rate quickened. Her supervisor would be monitoring this interaction. The system recorded any sessions with clients who had a sosh of over 60 and would directly ping the manager if they were over 75.

Urban checked the name.

Qing Angel.

Fighting to keep the trembling out of her voice, Urban instructed her system to let Angel in.

“Urban.” A voice rang loudly in her ears. “Urban, this is your manager, Troy.”

Fine time for the man behind the curtain to show himself. After four months on the job, Urban had started to believe the rumors that he let the bots run the show.

“You’re about to deal with a KOL. Do you remember your orientation training?”

“Uh... yeah, I think so. It’s like ‘always give Key Opinion Leaders a warm welcome,’ right?”

“*Maga...*” Her manager swore. “Just don’t upset her, okay? She has the power to tank the entire company.”

Urban nodded, though she wasn’t sure he could see it. She straightened and cleared her throat. “Hello Ms. Qing. How may I assist you today?”

Angle didn’t move from her spot near the door. She gave Urban a blatant once-over.

Urban’s foot began tapping nervously.

Angel cocked her head to one side as she continued staring. “Why the rush *Lee Urban*?”

Urban’s blood ran cold.

Clients weren’t supposed to know their facilitator’s true identities.

If Angel had somehow managed to hack the system then she was more powerful than even her sosh indicated.

Urban remained frozen.

Troy breathed out a string of curses that jolted her back to attention. Urban heard him issuing commands to several people in the background. Something about tracing Angel's location and putting everything in lock down mode.

Urban was only half listening. "Ms. Qing. How may I assist you today?"

"I have an important message for you." But before she said more, her avatar vanished from the room.