

Welcome

Excerpts from Olympus Union: Jovian Wars

Please enjoy the following chapters, and if you feel inclined, answer the survey questions here:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/28T3C7P>

Thank you!

Preface

“We did it! We found water!”

The man sprinted into the room waving his tablet around. The search had been on for two years, but the hunch had finally played out. Millions of dollars had been spent to establish a Station orbiting Venus specifically for this mission. Others had considered them fools, but now...

“You’re sure? We took a big risk here, Orphic,” Vili Cask reminded him. “If we can justify what we did by benefitting humankind, it might be enough to brush aside hard feelings.”

When she’d initially cleared their little maneuver, it felt right at the time. Now, however, she’d been scrambling to make sure it paid off. They were a very small operation and couldn’t really compete with the others out there.

Crediting another company with a groundbreaking discovery could help, though; that type of press was often worth its weight in gold. No one even knew what they’d been looking for on Venus, but that would change soon. Certainly, if this was real, the reverberations would be long lasting!

“We have samples, ma’am,” Orphic said, grinning ear to ear. “We were right to target that spot. We didn’t even need to drill that far down to find what we were looking for.”

The gamble had paid off. No one was hurt, of course, but they’d manage to scare another company off of the plot they’d identified. Cask Research was just that, a research mission. Everyone else on the surface was seeking valuable metals and profit.

Vili signed off on her husband blowing up a small mining craft during sleep shift. No one was hurt, but the rival group had pushed back from the plot long enough for Cask to drill down. And they’d been right.

“Here,” Orphic handed her his tablet, “see for yourself.”

She couldn’t believe it. Orphic had all the notes, and the sample was on its way up by shuttle now. They’d finally be able to announce that Venus had water! The most precious commodity in the Sol System, and they-

“Mrs. Cask! Mrs. Cask!”

A young woman sprinted into the room, her eyes panicked. They’d experienced some trouble with the Station as of late, so hopefully it wasn’t another critical component dying on them. They’d rebuilt two atmospheric compressors last week.

“What is it Callie?”

“Your husband,” she said, struggling to catch her breath, “the shuttle... the sample... ground crew...”

“What about them?” Orphic narrowed his eyes. “Was the sample not what they’d told us?”

“No, not that,” Callie had regained her composure. “They were mid-transmission and then they were gone. Limited visuals show the shuttle exploded just as they left atmosphere.”

“What?!”

A cold wave swept over Vili Cask. The whole crew. Her husband. What had-

“Whoa!”

Orphic screamed as he fell to the floor as the tiny Station rocked by an explosion. Vili grabbed on to a console as Callie slammed into a wall. There were only two other people aboard, and she hoped both were alright.

“What just happened?” she bellowed into a comm unit.

“Explosion on the south outer hull,” a husky voice responded. “I think we were just hit with a missile! Hull integrity is failing. If they fire again, we’re-”

The voice broke into static as the Station shook more violently this time. Callie was slammed so hard her neck snapped this time. Orphic’s face gushed blood and Vili hung on tight, tears streaming down her face.

“What’s happening?” Orphic bellowed.

“I’m so sorry,” Vili yelled, “I thought we were doing the right thing!”

The last explosion was too much for the small Station to endure. Within minutes, all systems were dead, as were the small research team whose discovery would remain unknown.

Chapter Four - In Clutch

Orbiting the great star Sol, staggered just beyond the flight path of Earth, hung three massive prisons. They are called Clutches, as it's been said that no man could escape the clutches of these deep vacuum penitentiaries. The three Stations hung ominously in the darkness, silently racing along their orbits.

Athena's Clutch, the closest to Earth and oldest of the three, predated the establishment of the Olympus Union by a number of years. It maintained the lowest grade of security, although its location alone ensured immense security.

Demeter's Clutch stood as the middle of the trio, its construction completed several weeks after the new Minister of Peace's appointment. Security was considerably tighter than Athena's Clutch. The newest and largest, it stood three and a half times the size of its eldest sister. Demeter didn't sit empty for long, promising to host many declared enemies of the state.

Within the cold titanium walls of Hera's Clutch, however, the darkest offenders were caged. Intentionally positioned the furthest from Mother Earth, it boasted the highest security in the system. Hera's population was now chiefly comprised of military prisoners from uprisings. The most violent criminals could expect to find a home within, with little chance to ever return. Still, no Clutch truly expected their guests to leave.

Deep within the cellblocks of Athena's Clutch, a very large, heavy steel door slammed home. The vacuum seal secured tightly, as did each gateway to freedom. The prisoner within the small, sharp-cornered room returned from his daily ritual: early morning meal followed by governmental indoctrination.

The program was tailored specifically to the crimes of each offender with an eye towards maximum rehabilitation. This man had endured seven or eight hours of varying propaganda explaining the just and rightful nature of the Olympus Union. He wasn't certain how long he'd been subjected; it was difficult to track time during the brainwashing. Regardless of that day's focus, it always began the same way.

Indoctrination intended to describe how he'd personally figure into society as a properly contributing citizen. He understood why his resistance was obstructive and problematic for all of mankind. "The good of all mankind," was an oft-repeated phrase, threaded throughout the message.

The closed circuit lectures made certain to remind him of a five year residency in Athena's Clutch if he continued his offensive ways. It also promised him release in a mere five hundred and twenty days, if only he exhibited a sense of respect, cooperation, and obedience. Submission was paramount.

"Day 59 of an utterly pointless imprisonment," Duncan Lab mumbled. An exasperated sigh deflated his. "One thousand, seven hundred and sixty six meaningless mornings left," he smirked despite himself, "unless they decide I'm a good boy." He looked around nervously, searching for hidden cameras he was certain always watched. "Do you think I'm a good boy yet? Are you watching me? You are, aren't you?"

No visible signs of recording devices dotted the cell, but he was never sure. Paranoia had crept in early on. The walls *did* have eyes and ears around the prison. Privacy existed nowhere, not even in the showers. While speaking out loud gave him comfort, he recognized it as a possible slippage of his sanity. Another thing stolen.

Duncan counted the start of each day after returning from breakfast. His regular routine shuffled him off to eat and back to his cell for an hour to “digest and defecate” before being prodded to the recreation complex. Deceptively labeled rooms provided prisoners with time to sit and read (only literature glorifying the Union), watch televised programs (only shows glorifying the Union), or play one of several digital games.

For a few hours per day, each man was led to a Tutoring Booth. Inside ran a personalized looped broadcast, recounting his crimes, incentives, and the full extent of his consequences. Each man was locked in, with vitals monitored and no food provided until after the session. Prisoners were effectively indoctrinated with the significance and certainty of the Olympus Union, and their own debt, as expected.

Less obvious, however, was the prison system’s bid to degrade both the bodies and minds of their inmates. Standard practices of nineteenth and twentieth century prisons allowed convicts yard time, exercising and lifting weights. Eventually, officials recognized that these activities made inmates stronger, faster and more dangerous.

During development of the clutches, a new program was instituted to reverse the startlingly precarious trends. Protein and vitamin rich foods were infrequent; just enough to satisfy basic human necessity. Sugar and fat was supplied almost endlessly. Salty snacks kept inmates munching and thirsty; beverages overly rich in caffeine were doled out, forcing tedious peaks and crashes. Exercise equipment was reserved for guards and administrative staff; while plush couches packed the inmate’s recreation complex.

On rare occasions a prisoner was allowed to leave one of the clutches, a halfway house was necessary to rebuild both body and mind to some extent. Doughy exteriors were trimmed

and blunted intellects slightly restored under supervision. However, the softening was never fully reversed, leaving an everlasting mark of their crimes.

To maintain some edge intellect, Duncan took to reading whatever he could, despite the Union biased flooding the content. He scanned the text slowly, debating each statement internally, arguing pros and cons. While he feared consequences, paranoia making him wonder if he'd split his personality, it was necessary. He knew, logically, that his fears were foolish, but he was scared and confused.

Internal debates were necessary just to keep bearings on his own position. It wouldn't do to altogether accept or reject the ideas across the board, out of spite. Only a mindless fool would acknowledge or dismiss political ideology based solely on its source.

Sometimes, just for fun, he'd quietly play the advocate for an Olympus Union viewpoint contrary to his own, just in case anyone happened by. Administrators and guards would favor him with patronizing smiles, which only increased his fear. Despite his anxieties, he took perverse pleasure at silently disassembling Union arguments with his marginally tarnished I.Q.

“Hopefully,” he thought nervously, “this isn't just another sign of insanity.”

Duncan had never had any staunch political viewpoint before. Oddly, the ruin his life had become unintentionally left him developing a rather firm set of beliefs. In prison, time seemed to pass more quickly when a man had something to think about; even faster when he had something to fight against. In his room at night, Duncan found himself reflecting on a newfound dislike, and fear, for this government.

The day before, he'd been thumbing the pages of a revised history book and came upon a disturbing passage. An atrocious incident of government sponsored violence was white washed

as peace keeping endeavors. The young prisoner lived close enough to the event that he knew the truth.

It bothered him so much, he'd requested permission to move to a game station. Duncan hated the simplistic, most popular of the mind numbing distractions, but he'd learned to compartmentalize while playing. He hoped to clear his head while going through the motions. The administrators, already concerned over the obviously excessive amount of reading that their charge had been doing, agreed almost too quickly.

Today had been his weekly reprogramming stint. The sessions always left his eyes numb and tired. No reading, no games, no escape. Forced to eat both his second and third meals of the day in the compact programming room, the tedious lectures meandered through the hours. Voices of the assigned Educators permeated his ears and mind while his overlords sat elsewhere, observing. Olympus Union images were plastered across all four walls to prevent detainees finding any escape from the message.

Exhaustion always set in during reprogramming, an expected side effect that made it more effective. Duncan lay back on his bed now, drained and staring at the walls of his cell, thankful for their emptiness. He conjured to mind the words of his trial judge, words plagiarized from the Prime Minister himself.

“Those who could not accept the justice of the Olympus Union, like you Mr. Lab, were provided a very simple ultimatum by our Prime Minister,” the judge had grumbled. “Come to terms with your disappointment peacefully, or face harsh justice.”

The judge was stone faced. And, yet, somehow Duncan felt like he was being mocked. Was there an underlying smirk? The man's diatribe seemed... personal.

“You couldn’t heed the *former*, so you must suffer the latter. For your potentially dangerous comments, marking yourself a detriment to mankind, I sentence you to five years of incarceration and reeducation within the walls of Athena’s Clutch. For your sake, Mr. Lab, I hope that you find allegiance to the Olympus Union sooner than later.”

Caught off guard, young Mr. Lab was roughly shoved from the courtroom through processing and issued an identification number he hadn’t time to memorize. Shortly after, he was in the back of a prison shuttle, hurtling through the deep space. Soon, the ominous Station loomed out the front viewport.

Duncan Lab was locked down in a tiny cell, along with several other prisoners, behind multiple gates and titanium doors, but he scarcely noticed. He spent the entire journey, numb. Lost in thought, Duncan tried to understand what he might have done wrong, optimistically waiting for his alarm clock to sound, waking him from this unending nightmare.

Chained to the floor like the rest of the prisoners, his back was pressed against the rigid bulkhead. Despite his enviable slot over those hunched awkwardly towards the middle, the wall offered little comfort. Time passed too slowly to track, but it mattered little, knowing he’d be happier to travel forever than dock.

Refocusing on the present, Duncan shifted on the bed, uncomfortable with both the memories and the thin mattress beneath him. Lying on his side, Lab replayed the first few days at Athena’s Clutch like a film in his mind’s eye. He’d expected, in the moments he felt the ship dock, that the events would resemble one of his favorite dramas.

The film had been remade twice since its twentieth century release. A devout fan, Duncan had seen all three versions. Too timid for many friends, all three had been solitary viewings. As a

result, he'd paid rapt attention, memorizing every scene and every line. Now, the story an awkwardly familiar reality.

Duncan pictured himself cast in the role of the young businessman, wrongfully imprisoned for the murder of his wife. Heroically, in the movie's climax, the man engineers a daring escape. Duncan had marveled at the ingenuity at the time. Now, he felt hollow, fully aware a rock hammer would do him no good. Any tool short of a laser torch wouldn't even scratch the unforgiving cell walls, let alone tear an exit.

When the main character had entered the prison, he was stripped and cleaned, walked into the holding area both nude and ashamed. Lab braced himself for the humiliation as he was marched out of the shuttle and down the long docking tube. Staring at the translucent enclosure, he wondered if there might have been a chance to escape into the cold embrace of the heavens. Now, more than eight weeks later, he wished he *had* tried to break the cylinder's bulwark, out into the nothingness. But Duncan had fear.

The prisoners had been marched into the detention center's dockside wharf, which slightly resembled a physician's waiting room. They sat when told. Suddenly, clasps snapped shut, the chairs locking down the men's wrists and ankles. Duncan had lurched in fear, but the restraints were secured with magnetic seals.

The harbor's iris spun shut, the docking tube detached, and they were officially prisoners of Athena's Clutch. Each man was called by name and number, escorted through into the processing office, inoculated, handed a jump suit. Duncan Lab was told to follow the corridor to the end; a guard would escort him to the correct cell. Being alone with a prison guard left Lab trembling as he trudged down the hall.

Most films dealing with the incarceration had guards itching to take liberties with the inmates. The chief had become more sadistic after each re-make. As his only experience with prison, Duncan Lab was now terrified. He prayed to a god he no longer believed in that the savage beating wasn't coming. Once again, of course, life was nothing like the fear-filled imagination pushing him against the boundaries of madness.

“Duncan Lab, huh?”

The guard seemed almost pleasant. No beating was forthcoming. His job was, apparently, just a job, with no rage-filled threats. The prisoner nodded dumbly.

“All right then! Let's get you to your new home,” he said, matter-of-factly.

Consulting his tablet, he directed Duncan to the proper lift, selected their destination, and hummed quietly. When the doors opened, he nodded for Lab to proceed, matching pace three steps behind. Reaching out suddenly after a dozen doors, he grabbed the prisoner's shoulder. Duncan halted, his entire body clenched awaiting the beating he'd been expecting. *This was it!*

“Go on in,” the guard said, pointing to the left. “Put on the jump suit and drop your clothes in that basket in the corner; they're collected when you leave the cell. Keep your underpants and socks for now, but you'll get more clothes today. Daily assignments come every morning.” He checked the tablet. “I'll get you up for your first week to make sure you aren't late. Leave the boots in the basket too. Residents aren't allowed shoes.”

Duncan stood stunned, glancing around the room. It was shiny and metallic, but more private than the transport, and a tremendous upgrade to his prison dramas. The guard's actions and words never matched up to nightmarish expectations. While Lab clearly wasn't on holiday,

his first impressions were at least of a survivable scenario. Carefully considering the consequences, he was compelled to ask a burning question.

“Sir, I don’t understand why you’re so... *positive*. What kind of prison is this?”

Duncan immediately regretted his words, turning a pale gray when the guard chuckled. It wasn’t malicious, though, or the least bit fearsome. This was just a man who found humor in the question. Nothing could have confused Duncan further.

“Listen, Lab,” he said, the smile lingering, “Athena’s Clutch isn’t a prison, it’s a rehab center. Personally, I don’t want you locked down the rest of your life, costing taxpayers hard-earned money – *my* hard-earned money – for years on end. We want you to sort your issues, get on the right path, and be a productive member of the Olympus Union. End of story. Follow the rules and do what’s asked, your time here won’t be too bad. You might not even be here that long either. I’ve seen them come and go. Honestly, we aren’t evil,” he said, proud, “just proactive and protective. Now, get changed, and feel free to read some of the info they left on your bed.”

The door didn’t *slam* or *clang*, it just shut. Anticlimactic. He changed and picked up the propaganda left on his bed.

“Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad,” he thought. “The judge was just doing his job, right? The evidence must have made it obvious, I guess,” he shook his head, starting to believe that he had, indeed, done something to offend the Union. He hoped they would soon see that he wasn’t a criminal, and his stay *would* be cut short.

“Sure, maybe I’ll get lucky,” he murmured drowsily, returning from his memories before drifting off to sleep, “and *just maybe* my brain will actually be left intact.”

Chapter Eight - Darkness for Light

“They raided the Black Switch last night. Anyone considered suspicious was taken to the precinct for questioning.”

“Interesting. We haven’t made a move the last two weeks,” a rasping voice responded from the room’s cold darkness. “What time did the raid take place?”

“One-thirty in the morning, Station Time.”

“Every member of the council was in bed for hours, just like every night of this interlude.” The voice chuckled softly. “These fools are clearly scared and confused, chasing apparitions. They are so desperate to find us, and have absolutely no clue. Our silence has them more worked up than our most shocking actions. How intriguing.”

“We also have news from Theta Station. The Minister just instituted a Station-wide curfew yesterday.”

“Is that buffoon restricting all non-government personnel again?” The rasping man clucked his tongue. “When will they ever learn?”

“Actually, no, sir, this one is real. We think the order didn’t come from Earth; this is a genuine lock down. It includes anyone who isn’t an on-duty police officer, or the Minister himself. The only exception are people carrying a Theta issued clearance pass.”

“Interesting. Tell me more about this pass.”

The agent shifted, making room between his body and the table, and extracting a foldable tablet from his jacket. Its backlit screen glowed soft green in the pitch-blackness.

“Our research found that they are rigidly time restricted, and incredibly rare. They’re supposed to be nearly impossible to get, and if you’re caught past curfew even a minute later than its expiration, the police are dragging you in for interrogation.”

“The passes are printed on an independent scan-able card. This new card is keyed to an individual’s ID, and must be presented along with the corresponding ID card whenever requested by an officer or official, without exception. Someone can even ask you repeatedly to pull them out and put them away, without retribution.”

“Goading you into reason for suspicion, no doubt,” the voice said.

“We assumed as much, too. Apparently failure to show both cards upon request is now an offence significant enough to warrant immediate arrest. When an officer gets his hands on them, both cards are scanned ID first, then the clearance pass. If the pass is invalid, expired, or not keyed to the initially scanned ID card, that’s grounds for immediate arrest as well.”

“Essentially, sir, the pass is identity confirmation which makes forgery nearly impossible. It’s meant for post-curfew errands of administrative nature, on behalf of the Station Minister’s office or support for the police, like forensics. It looks like medical personnel might be able to get them, too, but only under dire circumstances. Life or death only, it seems; disease, injury and pain need to wait until morning. Regardless of who has the pass, only the Station’s Minister or Vice Minister can issue them.”

“Interesting,” the rasping voice mused softly. “I will, of course, need you to obtain one of these passes for us.”

“Uh,” the agent faltered, unnerved by the obviously unreasonable request. “That’s just not possible sir! We don’t have any way-”

“Find a way, agent.” He paused, letting the words sink in. “Do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” he said automatically, failing to stifle an exasperated sigh.

“Excellent. Now,” he changed tone ever so slightly, “tell me about our special package.”

The agent gratefully returned his attention to the tablet. Finding what he was looking for, the man briefly reassessed before providing his report. The rasping voice went silent, lending a sinister air to the pitch-black room. Vertigo approached at the edges of his awareness.

“Looks like everything is going according to plan so far,” he said uneasily. “Our, uh, *package* will be delivered on time.”

“Excellent,” the voice acknowledged. “Where is he now?”

“That isn’t something I actually know at the moment.”

“What do you *mean* you don’t know?”

Genuine anger crept into the raspy voice, providing substance for the first time. The agent thought he even heard a bit of the man’s actual voice emerging, offering a possible glimpse into his hidden master’s identity. He put that away for the moment, though, trying to keep himself safe.

“Well, what I know is that, according to the agreed plan, our transporter is supposed to rendezvous with *his* transport to Athena’s Clutch between three days ago and two days from now. We left schedule points as ranges, instead of specific, to combat security leaks in our org and maintain integrity of the delivery. That was the mercenary’s idea.”

“Why are we allowing someone else to dictate our strategies?”

“The guy said that he’s done enough work like this to know it isn’t safe to trust anyone with details. The last message received from my connection said the package’s cell has been identified, and everything else is proceeding according to plan.”

“You’re saying he doesn’t trust us as an organization,” the anger grew cold, “or he doesn’t trust me and my leadership?”

“Actually,” the agent said, his smile vanishing in fear, “he doesn’t trust *anyone*. No one at all. This is just about money to him, nothing more. Trust me, I tried to sell him on working with us for the cause, explaining how much we could use a man of his talents. He said he doesn’t believe in the nobility of causes, just the integrity of money.”

“Why, how very *marvelous*,” the rasp said, appalled but in control of his tone once again. “Where did you *find* this man?”

“I can’t really say.”

“You *can*’t, or you *won*’t?”

“Honestly can’t sir. One of my agents found him and was sworn to secrecy regarding the location they first met. The deal was negotiated in a variety of different bars and restaurants stretched across the solar system. The best I can do right now is provide you a list of about nineteen places that he tends to frequent when he’s looking to make contact with a repeat customer.”

“So, if we ever want to hire him again...”

“We’ll have to go find him, yes sir. That is, unless he comes looking for us.”

“And why would he do such a thing?”

“I’m not really certain,” he chuckled. “That was just something that was passed along through my contact, sir.”

“Very well. Keep me abreast of the situation. The success of this delivery is absolutely essential to our victory. You may take your leave. Send in the new recruit on your way out.”

Quietly, the agent rose from his chair; the barely audible noise of his sleeves brushing against the smooth table top was the only sound. He stood straight up and turned in place, pressing his back against the table. It was a technique that he’d discovered early on to help stave off the room’s disorienting effect.

When the subtle beacon light began to glow an almost bloody maroon above the door, he started moving forward, extending his right hand in front to catch the doorway. He considered explaining the exit strategy to young man waiting outside. The kid was reporting to the mysterious voice for the first time, and could probably use the assist.

“Eh, let him figure out himself, like I did,” he decided in the end.