

Mistress Ciel

By: Archaon

-One-Shot. MMZ, MMC hints.- Six months after Ragnarok, Ciel happens upon a collection of files on time travel, signed by none other but Dr. Albert Wily. With the world's future looking bleak, she decides to take a chance.

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A Megaman Zero One-shot.

By Archaon

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Ciel entered her quarters, locked the door and proceeded to collapse on her bed exhausted. She remained there for many minutes, staring at the ceiling and trying to keep her industrious mind blank. It worked for a few seconds, then the day's events rushed in like a deluge through a paper dam.

Six months after Ragnarok.

In ancient mythology, Ragnarok symbolized the death of the gods. The irony was hardly lost to her. Weil and Zero had fallen, leaving the rest of the world to fend for themselves. Six months ago, Ciel had blanked her face, had wiped her tears and had steeled her resolve. In the memory of Zero, she would make the world a prospering place once more.

Now, half a year later, that goal seemed further than ever. How naïve she had been, thinking that her invention, the CIEL system, would solve every problem. True, it was a power source with immeasurable output and miniscule cost. Inexhaustible, environment friendly, self-maintained. A perfect foundation for what was proving to be a flawed world.

Refuges from Neo-Arcadia were still pouring in, although the total number of survivors was pitiful compared to the initial population. The realization was slowly registering in her mind that Weil had

accomplished his desire after all. With as few humans and reploids alive, he might as well have killed everyone. What is the use of an infinite power source when there is no one to use it.

Still, such a disaster could be overcome, if only the remaining people worked together. Another futile hope. Back in the days when she was a high-ranking official of Neo-Arcadia, almost on par with the guardians, she had faced that same attitude. Without an icon like X to guide them, the people had grown restless. It had been that restlessness that had prompted her to create Copy X, lest everything be consumed by civil unrest.

Now that the greater threats had subsided, the petty quarrels that remained once again threatened everything. One would think people would have learned. Humans against reploids, workers against thinkers, rich against poor, former Resistance members against Neo-Arcadians, purists against universalists, pacifists against militarists. Seemingly every single dispute in history was dividing those that mere months ago had been ready and eager to work together. And everybody expected Ciel to fix it, while few would heed her words at the same time. With X, Zero, the Guardians, most Neo-Arcadian officials, Weil, Elpizo, Copy X and Kraft dead, she was the highest ranking person in the known world, followed distantly by Neige. And yet, none of them had the legacy or power to back their authority.

Depression was also a very real threat. Neige might put forth a brave face, but Kraft's demise had devastated her. Alouette, Ciel's only other safe port, had withdrawn to herself completely. She and Zero had been very close and Ciel was worried his death had all but destroyed her. It was so bad, Ciel had discreetly placed the reploid girl on suicide watch. Ciel was not much better herself. Only her desire to fulfill her enormous debt to Zero had haphazardly kept her together.

Ciel sighed deeply. She decided that thinking about it would help no one. What she needed was her form of recreation, some independent research, she decided. Knowledge was still her passion and not having a time limit like with the CIEL system would do her a

world of good. Her eyes fell on a nearby desk, at a pile of very archaic-looking data disks. Some scavenger crew had uncovered them in an ancient lab in the middle of nowhere and they had brought them to her when they realized the data inside was both intact and protected. She had been working on that side project for a while and yesterday she had finally broken the code. The challenge had been unusually thrilling. She had never seen such complex protections before and had almost given up a couple of times, unheard of for the pink-clad scientist.

Placing one of the ancient disks inside an equally ancient decoder, she opened the files therein and gasped in astonishment at what she saw.

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November 11, 20xx

Theories and applications of time travel

By Dr. Albert Wily

Hopefully, no one will ever get to read this. Such thinking, however, has proven to be erroneous again and again. Now, close to the end of my life, I can clearly see the errors of my past. They call me insane, a nutcase, a would-be dictator. Perhaps they are right. I certainly could have tried to conquer the world with subtlety instead through brutal insurrection.

The world is full of noteworthy individuals, but as a whole, the people are sheep, or rather suicidal lemmings. The intelligence of a crowd as a whole can be calculated by dividing the mean average of their intelligence by their number. At large quantities mobs are less intelligent than amoebas. They need guidance to progress and mine would be better than most. Thomas sees that, too, although our methods are vastly different.

I am running out of time, but there are still options. The new android I have recently finished is one of them. He is powerful and will keep growing more powerful, no matter how much technology advances. Along with my Dark Energy Network Program Array, he will be able to do what I could not.

My legacy will certainly survive with him, practically my son, even though I have been careful to leave no indication he is my creation. However there is another way. Time travel has been a subject of debate for centuries and I happen to be pretty knowledgeable in this area.

There have been, of course, robot masters like Timeman, Flashman and Quickman that can manipulate time to some effect, but the pinnacle has been the Time Skimmer I acquired from the Chronos Institute some decades ago. While the Quint plot ultimately failed, I made sure to analyze the machine and understand its function. Its crude design only allowed momentary leaps and spending too much time in another temporal location could cause unprecedented and catastrophic effects. Even I hesitate to play around with time paradoxes.

The Time Skimmer works like this...

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... which is surprisingly complex by its own.

Through rigorous research I have found a different method of time travel, which I believe will work regardless of whether the destination is the same timeline, an alternate timeline or a branching timeline. Instead of physically travelling to the past, it is possible to simply transmit oneself's consciousness, along with all memories and skills to one's younger self. The current and past selves would merge together in one, but since the future version would already have the other's memories, the change should be trivial.

For all intents and purposes, the original timeline is erased or unreachable by the traveler. Also, there is no displacement of mass, which negates matter-energy conservation paradoxes. In effect, the traveler can relive his life with foreknowledge of future events. While new errors will surely be committed, none of the traveler's past mistakes need to be repeated.

As soon as I conduct a few more experiments, I will travel back to my younger self, probably before the first robot master war. What I will change then, I have yet to decide, since there is no limit to my options. My only fear is that I will die before the machine is complete. If this is the case, I leave this report to anyone worthy enough to decode and comprehend it. Rather than quitting, I perceive it more like getting a second chance to do things right.

What follows are the complete and detailed plans of my Temporal Essence Dislocator via Density Yield...

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Ciel blinked, then skimmed the report again, making sure she had not been dreaming. The theory was complex, of course, barely within her understanding. She gulped with awe at the genius of Wily and, by extension, Light. Despite the chaos the evil scientist had caused, she couldn't help but respect him.

Her eyes once more fell on the new type of time machine. "Would I dare?" she muttered thoughtfully. The guilt of her past errors would never leave her, but at least the damage would be erased from the world.

It was a frightening thought. Frightening and yet so wonderful. "What do I really have to work with here?" Alouette was catatonic and Zero was probably dead. X was gone too, and he had been like a father to her before he left to seal the Dark Elf. The guardians, both enemies and past family, were also gone, along with the vast majority of population, infrastructure, technology, knowledge and good will.

She gasped at the realization. The only thing keeping her from giving up was her promise to Zero. He believed in her, in her mind, in her ability and in her heart. Even when she had lost faith to herself, even when her choices had invited disaster, he had stood by her when everyone else would have blamed her.

"I will do it," she whispered. "I will go back and make everything right. I will make a world worth living in, a world for which you won't need to die for, only for them to spit on your memory by their actions."

She walked to her window and gazed at the world below. Area Zero was vast, but it wouldn't last forever. It would need centuries to reach the natural wealth that had existed inside Neo-Arcadia before the Ragnarok shot. Her eyes fell at what seemed like another dispute, this time between reploids. Zero would have leaped off the window and would have slapped them silly if he was still there. "Zero..." she whispered, feeling a tear running down her cheek. "This world..." she tried, pausing to gather enough resolve. "This world needs to be reset."

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Ciel entered her private laboratory, whistling happily. On the table was her latest masterpiece, a perfect copy of the legendary Megaman X. Or at least as perfect as possible. The prodigious twelve years old smiled. With this copy taking the place of her wayward uncle X, the people would stop fighting each other. She would have enough time to invent a new power source then everything would be swell.

It started as a light headache, but seconds later she was down on the floor screaming her head off. She was sure her mind would burst as seven years of knowledge and experience smashed into her brain, demanding space. Then it suddenly stopped and she blinked dumbly, completely disorientated. Her hand reached her familiar visor instinctively and she read the date.

"I did it," she whispered in a voice that seemed way too young in her ears. Her heart soared with relief. Despite following Wily's instructions to the letter, she knew any number of things could have gone wrong. The mad doctor had obviously never tried to use his invention.

Her eyes fell on a full-body mirror occupying a wall and she cringed at what she saw. "Welcome back to puberty, Ciel," she murmured wistfully. "Six more years until you start looking like a real woman again..."

Her next target was the inanimate body of Copy X. At first her face filled with disgust. She was tempted to rip him apart with her bare hands, but taking a deep breath she decided to stick to the plan instead. Before making the leap she had compiled a list with every important event not directly connected to her actions as well as a plan of action that would yield the best results.

A smirk that would have been in place on Zero's face dominated her own. "They won't know what hit them," she promised, picking up her tools. Copy X would require an extra week of work, but she had the time to spare.

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"... and so we must rejoice, since a new era of prosperity starts today," concluded the Copy of X, causing the crowds below to go wild. The speech had been better than the first time, thought Ciel, very satisfied. She had written it herself after all. The Guardians were still a bit suspicious, but nowhere near how they had been.

After exchanging pleasantries, Copy X retired to his quarters, followed by Ciel herself. As soon as they were alone, the clone's demeanor shifted visibly from a proud and benevolent leader to a mindless drone. "What is the next order of business, mistress Ciel?" he asked mechanically.

It was a guilty pleasure, she decided. While there was no need to make him sound so subservient, it was her form of petty revenge. This time around, Copy X was completely will-less, nothing more than a puppet emulating a real reploid. She didn't feel guilty about making him that way, he was hardly sentient.

The fact she was practically usurping Neo-Arcadia's power did not bother her in the least. She had seen the alternative, after all.

"You are to keep people content. In about a month, I will create the first CIEL system prototype and the energy crisis will soon be resolved."

Without any of her data, she needed some time to recreate her power source, but that was hardly a problem. With her increased authority, she had consulted the reports and had deduced to her disbelief the energy crisis was not nearly as bad as Copy X had made it look. The power grid would eventually fail, but that occurrence was still decades away. It explained how the other copy had managed to wage a very energy-consuming war in the first place.

The young scientist had to restrain herself from solving many problems at once. She was very aware she was not omniscient and she needed to pace things properly. Still, there was one last thing she could do for her peace of mind.

Ciel slid her ever-present visor on her eyes and connected to the central Neo-Arcadian databank. There she found all information about a petty reploid official, going by the name Elpizo.

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"Is this my ride, soldier?" asked the pink-clad reploid while smoothing one of his blond locks. He tried not to sound conceited, but his elation was hardly contained. At last, somebody had seen his potential. His loyalty to Neo-Arcadia had finally paid out.

The Rekku soldier eyed him unimpressed. While Elpizo did have a reputation of being a decent beam rapier user and possessing a measure of leadership qualities, he lacked the tact, self-awareness and ability to progress much further than a glorified errant boy.

"If you mean the ride for the Antarctic expedition, then yes. Are you part of the team?" he asked somewhat bored.

Elpizo sneered at that. "I happen to be the leader," he gloated. "And it's named the 'Southern Fringe Survey for the Conservation of Archaic Techno-Knowledge'."

The Rekku soldier rolled his eyes at that. He could see why Dr. Ciel wanted that one out of the way. "You are still just a glorified scavenger crew," he mumbled just loud enough to be heard.

"Silence plebian," snapped the other, before forcing himself to calm down. "Truly, I can't expect a mere soldier to understand the significance of my post. Lady Ciel approached me personally, after all."

The Rekku soldier just shrugged. He did respect the young scientist like most everyone else. The fact she had apparently taken a more active role as of late meant she knew what she was doing.

A few levels higher, Ciel watched with satisfaction as one more unstable variable was taken care of. Back in her universe, she had felt deeply betrayed by the one she had foolishly appointed leader. While she had been tempted to discreetly dispose of the pink-clad reploid, the fact he had done nothing wrong yet stopped her. Making Elpizo harmless had been delicate instead. Make him think he has authority, then send him far away with some obscure, long-term goal.

Ciel giggled to herself. Elpizo would get his karmic payback when he realized there were no hair-care products anywhere on Antarctica.

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Everyone in the crowd held their breath as the large metal globe started humming. The construct shuddered, then opened like flower, filling the world with multicolored light. At the same time, the power gauge that was prominently displayed, went all the way up and stayed there.

Everyone cheered at that and Ciel, standing next to Copy X on a podium, bowed humbly. "The energy crisis is officially over," she declared when the crowds subsided. "Now we can expand and progress to infinity without fear of overextending. I have proposed a terraforming project that will help us reclaim parts of the wastelands and found new cities. Up until now, we did not have the resources for such a daring move, but now we can improve everyone's lives." She took a deep breath then beamed at the people again. "With your support and master X's agreement, we can become as flourishing as the nations of the past."

Copy X continued as she left the podium, giving his support and generally saying lots of nothing. The crowds below were happy to simply see him there. Ciel sighed. These were the same people that had stood there when the initial Copy X committed genocide, the same ones that had accepted Weil with apathy and the same ones that almost destroyed themselves with their attitude and petty quarrels.

Ciel was trying very hard to maintain her compassion, despite the disillusionment she had suffered in her original timeline. "For you, Zero," she whispered. "I'm doing this for you."

When the CIEL system presentation ended, she retreated to her quarters. Before she could relax, however, she felt something was wrong. A shadow moved behind her and she reacted. A younger Ciel would have simply yelped in fear. This Ciel, however had led a military Resistance with the support of Zero himself. The red hunter had demanded she had at least some basic training.

She twisted around, small blaster in hand and held steadily. What she saw was the very startled eyes of one Third Guardian.

"Phantom!" she sighed in relief. "You scared me."

The ninja reploid raised a brow. "You hardly seem scared," he commented wryly. "I don't know who taught you how to draw a gun, but they did a good job."

She blushed at that, replacing her weapon in its hologram-concealed holster. "Sorry, I've been bit high stung lately."

He regarded her carefully. "You have been distant," he commented and she had to force herself not to cringe. In her current age, she had been very close to the Guardians. They, along with X, were her only family. However, they had been enemies after she had formed the Resistance. She needed time to accept them again and her busy schedule hardly helped things. "At first I thought you were an imposter, you know, but you have all of Ciel's mannerisms, so it can't be."

The young scientist looked away. "People change."

"Not everyone is fooled, you know," went on Phantom nonchalantly.

Ciel stiffened at that. "What do you mean?"

The black Guardian sighed. "He might look, sound and behave like him, but he is not master X. In fact, he is not even a reploid. I know that because I know where the real master X is."

He expected Ciel to simply fold, but she smirked at him instead. "I know, he is busy sealing the Dark Elf with his body," she added in the same 'the-weather-is-nice' tone.

Phantom's eyes went wide. "How?" he tried, stopping at Ciel's determined glare.

"The how is not important," she snapped. "What is important is that this city needs him, even if he is fake. I know that and you know that. X placed way too much faith in our ability to keep things together. If I

must create a puppet to keep everyone alive and well, then so be it." In her own timeline, Phantom had confronted Copy X and had been defeated. The flawed copy had wrapped his mind, turning him into his fanatical supporter.

Phantom sighed, rubbing his temples. He had removed the mask he habitually wore, a sign he trusted her. "What you are doing is risky. Harpuia and the others could realize it anytime. Still, you are correct, we can't keep it together by ourselves. Be careful though, Ciel. You have acquired a lot of power between your puppet and the CIEL system."

As that, she smiled sadly. "I know. I also trust you to keep me from becoming too arrogant."

Phantom smiled and hugged her. "Always, little sister," he whispered. Ciel smiled, trying not to be reduced to tears. Merely having the real Phantom back in her life was worth of every hardship she had had to endure due to her time leap.

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Ciel held her breath as the technicians cut down the last door to the ruined sanctum. A part of her was afraid he wouldn't be there, yet her fears vanished as soon as she rushed inside.

"So this is Zero," commented Leviathan. She and Harpuia had accompanied her. "He is cute," she chirped, drawing frowns from both Ciel and her brother.

"He is in bad shape," observed Harpuia. "How did you know where to find him?"

"Lost files," she answered vaguely. "Come help me with the data, Fairy. Sage, if you could get someone to carefully connect a portable CIEL generator on the power grid, it will make everything easier."

Leviathan skimmed the data, whistling in appreciation. "The legends are real," she marveled. "He seems to be as capable as master X. What are we going to do with him?"

Ciel smiled to herself. "We need to move him to Neo-Arcadia and repair him, all without disrupting his stasis."

Harpua nodded. "I wouldn't want to have to explain to a legend like him why his memories have been messed up."

Ciel sighed guiltily at that. "I will supervise every last detail myself, but I appreciate you staying and helping me. Everything must be perfect."

Behind her back, Leviathan and Harpuia glanced at each other. The two Guardians had noticed the change in the young scientist. She seemed to have developed an intensity and drive that was beyond them. Still, it was hardly a bad change. Harpuia eyed Zero's inert form again, wondering what it would be like to know him.

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"Dr. Weil?" questioned Harpuia, looking at the datapad Ciel had given him. "Is he even alive? I thought he was already old when he was exiled."

Ciel nodded. "According to our intelligence, he is plotting against Neo-Arcadia. This man is dangerous, Sage. Do not underestimate him."

Harpua nodded. "And master X wants to arrest him."

"Simply exiling him was a mistake. We have to remedy that before it's too late," she replied, trying to keep the agitation out of her voice. She eyed the Guardian concerned. Weil wouldn't expect it and he lacked both Omega and the Dark Elf, but the evil scientist was notorious for keeping aces up his sleeve. "Try to blindside him,

knock him out and keep him bound and unconscious while you move him. We can't mess this up, Sage."

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Ciel entered what was probably the most secure room in Neo-Arcadia. She knew she had overdone it a bit, but she would take no chances. As multiple doors closed and sealed themselves behind her, she eyed the room's occupant. Zero was levitating in the middle of the room, in the same position the liquid inside an old stasis capsule would have held him. His body was completely repaired, however, and the bulky wires had been replaced with wireless connections. A tiny CIEL generator attached on his back kept his power levels stable.

"Hi, Zero," greeted Ciel excited. "I know you can't hear me and even if you could, you wouldn't know me, but I certainly know you," she babbled. Her smile fell a little. "And I would be so happy if you did know me like you did back in my world. But it's okay, I'll be alright and you'll be alive. And in some years, when it's time for you to wake up, we can get to know each other again."

Ciel sat on the plain floor, wiping her tears and scolding herself. Zero was still Zero and here he was alive. It didn't matter he wouldn't remember her as she did him.

"I hope you won't mind me coming here, but I'll be doing that a lot. Not that you have a say, even if you don't like it," she added, amused with herself. "And I'm being stupid, too, because I could be talking to a wall and it would be the same. I can't help it, though. I... I missed you Zero. I wrapped time for your sake and it's still not enough compared to what you have done for me. It all started when my parents died and X took me in..."

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"Ciel!" greeted Fefnir as he and Harpuia met her at a corridor. "You were right about that Kraft guy. When he can get his mind off that

human girlfriend of his, he is a very strong warrior. He is almost Guardian level."

Ciel nodded. Weil had upgraded Kraft after he had bent him to his will, but even as he was, his power was formidable. "He is also a good leader. Take care of him, Fefnir."

"Gotcha!" he replied.

Harpua stayed behind, following her to her quarters. "We have Weil," he reported, looking a bit pale. "We lost twenty men, but we got him." He shook his head to clear it. "You were right Ciel. This guy is a menace. Illegal experiments and powerful defenses were only the beginning. He has somehow started building an orbital station, full with an enormous cannon. If we hadn't stopped him, he would have finished in six years and we would have been doomed."

Ciel did her best to look surprised. Inside she was giddy. Ragnarok would never be completed. "Try to locate the station's plans. We can recover lost technology, of course, but we could also modify them and complete it for a more peaceful purpose. Perhaps an orbital research station, or even a colony."

The jade Guardian smiled at that. "It's large enough for ten colonies," he quipped. "What should we name it, then?" he mused after a while.

Ciel beamed at that. "Name it Valhalla," she ordered, nodding to herself. It was appropriate and a slap on the face of fate. "What about Weil himself?"

Harpua grimaced. He was not very fond of mistreating humans, even though there was hardly anything human left on Weil. "Detained in the highest security cell. It took us a while to find and disable every weapon on his body. The way his systems work, I'm not sure whether he will eventually regenerate them."

Ciel's face darkened. "Make sure no one else sees him. He might have agents in our ranks. I'll take care of this personally, Sage."

As she left, Harpuia looked at her back concerned. He had an inkling he wouldn't approve of whatever Ciel had in store for the madman.

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"I wouldn't hesitate for a second to kill him, you know," confessed Ciel somewhat blankly. Her hand touched the inanimate reploid's arm for a second before she retreated and looked away. "If I could figure out how to disable that regenerative armor of his, I would have done it at once."

Predictably, Zero did not respond.

"I mean, even without everything he did in my timeline, he still caused the Elf Wars. I'm not sure what the people that exiled him were thinking. Perhaps they expected him to go crazy before he could retaliate." Her expression softened as she gazed once more at the crimson warrior. "I can't forgive him for what he would have done, though. For what he did to me. And to you." Ciel had realized very soon how awkward language could be when it came to temporal travel.

The human prodigy sighed. "I did find a way, though. It should be enough until a more permanent solution becomes available. Like shooting him in the sun or something." Her face hardened. "I have to go and visit him soon. It will be scary without you there, but I can't postpone it any longer. We can't overestimate people like him enough."

She went to leave the room, then hesitated. "Hopefully, you'll be with me in spirit," she finished.

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"So, you are the new leader of Neo-Arcadia, the one that controls X's copy. I must commend you, girl. I underestimated you."

To her credit, Ciel did not flinch. She had never been in Weil's presence before and the experience was daunting. Weil wasn't just another smart scientist. He also possessed a charisma and force of will that had not diminished by his twisted features or his imprisonment.

"Hardly," she replied humbly. "I just gave myself a second chance." At his confused silence, she bravely turned and looked him in the eyes. "I'm from the future, Dr. Weil. I returned to my past body for many reasons, including stopping you."

His eyes went wide at that. "Temporal essence dislocation," he breathed. "How can this be?"

Ciel was busy with her apparent task, but she still answered. "Via density yield. Very controversial. Not my invention, I just found a report by one Dr. Albert Wily," she replied casually.

"Of course," he exclaimed excited. Underneath the hate and madness, he was still a scientist, after all. A grin filled his face. "Then I did it. My plans were a success in the future."

Ciel stopped fiddling with the devices she had brought with her, turning a feral grin at him. "You did not," she riposted. "Zero stopped you twice, killing you in the end. He even destroyed Omega."

"Impossible!" spat the deranged doctor. "Omega is..."

"Omega is Zero's original body. Despite that, the copy body contained the true Zero and he was victorious. I merely came back because the price of victory was too high," she interrupted him, drawing unhealthy satisfaction as his face changed from glee to hatred. "I will not allow Omega in this world. The old Omega is still in orbit and without you, it will remain so. As for Zero's old body, we will keep it in stasis indefinitely. Without Omega's mind, it's just a shell."

Weil calmed himself down. He tried to remember everything he knew about X's surrogate daughter. "What will happen to me, then? Will you just keep me locked here?" he asked, keeping his hope out of his voice. He did have the means to escape, given enough time.

Ciel glared at him. "If I knew how, you'd be dead now. Instead, I'll keep you in Cyberworld-induced stasis until I find a way," she explained indicating the machine she was busy assembling.

Weil's eyes gave him away. He was terrified of her plan. If she could really achieve such a stasis, there would be no way for him to recover on his own. The evil doctor had no reason to doubt her ability. "You are bluffing," he tried. "I know of you. You are too soft to do this."

Ciel sighed sadly. "Perhaps I was once. After seven years of struggle, not anymore." Her fingers never stopped working. "Ironically, you gave me what I need to destroy you."

"That would make you as bad as I am. Would you really betray your ideals?" Weil was grasping at straws and they both knew it. Ciel still remember what he thought about ideals.

The pink-clad scientist smiled bitterly. "I have lost my naivete, my friends, my family, my... my love. The people I knew back in my world still exist, yet they are different. The only thing remaining is my promise to fix my mistakes." Her eyes hardened. "If I must kill you in cold blood, then so be it."

Weil took a deep breath, then played his last card. "I could help you, you know. I can change. I have vast knowledge of technologies long lost or unheard of. Would you really extinguish all that?"

Ciel took a sharp breath as a shudder crawled up her spine. All her life, knowledge had been her main pursuit. Her goals had always been altruistic, but everything she did had a deeper basis in science. It was her calling and her enemy apparently knew that. What

wonderful knowledge could he really offer her? How much faster could she use it to make things better, brighter?

Ciel sighed again, turning and smiling at him. For a second he thought he had won. It would take much time, but eventually he would earn and exploit her trust. Then she spoke and his plans shattered. "You are a very cunning man, Dr. Weil. You really managed to appeal to everything that makes me myself. The lure of science and a claim to redemption..." She closed her eyes for a while. "The past me would have jumped in with both feet. However, I'd rather learn from history. Even if you are sincere, I'll err on the side of caution."

"Wait!" shouted Weil, now truly frantic. Ciel's device had been set up already, after all.

She shook her head, her eyes hard. "Zero never hesitated. When an enemy appeared, he terminated it. I wouldn't forgive myself if I did anything less. Good night, Dr. Weil."

Ciel pressed the activation button and stepped back, careful not to miss a single detail. Weil glared at her with helpless hatred, then his eyes gradually dulled and closed. He was not dead yet, but only she could reverse the process, which was almost as good.

"Good night and good riddance," she added in the now practically empty room.

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"It's been four years since my time leap, Zero. I made some mistakes, but compared to my old ones, they are nothing. I sometimes think I have become what Weil wanted to be, a dictator. But then I look at the people, humans and reploids, and they are content, happy and alive. You and X are still in stasis, but your time is almost over and I am that close to finding a way to cleanse the Dark Elf. Then X can wake up again."

Ciel regarded Zero fondly. During the past four years she had regularly visited him, at least twice a week, and sometimes, when times were hard, every day. A part of her knew it was unhealthy and somewhat idiotic, but that wouldn't stop her. She had contacted many of her old friends, of course and had forged new relationships with them. Cerveau would soon become the lead Neo-Arcadian engineer, Alouette was once more her surrogate daughter and many other Resistance members had been placed in positions according to their value.

Despite moving on in every other sense, she could not do so with the red hunter. In her original timeline, he was the one that had fixed everything, the one she owed her life and her sanity to. "I love you, Zero," she declared without hesitation. "Back in my time, I would not admit it. So many other things were in the way back then. This time I will not repeat that mistake. It will be painful, of course, at least at first. You might not even like me this time around. But I will do my best to become your friend and then perhaps... Perhaps more."

Her hand caressed his exposed cheek then withdrew as she turned to leave. To her utter disbelief, Zero's hand moved and grasped her own. Her eyes snapped to his own, noting in disbelief they were open. "Only time will tell," he replied in a voice gruff from disuse. "Hi, Ciel. You look as pretty as you sound."

"Zero! How...?" she tried, her mind unable to form anything more coherent.

The red hunter left the levitation field, his legs touching the floor and supporting him easily. "I'm not your timeline's Zero, if that's what you're hoping. Before this moment, I've never seen you before." He paused, reaching back and removing the harness holding the generator and the wireless adapters. "However, I've heard everything you've ever said to me for the past four years."

Ciel's eyes went wide. "Everything?" she repeated, her mind stuck between elation and embarrassment.

Zero smirked wickedly while stretching. "Everything you ever said or did inside this room. It was actually a security feature. When someone would talk around me, I could hear them despite being in stasis. If an enemy got their hands on me, I could potentially force myself to wake up. Funny how it worked in our favor."

Ciel smiled brightly, despite still blushing madly. "I... I'm glad," she replied unnecessary.

Zero frowned a bit at her, then smiled genially, extending his hand. "I'm Zero Omega Wily, Maverick Hunter. My father was an insane genius, I have caused lots of problems and I have lost many people I cared for, but if you can look past that, I'd like to be your friend, miss prodigy."

She giggled at that, shaking his hand with glee. "And I'm Ciel Light, scientist and de facto leader of Neo-Arcadia. I'm from an alternate future, I have also caused lots of trouble and I'm as eccentric as they come, but if you can look past that as well, I'd also like to be your friend, mister legend."

Zero grinned. They had lots of trials ahead of them but it did not really matter. "This is the start of a beautiful friendship."

The End.

-Z-Z-

This is one more plot-bunny I had to write. I've never seen the 'jump to your younger self' concept in a megaman story and Ciel was really ideal. While this is compatible with my 'Soul of a hero' story, I made sure to write it completely standalone. What happens next is irrelevant and since this is a one-shot, you'll have to use your imagination. Do disregard the absence of Passy. I couldn't fit her here well enough.

I hope you enjoyed both the story and the happy end. Do not neglect to review, please.

