

“Welcome to Silver Star, home to thirty million Silvers, land of free trade, free elections, and free guns. Come and take it.”

- **Glamour, *Smoke & Mirrors***

Castella was a patient woman, but the line was long. Dumbfounded tourists, bad packing, and asinine questions had turned Silver Star’s arrivals into an endless slog. Getting shot at would be better, at least then she’d have an excuse to stretch her legs.

Exhaling, she scanned the crowd again. Narrowed eyes watched her from the churning mass, and more than one squawking native penned their frustration on the walls: *Silver Star is for Silvers. No syndicates, no tyrants!* Drones orbited the damage, burning off digital paint while security guards corralled the aspiring artists into checkpoints.

“Well, now I see why they hired us.” Basir grumbled behind her, blowing out sun-weathered cheeks as the guards looked their way next. He pointed to his head. “C’mon Cas, I told you to take that off.”

Castella shrugged, her jacket’s stiff collar scraping a dark helmet. Her neighbors pretended not to notice. Standing head and shoulders above the crowd was one thing, wearing ballistic armor in public was another.

Not everyone noticed.

“Man, this takes me back.” Ein chimed in ahead, transfixed by the arrests. “Hayabusa was buying up my home for the Fifth Merger. I thought about fighting back, but...” His face fell,

aging out of his twenties as he nervously tugged his collar. as he glanced at Basir. “Why *are* we going through security? I thought the president wanted us specifically.”

“Because even the president of the galaxy’s last democracy can’t play favorites.” Basir sighed, rummaging through his high-collared jacket for a crumpled pack of Haze-sticks. “Besides, the boss is a big softie. Couldn’t stand anyone thinking we were cutting in line.”

Ein cracked a wan smile. “Aren’t we mercenaries?”

“Sure, but we’re not Necropolis.” Basir poked a cigarette before shoving the pack away with a grimace. “We got standards.”

“We’re killers.” Castella thumbed the sword on her hip, neck prickling as Ein looked at her. Even in the armored jacket, he still looked every bit the scared refugee.

“Killers.” Basir snorted. “Got aug’d eyes and you still see the world in black and white.”

The line flinched forward and Castella plodded along. Metal gates ahead funneled the crowd through a battery of scans designed to keep out a sixth syndicate Merger. But the influence was already here. It was in the kaleidoscope ceiling churning through flashy products, flashier people, and the synthetic mantras beating against her head. Buy. Buy. Buy.

She tore her eyes down and glared at the gawking crowd. The one free station that survived the Fifth Merger, and they were still addicted to syndicate merch. Wrestling the violent decades etched in her muscles, she squeezed her sword. Already on edge, the crowd ahead skittered away.

“Great.” Basir sucked his teeth. “Just let everyone know we’re here.”

Ignoring him, Castella seized the chance to march ahead.

“You’re going to have to step out of line ma’m.”

Three men waited on her left in the roped security median. Carrying themselves more like soldiers than Intake Authority employees, they sported body armor, heavy rifles, and a panting dog. Unbuckling the ropes, the leader waved her in along with Ein and Basir.

“I’m Agent Bren.” He smiled, calm to the point of boredom. “Going to ask you all to come with me.”

Castella obliged, following the men to an isolated checkpoint where she swung her duffel bag onto the table. Plucking the pistol from her waist, she added it, then removed the sword from her hip and laid it on the pile. A drone buzzed overhead as Bren unzipped the bag, scanning her collection of armor inserts, bullets, and stained clothes.

While Basir went through the same process, Ein bent down to pet the dog. Castella clenched her jaw as the kid got a polite warning to focus. Forcing it out of mind, she turned back to her own interrogation.

“Huh, there a convention I missed?” Bren approached Castella’s pile. Picking up the curved sheath, he pulled the tattered handle and cocked an eyebrow at the burnished steel inside. “You’re not *actually* mercs, are you?”

“Artemis.” Reaching inside a hip pocket, Castella produced a thin id, then slid a thumb under her helmet. Silver Star’s greasy air prickled her scars as she pushed it up. She tapped the orange name on her jacket’s digital collar: Artemis, LLC.

Bren lifted his other eyebrow, then accepted her offering. “Riiight. Artemis.” Checking the photo, he scanned the booklet through the checkpoint’s terminal. His expression tightened.

“Alright, Artemis Contractors, here for... election security consulting. Fun.” He nodded to himself with a long whistle. “Looks like we got something for you too, straight from President Bellem herself.”

Reaching under the table, he produced a small box. Punching a code in on one side, he shed his glove to thumb on the other end. Then he turned the box around to reveal a lustrous chip.

“That’s your encryption key. It’ll give you presidential access to our network, long as you don’t get cute.” His stony demeanor hardened a fraction more. “Fair warning, we’re a little bit on edge these days.”

“You don’t say.” Basir grunted, watching the soldiers dig through his gear. He glowered as they dug out a rifle and started making notes. “What, you expecting another merger?”

“No, syndicates learned the last time.” Bren chuckled, then zipped Castella's bags up and shoved them through the digital scans. “Trouble I’m talking about is inside. Silvera might have kicked the syndicates out, but people don’t take kindly to armed strangers. Even if you are here to help.”

Ein looked up from the dog. “Because of the election?”

“Maybe, heard there’s some kind of drama between Bellem and her advisors.” Bren shrugged, checking the bag readouts before waving Castella toward the detector. “But I think it’s because this is the first time we’ve hired outsiders.”

“Noted.” Castella grunted, stepping into the metal detector and lifting both hands. The resulting alarm got the crowd to stare, especially when the soldiers reached for their guns.

“Easy guys, probably just the jacket.” Waving them down, Bren nodded at Castella. “Armored, right? Pop that off and...” He trailed off as he spotted the scanner’s readouts.

Castella's crude outline was caught against a red screen. It was filled with a dense, black web of cybernetics that covered her toe to hip before crawling into her left arm. Thin branches spiraled out into the rest, carving a ghostly skeleton.

Just looking made Castella's phantom limbs twinged.

"Alright, not the jacket. Guess you really do bring swords to gunfights," Leaning over the screen, Bren tapped commands with a low whistle. "Damn, that's serious hardware." He pulled himself back up with a scoff. "Syndicates. Can't live with them, can't live without them, huh?"

"It's custom." Brushing past him, Castella hooked the duffel over her shoulder.

"Might be custom, but I bet they made the parts." Sweeping a hand across his waist, Bren stepped into a sharp salute as Ein and Basir passed through. "Welcome to Silver Star, Artemis. Don't get yourselves killed."

Castella was already moving. Bren's little detour might have cost a little privacy, but it was dumping them out into the main gate ahead of schedule. Her long strides ate the distance until her ears pricked at the silence behind her.

Checking her shoulder, she found Ein awkwardly hauling his gear on while returning Bren's salute. Watching him struggle tickled something in the back of her skull.

"Good kid, see why the syndicates kicked him out." Basir sidled, hooded eyes stuck to Ein. Glancing sideways at Castella, he scoffed quietly. "Wonder if you were ever that young."

"Ein." Calling out, Castella turned on her heel. He caught up just in time for the crowd to sweep them into the city proper. Forcing her way through the milling tourists, Castella got that prickle on her neck again.

"Ein..." She ground to a stop on color-slicked pavement.

"Sorry!" He skittered up, eyes wide. "Just... do all stations look like this?"

Despite herself, she looked.

The street jutted forward, speckled with pastel lights and lined with glossy towers. Three loomed above the rest, like obsidian canines soaking up the light. Caught in their jaws was Assembly Hall, a domed building whose wings curved around a bustling plaza. Tourists filled the space in-between, packed tight as bullets while lanterns and drones ambled overhead.

A sea lapped into the street's flanks, drawing applause and cheers from the crowds gathered there. Yet even when rogue waves crashed over them, the tourists remained dry. Nor did the shores whittle away. All tricks of the light, no station would waste so much water.

Despite herself, Castella lifted her chin to peer into the waves. Vast apartment complexes sprouted in those depths, forming neon pools where holographic leviathans nested in dense nets of wires. Somewhere down there, Silver Star's millions went about their lives. Shoulder throbbing at the sight, Castella turned her gaze skyward.

Far above, inverted skyscrapers hung from Silver Star's roof, their balconies connected gardened bridges. Castella glared at the serenity for a moment before Basir's words dragged her back to earth.

"Never seen that before." Basir admired the vista, lips pursed. "Good for them."

"Good for *us*." Ein whispered, head whipping around to take it all in. "This isn't a syndicate station." Wheeling around, he grinned at the pair. "It's a *free* station."

Castella said nothing, but her fellow travelers murmured excitedly. She looked up to see the kaleidoscope sky coalescing into a bright veil. A woman appeared on it, draped in Silver Star's blue-and-silver flag as she lounged in a velvet chair.

“Welcome to High Street, population *you*.” She extended a hand in welcome, then snapped it closed with a grin. “Allow me to be the first to welcome you. I am Glamour, and if you’re here to see democracy in action, then do we have the show for you...”

Snapping her chin down, Castella glanced over the crowd. As they shouldered each other aside and snapped pictures with Glamour’s vibrant avatar, the greedy light in their eyes was all too familiar.

Same with Ein.

“Free?” She tugged the bag over her shoulder then prowled forward. “No. Reminds me of home.”