

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

DAEMON CIRCUIT

[0]: Ice Breaker

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

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

Castella swam against the tide of Ward 15's streets. Head and shoulder above the crowd, she shoveled her way forward, knee-length jacket clanking along with her. It was an imposing patchwork of gray ballistic-weaves and armored-plates, crowned by a stiff collar rising to her chin. Orange letters glowed on each side, reflected in the sullen gloss of her helmet: ARTEMIS, LLC.

Slipping around a knot of chattering Silvers, she collided with a drunk. He gripped her shoulder for support, then fell as she shrugged him off.

“Foreigners,” he sneered, staggering to stay balanced. “Gotta come into our home and, no...” he trailed off, eyes wide from a combination of Castella's collar and the sword on her hip. “Contractor! Wannabe Samurai.” The man grinned up at the second Artemis Jacket shouldering past him. “Like eating out of Syndicate hands, doncha?”

Waving for the second Jacket to follow, Castella took a sharp right down an alley. She plowed past windows offering indiscreet services for discreet customers. An audience watched from the stoops, scratching chrome implants and needle-tracks. Unimpressed, she barreled toward a misty archway where holographic blue lights cordoned off a waist-deep reservoir. The letters' reflection fluttered on the wet ground.

Designated Competition Area – Do Not Enter

“Hang on, we're just looking for a kid, wasn't supposed to be a DCA.” Basir, the Jacket trailing Castella, pulled up short to shot a hard look at her back. “You know what that means.”

“Means keep your whining in the NeuralLink.”

“Just check your weapons.” Basir pulled the rifle from his shoulder. “And don't forget your systems. Last thing I need is you glitching out on me.”

Silent, Castella pulled a gauss-pistol from inside her jacket. Checking its magnetic coils, she ejected the magazine. Designed to ignore magnetic-deflection, the bullets had non-magnetic cores sheathed in disposable steel skins. Good at punching holes in people, they punched bigger holes in budgets, even Syndicate ones.

Holstering the weapon, she flicked her eyes down then up to open her a menu resembling a human outline. Gold lines inside the head, arm, and legs represented her implants and flashed as the system-check with her head and neck.

Diagnostic Started

HCE SharpSight-v22: Status - REBOOTING

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Her vision skipped a second as her augmented eyes came back. Then the diagnostic moved down to the two chips embedded in her neck.

HCE NetAgent-v18: Status - READY
StelCom NeuralLink Model_9: Status - READY

She'd have Net access then. The scan went down to her arm.

Hanza-Augments Iron Hand (Modular) Detected:
- *Custom Muscle - READY*
- *HCE DEFLECTION ENGINE - READY*

Lifting her hand, Castella watched the lines point to joints and inflections points hidden under her jacket. Everything was smooth and fully charged, her legs came back the same.

“All good?”

“Yep.” Snarling her answer, Castella stomped through the holographic ribbon and into the murky basin. As the sullen light stitched themselves together, the glinted across thick vapors curled from the rippling waters. All was serene until her visor chirped.

Message From: Silvera
Designated Competition Area (DCA):
Silver Star is not responsible for any related injuries.

Deleting the message with a swipe, Castella stalked along the basin wall until a chortling dam emerged from the fog. Slogging up to the dribbling edge, she admired the view.

Gutter 15 was a wedge-shaped scar in the Ward's urban sprawl; eighty meters of empty air at street-level pinching down to forty-five of sodden trash at the bottom. An empty walkway ambled along the walls, just waiting for rain-swollen rivers to wash the detritus away.

Apartment towers huddled about the banks like thirsty trees, their foliage a tumbling, neon fall. As Castella watched, those ephemeral screens united to present what looked like a woman. Hair pinned back and dressed in a scarlet kimono, she was regal save for her the lump of metal welded to her cheek.

Castella snorted; she couldn't cut that.

When a network got too large for man to understand Daemon emerged. Born from the primordial soup of a billion connected devices, these intelligences worked tirelessly to onboard new users, manage updates, and give the incomprehensible a face. In that intimate capacity, they absorbed the culture of their constituents and, in time, merged with the group identity.

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Thus was born Silvera, Silver Star's personal Daemon.

"Attention Ward Fifteen, Citizens for Reform Today has reported one of its aides as missing, please contact local authorities if you spot him." She hugged the photo of a curly-haired man to her chest. *"Given this development, President Bellen would like to share a few thoughts."*

Silvera winked out of existence as the Presidential Anthem picked up. Soon, a dour woman dominated the apartments, her chiseled brow blunt as a statue's, her voice too stern to have ever been young.

"I have been honored to serve you, and humbled to see you grow strong." President Bellen stood behind the Meteor Desk, hands clasped behind her back. *"We have fought hard for independence, today is no different. All I ask is that you trust one another and unite behind tonight's outcome. Our democracy is strong, but so is hate and fear; let neither blind you."*

Putting it from mind, Castella vaulted over the dam. For a long second she hung weightless, then she landed silently on the riverwalk. Never breaking stride she continued on as Basir splashed, and cursed, behind her. Grinding her teeth at the noise, she waited for the drop. The impact ran up her spine as if she had been the one to jump off, and lukewarm water drained down her neck.

Castella felt it all thanks to the StelCom NeuralLink chipped in her neck. It opened a constellation of stars inside her skull, each a connection to a linked chip. Quantum-entangled for security and range, she could sense their direction like she felt her hand in the dark. And, like her hand, she could feel things if she touched; thoughts, fears. Pain. And sometimes, they reached out to touch her.

She touched Basir's star, he was cursing again, and shaking himself dry. She pressed her jaw shut and forced her scowl across the connection. <<Keep it in the NeuralLink.>>

<<Well excuse me, not all of us have steel legs.>> Basir sniped, wiping slime off his pants.

<<You're not paying attention.>> Castella lifted a finger toward the gutter wall. There, a corpse slumped atop a rubbish throne, cheeks stained by wet overdose-tears, eyes empty as the needle in its arm.

Stalking over, Castella's roaming gaze caught on a blue glint in the man's lap. Squatting, she nudged aside the trash and pulled out a medical vial ampule filled with an azure liquid. The contents sloshed as she turned the vial to find the Syndicate logo on its stopper. *Hanza Pharmaceuticals*. She already knew what was printed on its side.

ERASE

A Fresh Start

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“Remember this Saigo, all the blood we shed?” She whispered to herself, and the sparkling contents. “Syndicates always win in the end, don’t they?” Her fist balled around the Erase as Basir stepped up.

<<He didn’t move, did he?>>

<<No.>> Tossing the ampule to Basir, Castella slipped a hand behind the corpse’s neck. Finding a metallic divot, she pinched down, then ripped. A wafer-thin computer chip popped out with a whimper of bone and foil.

<<Glad you’re the hardass.>> Basir shuddered at her work, then busied himself with the vial. <<Weird, who ever heard of an Eraser overdosing from one vial.>>

<<People die.>> Palming the chip, Castella thumbed the blood off a Syndicate label. *STELCOM: MOMv2*. The Multi-Objective-Manager chip was Stellar Communications’ latest personal agent, offering chemical-balancing, neural acceleration, and more. Normally unaffordable, the implanted version came with a steep discount in return for permanency and in-depth telemetry.

Plugging it into the hem of her sleeve, Castella pulled up her helmet’s display. When the new hardware registered, she opened a proxy, ran a virus-scan, then dove in.

BIOMETRIC CHANGE DETECTED

If you are Dexter Takemura, please sign in. Otherwise, please contact StelCom to register your new device.

Castella instead opened the proxy’s toolbox and selected one Quantum Rainbow. A progress bar flashed across the screen, taking the lock with it. A slew of alerts scrolled up.

Starts in 1 Hour: Rendezvous

3 Hours Overdue: Eat

2 Weeks Overdue: Taxes

1 Month Overdue: Eviction notice

Noting the upcoming meeting, Castella switched to medical notifications.

CRITICAL (Just Now): Unauthorized Ejection

CRITICAL (70 Minutes): Neural/Heart Activity Arrested

CRITICAL (70 Minutes): Neural Activity Low

URGENT (70 Minutes): Neural Activity Spike

WARNING (90 Minutes): Blood Toxicity High

Scanning the data, she pulled up the dead man’s schedule. Unemployed, Dexter Takemura spent most days wandering Ward 15. However, this morning, he had spent thirty minutes in the local polling station. It stopped there, with only the promise of a rendezvous to intrigue her. Checking that there were no hidden links, Castella copied the Agent’s data to Artemis’ Subnet.

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<<He voted? Erasers can barely remember their names. And what that spike... could have been a hack.>> Basir tensed. <<Or, what if it's Hayabus's next-gen Ghost? Syndicate bastards are just turning it on and off?>>

<<That let me pull its agent?>> Castella stood with a snort.

<<Maybe, Synders always got plans within plans.>> Basir jerked his head up. <<Speaking of, where are the drones? This is a competition area, Syndicates should be blowing each other up.>>

Castella lifted her chin. The sky was quiet, relatively speaking, until a maglev shot overhead, its digitized sides a rancid orange sun. Gutter 15's puddles soaked up that color until they resembled a sunset ocean, reflecting the double-barreled rifle and black ink crawling across the maglev.

*Valor Paladin Out Now: Keep the dead, dead**

**Valor Arms is a Subsidiary of Hayabusa Combined Enterprises*

<<Great, now Hayabusa has a sense of humor>> Basir plucked a thin cylinder from his jacket, making a point not to look at the corpse. <<Keep the dead, dead. Real funny.>>

<<Shut it.>>

<<You Samurai all have sticks up your ass.>> Sighing, Basir pulled back his helmet, revealing brown hair matted with sweat, tawny eyes, and a sagging face. He set the stick between dry lips and inhaled; lighting the Haze and sucking down the numbing smoke.

Castella grit her teeth. <<I'm expecting violence.>>

<<You know what they say, when the Samurai's around, the dead abound.>> Basir scrunched his nose, then went back to sorting through Dexter's data. Castella got a step away before he stiffened with a hiss.

<<Cas, we got a problem, someone spoofed this DCA. Look, they're using old Hayabusa sends.>> He shoved a message over the NeuralLink. *Valor Paladin: Coming soon to a DCA near you!*

Castella looked at the parting tram, then toward the dead Eraser. She saw it in a new light as she activated her NetAgent's overlay and took manual control. Decades had been wasted debating the best way to visualize the Net until reasonable people agreed they'd just let Daemons navigate for them. But there were times when a personal touch was required.

Her default visualization was a two-dimensional lattice of sparks draped across the MegaHabs, ad-clouds, and pedestrians. Each light represented a Net address, while the lattice was a simplified rendition of their connections. Reaching out to the dwindling maglev, she touched the Hayabusa message encoded to its side. Bright data-lines arched away from, connecting to Hayabusa's paid influencers who acted as broadcasting hubs from within the DCA.

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She found three local businesses; Tio's Bar, Hellfire Genetics, and Action Tattoos. Grabbing their metadata, she compared them to Dexter Takemura's inbound data; Tio's was a perfect match. Castella lobbed her find into the NeuralLink, and was lurching forward when the first stale raindrop splattered on her visor. Millions more followed, kicking up knee-high mists. Castella forced herself not to look up; she needed to focus, not fan her smoldering temper. As the dark rivulets rolled off her helmet, a cheery ghost floated in her ear.

"You Can't See Heaven from Hell" On cue, a woman's giant hologram held out its hand to the streets above.

Castella glared back. It was just like the ones that had greeted Artemis when they stepped off the shuttle. For all their talk of independence, Silver Star could have been any other Syndicate metropolis instead of a lonely ball of metal adrift in the stars. Just like Jacquelyn Ernst was a politician like any other. Kind words and an empty hand alone never won hearts and minds.

Basir's chuckle ripped her out of the reverie. <<We're down here because the President personally asked us to look for one missing kid out of millions, and you don't bat an eye. But, Jacky's campaign slogan, that's what gets you?>>

Feeling his eyes on her neck, Castella bit her tongue when a third star entered the NeuralLink. Hidden in one window of the faraway Megahab, it gleamed bright like a guiding light. She sighed impatiently; he was supposed to be covering their approach.

<<His name is Tam.>> Four months out of university, Ein's voice lacked the veteran edge of his fellow Jackets. He was shy about the fact, which was why his connection flushed red under Basir's stare. <<Just trying to do the job right.>>

<<Then keep an eye out.>> Stomping away, Castella effortlessly kept her thoughts flat and life as she pointed them at Basir. <<People think it's easy to change the world. Wouldn't expect you to understand.>>

<<What? Because I think with my head instead of a sword? You know what violence gets you? That.>> Basir glared at the gutter's wall. There, a skull wavered in the rain, its bullet-studded mandibles gnawing a flaming scale above an ashen subtitle. *Burn them to cinders.*

Electro-graffiti below depicted a monstrous woman. Lank hair hung over her face, while augments and scars sapped her humanity. She was cold iron from the shoulders down, sporting four-inch claws, and a nameplate. LAW.

<<Law, what a model Samurai. At least Syndicates will try to bribe you before putting a boot on your face.>> Basir spat as the digital art pointed its blades at his throat. Castella bit her tongue, but Basir saw the shape of her mood anyway.

<<Damn right I'm scared of her, she turned herself into a tank.>> Exhaling, Basir turned his head away. <<You're halfway there yourself.>>

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Castella pretended not to hear, but her limbs did. For eight years, she had been told steel didn't feel, but Basir's words made the metal fused into her hips and shoulder throb like bruised flesh. She kept walking; at least her augments didn't feel tired slogging through a gutter so hot it cooked trash into an opaque sweat-mist.

<<I'm not apologizing.>> Basir muttered, face shadowed by their NeuralLink's sympathetic pain. <<You've been itching for a fight ever since we got here.>>

She didn't answer, but someone did. Above, a thousand voices rose from the streets, accompanied by the splash of a thousand stomped puddles. It drew in more shouts until it boomed through Castella's chest.

"Hierophant! Hierophant!"

<<What is it now?>> Basir wearily looked up. Street-side, digital flames devoured a nearby MegaHab while hundreds gathered to watch. They cheered wildly as a katana cut the blaze, holding out their hands to greet the bespectacled giant that emerged. Ignoring the adulations, the man shuffled a deck of dogeared cards.

"*Justice.*" Hierophant's voice was thunder as he suddenly drew a card. On its face, a skull chewed golden scales. He let go, and the burnished rectangle hung mid-air. "*Tonight, let it be the people's Justice. Let our will shine bright.*"

"Silver Star alone! Synders go home!" The shouting spread like wildfire.

<<Whole damn city is full of wannabe Samurai.>> Basir shook his head. <<They'd bicker over the ashes.>> A NeuralLink star winked in the MegaHab as Ein rejoined. Castella balled her fists, then grudgingly cinched them open when she heard the boy's tone.

<<Uh.... about that. I... we're late.>> Worry cracked Ein's voice. <<They killed Tam.>>

[1]: Core Deliverables

“An old-world prophet foretold the meek would inherit the earth. They haven’t yet.”

- Suman Kai, *The History of Everything*

Dipping into Ein’s NeuralLink, Castella felt a high-magnification scope pressed against her eye. Through it, she saw a stretch of riverwalk strewn with broken bottles, damp wrappers, and one misshapen mound. She knew what it was before her SharpSight software highlighted the faces and hands.

Basir joined them in the NeuralLink, cheeks puffed with a sigh. <<Sorry, jinxed it.>>

<<Ein, sweep the perimeter.>> Castella slunk forward, connecting to Silver Star’s medical Subnet. Her answer came back faster than expected.

Query Terminated: ERROR 951

Due to earlier outages, databases do not meet hygiene standards. Please try later.

Black laughter tinged Basir’s thoughts.

<<Ignore him.>> As Ein’s shaking spread to her, Castella exhaled; willing her heart’s stillness into him. He latched on, no heavier than a teardrop as she walked. She could have crossed miles, but she didn’t have to go far.

Her first view of Tio’s Bar was a rash of stylized graffiti slashed across the other side of the gutter. Above the glistening menu, a street-level cafe bustled with foot traffic. Hundreds crammed into the street-seating while an impatient line formed at the doors. No one was getting in. Or out.

Castella filed that detail away before looking down.

Tio’s riverside patio was larger than its street-side offerings, and with the rains coming it should have been full. Instead, four patrons lounged at one table, wearing body-armor with a singular label. D.R.E.A.D.

Daemon Regulation, Enforcement, and Detainment had a reputation for kicking doors, taking names, and commandeering hardware. It was one Silvers were quick to forgive if it kept Syndicates Daemons out of their city.

Basir scowled. <<What are Dreads doing here?>>

<<Doesn’t matter, we’re here for the job.>> Castella pointed at the tangled mound of Silvers looming down the walk.

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<<Hang on, look.>> Ein shifted his sights across the patio toward three more customers huddled against the bar's wall. They huddled together, safety out of sight from the bustling streets. One stood out, his face covered by a mess of cables that drooped over his armor.

Basir exhaled. <<'Told you, it's never easy.>>

Ignoring him, Castella dialed up the SharpSight's magnification to focus on the man standing beside the octopus-looking Dread. Silver Star's emblem glinted on a thick sleeve of bullet-resistant weaves, but her attention drifted to the comatose man at his feet.

The Synder, she immediately recognized the man's gene-enhanced features, had his eyes closed and head lulled against the Dread's boots. She attributed his condition to the cable plugged into his neck.

Ein's voice rose an octave. <<See it now?>>

<<Relax.>> Castella imagined her languid pulse filling the NeuralLink, while wrestling down the wild energy brimming in her phantom limbs. She managed somewhat, oblivious to the crooked smile behind her helmet. <<We're all on the same side here.>>

<<More like you're on your own side.>> Basir drawled, then activated the Emergency Key Rebecca had given them. <<Silvera, id that Synder.>>

Castella saw the Net writhe as one of Silvera's sub-Damons churned its depths. It was like a cloud passing over the sun. The previous bright lattice dimmed, overwhelmed by the arrival even as it gently alighted on Basir's shoulder to hook into his vision. She clutched her fist tighter.

That is Hayabusa Employee 9817. Silvera's answer played across her visor. *Video Link.*

She allowed the broadcast. A screen popped onto her visor, showing a Hayabusa executive shuttle at dock. The Synder, Hayabusa Employee 9817, prowled out of the vessel a moment later. Castella recognized his movements as implanted muscle-memory, the sort Synders stuffed themselves with in hopes of becoming experts.

While she wasn't impressed, the Silvers, for all their sneering, jumped out of his way. Frowning at their eagerness, she turned on the video's Net filter, and immediately saw the Synder covered in gold.

Castella narrowed her eyes. She had only ever seen Blackwalls, obsidian shroud of anti-intrusion software that ranged from layered proxies to biometric couter-hacks. But all of them

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were static designs. This one shifted, taunting the NetHeads ineffectually scratched its surface. But the aspiring hackers were starting to swarm, there was a reason most Silvers thought encryption made you a target.

That was hours ago, didn't explain why he was lying at Dread's feet.

<<Let's just call this off, say Dreads found our guy.>> Basir groaned as Castella crept forward. <<Or not. There you go again, thinking with your sword.>>

<<No, we got our job straight from the President.>> Putting the Synder from mind, Castella crept forward. <<We don't let them stop us.>>

<<Cas is right, if we can help figure out what hurt those people... we can make a difference.>> Ein's hopeful tone trailed off as he looked at the tangled Silvers. Basir winced, but distracted himself by frowning as hundreds of oblivious pedestrians trotting by.

<<Focus. If they try anything, Ein drops smoke, I'll take care of the rest.>> Castella froze as something crunched underfoot. Lifting her heel, she found a drone twitching like a stricken bird. Dozens more littered the place, from hobby models to Syndicate flyers.

Ein started at the sight, then swallowed. <<Is... that why no one noticed?>>

<<There's always voyeurs.>> Castella answered cheerlessly as she stepped up to the sprawled Silvers. The first victim was a young woman whose cybernetic eyes still dutifully recorded the kaleidoscope sky. Heaving the body away, Castella dug in, throwing three more aside until she dug up a victim in blue. His blood-slicked hair suggested a rough fall, which explained why Tam Kassin's eyes were tranquil as they were empty. Just like the rest of his dozen companions.

Pulling the body out by the ankles, Castella touched Tam's throat. Turning him over, she searched the nape of his neck for a metal sliver. Under a second of steady pressure it ejected, where she lifted it toward the base of her skull.

<<If Ein found him so fast, what took Silvera so long? Not like she doesn't have cameras.>> Basir snapped, glaring at the MegaHabs and their countless cameras. When Castella didn't answer, he spun around with a sigh. <<Really? Now? With Dreads watching?>>

<<Need to know what happened.>> Tilting her head, she pushed her helmet up to punch Tam's chip into a read-only slot near her NeuralLink. As her helmet slid back into place, the chip's control menu flashed across her helmet.

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Alert: Calling Block- Contact nearest Authorities

Alert: Emergency Functions Unlocked

Error - User Unresponsive

Clicking into the available functions, Castella clicked into the logs. A prompt flashed up, requesting her desired immersion sensitivity, and BleedOver protocols. Selecting *Full*, Castella dialed the recording to five minutes before the error. As Tam's vicarious memory swam over her vision, she squeezed her right hand, anchoring herself to the flesh's dull pressure.

An old trick to stay in the real world as a stranger's thoughts filled her mind.

[2]: Vicarious

“Nothing quite so exciting as watching another man die.”

- Glamour, *Smoke & Mirrors*

Silver Star was on the brink of greatness. After twelve long years, it was time, and Tam Kassan was done waiting.

He hurried down a cramped hallway packed with chirping machines. The automated mall sold everything a Silver needed. One young man was out now, shaking off vestiges of his electric dreams. Tam passed him with a warm smile, not that the boy noticed.

The hall opened up shortly, making space for the street-side exits. Tam paused now that he had space to stretch his arms. The doors here were covered in digital screens for the owners to express themselves. Most defaulted to Glamour's *Smoke and Mirrors*, Silver Star's top rated shows ten years running, others preferred to take a stipend running Syndicate ads. It was Tam's job to get them to run the right campaign slogans.

Checking his do-not-disturb list, he excluded the doors until there was only one left, a crossed circle on its display. Ignoring it, Tam walked up and knocked. The sound drifted away, eager to put distance between itself and the unwelcome guests. Unfazed, Tam lifted his hand again, and a distorted voice burst out.

“What do you want?”

“Apologies for the bother.” Tam held up a flier. “Do you—” The door jerked open, and a matronly Silver bristled behind it.

“You’re with Jacky, huh?” She snapped..

“That’s right, can’t see Heaven from Hell.” Tam tapped the flier’s top-line slogan.

“What’s her take on foreigners?” Yanking the paper out of Tam’s hand, the woman skimmed with a pinched brow. “Don’t like Rebecca bringing in all these contractors, Silver Star can take care of itself.”

“We believe they’re people like you and me, Citizens for Reform Today doesn't villainize anyone.” Tam smiled like he’d known the woman for years. Two days ago her attitude would have sent him running, but he’d knocked on too many doors to scare that easily.

The woman squinted up from the paper. “She’s consistent, I’ll give her that.”

“She is.” Tam nodded intensely. “And—”

“What about Hayabusa, huh?” The woman crossed her arms, but kept the flier. “Rebecca rolled over and gave them those DCAs. Jacky going to do something about that?”

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“Yes. She imagines a united Silver Star, where you can go wherever you like. You can be a part, add our videos to your door and let people know we’re in this together.” Tam held out a hand, just like the woman on his flier.

“Hayabusa wouldn’t like that.” The woman grinned, then quickly swallowed it. “Give me one reason to believe she could actually pull that off.”

“Easy, you wouldn’t have answered if I worked for Rebecca, would you?”

“Maybe you’re right.” The Silver fixed him with a cutting look. “Just be glad Rebecca already had her chance.” By the time she slammed the door, Tam was already headed for the exit; he had places to be.

Outside, Tam squinted through a drizzle falling from a gunmetal sky. What looked like bulging clouds was in fact a thicket of wires spliced between the towering apartments. But a few shifting lights stole through the gaps. They were glimpses of Heaven’s delirious neon haze, hundreds of meters away where the city’s bodyheat pooled and the angels cooled off with regular storms.

And all the way down in Ward Fifteen, Silvers went about their business. Watching them march and amble, Tam’s heart swelled with pride.

“Home sweet home.” Tucking his shoulders and setting out, he passed through a small garden, where floating pebbles of glass flowed in the wind. He slowed as he reached the main boulevard, letting his eyes acclimate. Street-glare always gave him a headache if he wasn’t careful.

The problem was a thousand holographic suns skirting the sky’s sagging loops, their endless dance inflaming the rain-washed streets. Each promoted a different product or service, but the message was all the same. Live longer, live harder, live rich.

Hundreds of similar ads turned the cityscape into a blur of faces and names. Tam tore his watering eyes away with a grunt. It didn’t have to be that way, change was coming.

As he struck out, the vibrant mists overhead coalesced into a woman. Crowned by nebulas, Glamour fluttered her neon lashes. Tam stopped in his tracks, reluctant to miss a single moment of the woman’s winsome voice. A pang of jealousy stabbed him as other Silvers stopped to admire her.

“...polls have Jacquelyn Ernst up four points, putting her neck and neck with President Bellen. Either way, that’s four more years where the Syndicates don’t win.” Glamour rolled her wrist, conjuring a city in her palm. She smiled proudly down on it, lifting Tam’s heart to new heights. *“There’s no liberty like earned liberty, isn’t that right Silver Star?”*

Tilting her head, Glamour beamed down on the Silvers as they erupted in applause. She dwarfed the smaller ad-clouds pattering through the sky, while her voice reached every alley. *“You stand alone Silver Star, the last bastion of democracy. Stand proud.”*

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The cheering rose like ten thousand fists in salute. “Silver Star alone! Synders go home!”

“Silver Star alone.” Tam whispered, then stopped dead. The others did too.

The cause was a tall man walking toward them. Impossibly handsome and graceful, he could only be a Synde, one of those few individuals with any real power in the Syndicates. They had the obvious perks of wealth, power, and lavish genetics, but Tam had heard rumors that they could crumple a dozen men without breaking a sweat.

Whether or not that was true, this one slipped politely through the crowd.

Tam was stepping to the side himself when the personal agent in his neck chirped. The alert went straight to his vision.

Warning: Net Access Lost

Warning: Ward 15 Subnet Connection Lost

Warning: CRT Subnet Connection Lost

As other notifications indicated cascading failures, he tried to open his Net connection. Instead of the digital overlay he expected, the world remained dull and physical. All except for the Synder, who was now wrapped in a strange firewall that shimmered like molten gold. But the spell was broken.

Tam jumped away, pressing himself against the street’s waist-high wall. As the Synder approached, he glanced back to find the wall’s other side sloped down into a dry canal. Clutching Jacky’s flyers to his chest, his heart hammered at his ribs. Then the Synder was upon him, and a soft voice rippled down his spine.

“Excuse me, you’re one of Jacky’s, right?” The Synder touched Tam’s shoulder. “Mind telling me why?”

“Um, she has principles, doesn’t believe in... violence...” Tam licked his lips, his evaporating confidence leaving a chill in his heart. The words burned his ears, because it took every ounce of his will to keep his hands from the man’s throat.

“She doesn’t want to hurt anyone.” Tam mumbled into his hands. They twitched as that heat in his ears stole into them. Yanking his eyes away, he glanced up; the crowd had fallen silent. Now they closed, their expressions confused, their fists clenched.

“Really? No violence?” Wiping the smile from his face, the Synder tilted his head to appraise the solemn crowd gathering behind him. “I don’t feel particularly welcome. Perhaps you could remind your friends here, they look... hasty.”

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The fire in Tam's ear became a whisper; *the time is now*. As if guided by strings, he pinned the Synder's hand to his chest in a movement he had never known nor practiced.

It was alien as the words leaving his mouth. "Thus always to Synders."

The Synder ripped out of Tam's grip too fast to see, yet not fast enough. Silent as statues, the Silvers crashed into him and Tam like a wave, washing everyone up and over the wall. For a heartbeat, unexpected vindication burned Tam's chest, then the crushing horror rushed toward him like the stone below.

But the last thing he saw was a man in a black uniform stepping up to the gutter wall. The golden letters stitched on his chest gleamed bright just before Tam's world went dark.

D.R.E.A.D.

[3]: Dread and Anger

“An old-world prophet foretold the meek would inherit the earth. They haven’t yet.”

- Suman Kai, *The History of Everything*

Castella blinked once, clearing the residual memories. Basir was crouched nearby, one of his hands tensed above her shoulder. He was focused on the other side of the Gutter though, NeuraLink cluttered with images of the lounging Dreads.

Putting it from mind, she reached for Tam’s chip as Basir spun up another proxy. As the chip fell into her hand, Basir tapped her shoulder.

“Disconnect.” A darkness followed his whisper. His proxy died and an ultimatum flashed across her visor.

Message From: DREAD

Leave immediately. This is your final warning.

<<We should bail.>> Basir bent his knees. <<These guys mean business.>>

<<Deads did it. Ein. Go.>> Castella ripped out of Basir’s grasp and streaked forward. With just a flex of the knees, she was sailing across the gap. The flesh and blood of her right arm thrilled as she soared, alive and powerful in a way steel never was.

Ein took his shot a quarter-second later, covering the four Dreads in sizzling smoke; blinding eyes and scrambling infrared. The Dreads opened fire half a second later, and a full second later the Silvers on the street started to scream.

Falling into the murk, Castella tucked her knees to blunt any lucky hits. She felt the cloud’s sharp particles rasp her armor before she landed on a table’s edge. She skated down as it tipped toward a Dread’s vague outline. Sliding her katana between armored plates, she made the man bow.

Simultaneously, she used her left hand to rip a pistol from inside her jacket. Swinging it behind her back, she squeezed the trigger. A second Dread jumped aside as the bullets mulched a dozen polymer chairs. The two furthest Dreads disappeared in the smoke, but she didn’t have long before their Inferred-Motion-Fields calculated her position.

Castella pulled her sword down to dislodge it through the Dread’s ribs but something tougher than bone resisted. Shifting her hip, she leveraged her weight to tear free, then kicked the table, her cybernetics turning it into a lethal projectile. As the Dreads behind her scattered, she prepared to jump away from Dread One. But she stayed right in place.

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Her legs were frozen, leaving her open as Dread One lunged for the kill. Despite the severed ribs clicking in his side, the man only picked up speed. Gripping Castella's shoulder, the Dread swung his head down to bite her neck.

Tucking her chin, Castella drove the crown of her head into the man's face. Blood smeared her visor, and the Dread's nose reeled back with a shattered nose. Pressing her advantage, she lopped off the man's arm at the elbow. The Dread recovered with a happy gurgle, then moved faster than a dying man had any right to move.

Basir noticed. <<Ghost. Told you so.>>

Ghosts were the result of people stuffing themselves with hardware, eventually it could move on its own. The possibilities delighted the Syndicates so much they augmented volunteers to terrifying heights. For the remote operators on standby, death removed fear and pain; Ghosts only stopped when they were bloody smears on the pavement.

As best she could with the paralyzed legs, Castella shoved her pistol toward the Ghost's head. But her metal fingers were as treacherous as her legs and didn't budge while her arm kept moving. Her proxies went dark a second later, but in her Net overlay she saw golden threads of logic burrowing into her cybernetic arm, twisting it around until she stared down the barrel of own pistol.

With the smoke cloaking her, she didn't see the Uniformed Dread, but she remembered the cable connecting him, 9817 and his Goldwall. She pushed the memory into the NeuralLink. <<Take him out Ein.>>

She felt Ein tremble far above, much like the way her arm shivered when she cut down the Dread. Balling up the numbness of her hijacked limbs, she pushed it onto Ein. He exhaled under the weight, loosening the kink in their collective chest. Through Ein's NeuralLink, she saw raindrops beading on Uniform's forehead and felt his fingers curl, racing her own on the pistol. Suddenly his finger hitched like his breath, unable to overcome the last inch.

<<Ein.>> Castella didn't shout nor pressed the thought on him. But Ein still inhaled shakily, closed his eyes, and pulled. An image of Uniform doubling over, stomach plastered across the bar's wall, filled the NeuralLink. He pointed as he fell, and the octopus-faced Dread lurched toward the fight.

Castella hardly noticed, more interested in the invigorating rush restoring control of her arm. Leaping backward through a lull in the smoke, she lined up with the Dread who had dodged her first shot. He tried to duck away, but Castella had her full attention on him this time. She squeezed the trigger, tearing the man's head off like a clump of wet grass.

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Then the ragged Ghost was upon her, kicking up plumes of water as it clawed for her. She rolled backward, putting distance between her and it while giving Basir a clean shot. A large-caliber shot boomed and wrenched off the Ghost's remaining arm. The dead thing simply picked up speed with the shed weight.

<<Hate Ghosts.>> Basir's displeasure filled the NeuralLink as he chambered another round. This time, the Ghost's skull blew open.

The explosion brushed Castella's neck as she kicked off her heels. She sailed back ten feet, crashing through tables and chairs before skidding to a stop. Snagging a chair, she hurled it in a blur, striking down the Dread to her right before bounding toward the last Dread standing. He opened fire as she closed in; shooting to kill..

Throwing her left arm up, she activated its magnetic field. Bullets meant for her heart deflected down to her ribs instead, cracking bone and tearing chunks from her jacket. Only her augmented legs let her close the distance.

A handful of meters from her prey, a bullet found her helmet. Her head kicked back, she blinked stars as she lunged the remaining distance, eating two more shots to the stomach before sweeping past him. The Dread fired wildly, dropping back with half his head falling away.

Castella landed in a crouch, weaving through the plaza and loading a fresh magazine into her pistol. Tables and chairs exploded as the last Dread hosed the place down. She touched her NeuralLink just enough to borrow Ein's eyes.

From that vantage, she saw the fourth Dread on the edges of the smoke, spraying the plaza with suppressive fire. He was hurrying toward the wall where the Uniformed Dread was bleeding out. At the same time he stepped away to make room for the Octopus.

<<Ein.>> Castella pointed her fingers at the man like a gun. She sensed him move the rifle then freeze up; revulsion gripping his stomach.

<<I'll do it.>> Basir didn't hesitate, nor did miss. And once the Dread was done, he turned to Uniform, Castella resting on his shoulder.

While Uniform curled around the hole in his stomach, Hayabusa 9817 stirred. Castella watched coldly as the Synder fumbled about his neck and found the wire tying him to Uniform. When they locked eyes, the Dread stopped fussing with his stomach and went to his hip.

Basir hugged his rifle close. <<Cas...>>

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<<On it.>> Castella started stalking toward the pair, breaking into a run when Uniform flourished a knife. Before she could close the distance, the knife disappeared into 9817's chin. The Synder stared at it dumbly, then toppled over. Castella ground to a stop.

<<What's wrong?>> Basir ran his scope over the plaza, looking for threats. Then he saw 9817's Goldwall bulging like a balloon ready to burst. Then the tension broke free, and a golden sun dawned in Gutter Fifteen.

Castella covered her face as the light washed over her. Two milliseconds of contact made her cybernetics buckle with static. As the limitless storm and her weakness lessened into a harmless prickle, she glowered through the scouring rain.

"Castella, I'm so sorry." A voice cool as marble touched her. Its owner stepped out from behind a table, his noble face serene as she remembered. He was as tall as she first remembered, as if she hadn't grown at all.

"Sorry? You're not sorry bro, you're dead." She hissed, and the man dissolved along with the dawn. Castella glared at the empty space, then stirred as awed witnesses pressed to the gutter's edge.

Ward 15's ceaseless cacophony was gone, replaced by a silence that rang unpleasantly in her ears. Faring no better before the storm, the neon summertime of its MegaHabs and holograms had turned to winter's seething static-blizzards. The Silvers above chattered excitedly, pointing at Castella and her bloody wake in a mix of fear, awe, and admiration.

Castella glared back at them until a new star touched a temporary connection in her NeuralLink. Running her tongue along her teeth, she opened the connection, speaking right away so she didn't have to hear the voice on the other side.

<<'Tam and the others are alive but unresponsive.>> Castella's tone was flat as the side of her blade. <<Dreads and their Ghost were interested in a Hayabusa Synder. Things got violent, then the Net blew up when the Synder died. Your Dreads got Whitewalled.>>

<<A shame it came to this. In any event, well done, emergency services will be arriving shortly. By the way, I find it curious you didn't get Whitewalled too.>> President Bellen's mind was sterile compared to Artemis.

Castella clenched her fists. <<Didn't have direct Net access.>>

<<Perhaps, but that won't satisfy everyone. You can never be too careful..>> Then the President was gone, leaving the strange void where minds had touched.

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“Almost as bad as a Synder.” Muttering, Castella stumped over to Uniform. Pulling him forward, she inspected his neck. It was smooth and fleshy as the day he was born. She looked aside to 9817, who smiled around the knife in his throat as his agent-chip liquified with a noxious hiss.

“Almost.” Shaking her head, Castella yanked the knife free and started to cut. Uniform’s skin resisted bitterly at first, but soon she had a small flap. Peeling it up and sawing with the knife, she soon found a black speck dotting a white spine.

Teasing the chip into a hand, she held it to the light. While it lacked Syndicate labels or self-destruction, the design was a variant of StelCom’s current generation model. Tucking it into her pocket, Castella looked at the other casualties and gauged how long she had before the approaching sirens arrived.

<<Cas, Basir...>> Ein’s pained thoughts pointed her to where the man lay face down on the riverwalk, his NeuralLink a nostalgic shimmer.

<<Make sure no one touches him.>> Absorbing Ein’s worry, Castella slipped over to the octopus-Dread. Under the hood, his cables connected to a plastic wrapped skull that her borrowed knife didn’t even scratch. Gripping the tip of her sword she cut through, and found the chip seconds later. Pressing her thumb down, she smothered its self-immolation.

Ein’s nerves flared as she examined the chip. <<They’re almost here Cas.>>

The sirens were changing pitch, getting closer. Pocketing her prize, Castella bounded over to the dead Ghost, reached into his collar, and yanked out another agent-chip that sparked in hand. Then she ran, powering over the slick plaza to jump across the gutter. Ignoring the cheering Silvers, she stalked up to Basir and kicked his ribs. Sputtering, he curled and twitched.

“Up.” Eyeing the sky, Castella tapped him with her boot..

“You really need to do that? Was having a good dream.” Basir groaned, then pushed himself up. Squinting at the glitching blizzards he pulled a crumpled Haze stick from his jacket. “Well fuck me.” The drug wobbled as he inhaled sharply. “That’s what we get for fucking with Syndicate tech.”

<<Is it?>> Ein chimed in indignantly. <<How can we know Rebecca didn’t send us into this knowing what would happen?>>

Basir just rolled his neck. <<Stop. You’re too green to be thinking like that.>>

“If she wanted me to rip up her bureaucracy she could’ve asked.” Castella snorted, her eyes narrow diamonds. “She wanted something else.”

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“It’s always politics, Dreads just got sick of their leash.” Basir glared at the MegaHabs flickering through reboots. Silvera appeared there; disheartened, blurred, and speaking in a fuzzy voice without moving her lips.

“Please forgive all disruptions, I am striving to ensure service is restored shortly.” Silvera crooked an unconvincing smile. *“However, I am pleased to announce that Tam Kassan has been found alive. Thank you, all of you, for your hard work. We couldn’t do it without you.”*

“That’s one way to put it.” Basir blew a smoky sigh through his teeth. Then he started down the riverwalk, trudging toward its street-side stairs. Castella caught his shoulder and pointed to the MegaHabs.

Inferno TV’s orange flames rippled there, framing another one of Hierophant’s floating cards. This one had been placed to the side of Justice, the eerie skulls and scales. Etched in amber, its face depicted a crumbling skull that gaped at the sky in hopes of salvation.

“Death comes for the body and mind alike. Tam Kassan has been Whitewalled.” In the pallid light, Hiero’s smirk resembled nothing more than a scar. *“And so, we cry out for Justice.”*

[4] Gathering Minds

“Knowledge, like any tools, rusts in disuse. True power does not.”

- **Gideon Hayabusa**

Tawny lights painted the room in sepia tones; Jacky thought it was fitting.

Her company was an eclectic group; though in the dim light it was difficult to tell veteran campaigners from fresh-faced volunteers. They gathered round a long table, overlooked by a drawn window where the EYE glittered like a neon tombstone. Looking around the table, she saw most of her companions gazing into their lap.

She couldn't blame them, not when it took all her will to look at the hologram floating above their table. Tam Kassin looked real enough to touch. Suspended in a cloud of menus and datastreams, he grinned at him like he had in their last meeting.

Jacky twirled a lock of rust-colored hair, winding it around until tension made it slip away. The pain in her heart kept scrabbling up her throat, only to be shoved back down by the oppressive silence. She saw how everyone looked at her; hungry for strength.

She jumped as the door opened. A girl hurried in, shut the door, then slid down it. The shadows slipping down her face revealed fresh features marred by sudden aging. As the room watched her, the newcomer forced herself upright.

“Jacky,” her voice was gaunt as her eyes. “Mr. Kant called. Tam.... they'll keep him alive but...” She broke off, sobs crinkling her face.

“Was Artemis involved? Nothing good comes of foreigners.” An older gentleman seated across the table leaned onto his elbows with fire in his voice.

Jacky looked sharply at him. “Rebecca trusts them.”

“We've been over this,” the man dropped a hand loudly. “We all know what happened to Mr. Bellen. It's not wise to trust her.”

“I trust her.” Jacky whispered, then looked from him to the rest of the room. Eliciting nods from each, she resumed twirling her hair. “Besides, we don't know if it was them. Not yet.”

“Alright,” the man shrugged. “So what now?” His gaze settled on the newest woman who still hunched over the table. “Anna?”

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“We should find somewhere safe.” She looked up, eyes feverish. “For all we know, Tam was just the start.”

“She’s right, this wasn’t an accident.” A younger man jumped up and cracked a fist into his palm. “We don’t know who they are, but they want us dead.”

“Stop!” Jacky slapped her palm on the desk. Fighting her quailing heart, she fixed the man with a gaze stern as her voice. “Don’t talk about ‘them’ like that, it’s fear mongering. We got this far by talking to people, not pointing fingers at them. So,” she turned her gaze across the room until they all met her eyes. “That’s what we’re going to keep doing.”

[Signal Shift...]

Twelve years of planning, burned up in twelve minutes. It was faster than expected.

Rebecca Bellen betrayed nothing as she stood alone. *Smoke and Mirror’s* played on mute, but Glamour’s fiery mood-lipstick and record-breaking viewership spoke volumes..

“I’m surprised she hasn’t reported on Tam. All this time, I thought that peacock would be the one to ruin me.” Rebecca chuckled quietly. “Or maybe, I’m underestimating her.”

“You do tend to overthink things, she may simply be waiting for verification.” Silvera’s words were as unnatural as the grafts blunting her smile.

Rebecca’s stony features lightened. “Guilty as charged. But, speaking of personal shortcomings, any progress with Gutter Fifteen?”

“I have reestablished access to a majority of the Subnet, full control should be restored within the hour.” Silvera paused, gaze flicking to the door. “Do you truly believe Kant sanctioned this operation?”

“So long as someone endangers my citizens; it doesn’t matter what I think, actions must be taken. No matter how limited my office.” Rebecca wandered toward a tall window overlooking High Street. Peering out over the bustling thoroughfare, pride stole into her voice. “What of the Senate? Has the election paralyzed them?”

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“They have called for a special assembly at noon.” Silvera tilted her head. “Some in your own party worry that hiring Artemis for an internal matter sets a worrying precedent.”

“Despite Dread’s involvement proving I cannot trust state resources.” Rebecca pinched her brow. “I expected the blind opportunism, but that makes it no less—” Rebecca was interrupted by a curt knock. Straightening while Silvera vanished, she turned and nodded. “Enter.”

A short man saw himself in. Closing the door quietly he bowed, but his eyes gleamed defiantly. They were remarkable things, mahogany spirals loomed large in his pupils.

“I called upon you yesterday, Director Kant.”

Kant crooked his lips. “Regrettably, the Senate’s call takes priority.”

“That was not a question.” Rebecca collapsed her arms. “Now, what knowledge did you have of the Ward Fifteen operation?”

“When we detected the Artificial, I determined overwhelming force was required.” Director Kant pulled his shoulders back. “You appointed me to defend Silver Star’s freedom, not its ethics.”

“Suppose I did.” Rebecca ran a finger along her desk’s edge. “However, one detail bothers me. We lost the Ward Fifteen Subnet shortly after this Artificial entered there. But we tracked it through fourteen other wards without incident. And then, when the smoke settles, we find Dreads has... taken the initiative. You see my concern.”

“Of course, I’m as distraught as you are. Unfortunately, your friends in Artemis did a spectacular job ruining the crime scene.” Kant smiled placidly. “If anything, the situation is quite convenient for Hayabusa.”

“Yes, I am sure they are delighted to have lost a multibillion-credit project. Now, forgive my narrow-mindedness, but tell me,” Rebecca loomed over the man. “How did Dread’s manage to disable this Artificial and why did it end with a dozen Whitewalled civilians?”

Kant shrugged. “Perhaps it will come up in the hearing. But, if you’ll excuse me, the Senate waits for no man.” Not waiting for dismissal, Kant vanished the way he had come. Silvera reappeared as the door closed, face wrinkled with runaway questions.

“The Senate has not yet informed me of the nature of these hearings.”

“You give them too much credit, it is pure opportunism. I imagine it will be the Designated Competition Areas, they’ve been blaming me from the beginning.” Rebecca reached into her desk

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and extracted a small package wrapped in auburn. Shredding the seal with her thumb, she pushed out a cylinder wrapped in gold.

Silver regarded the object with a blithe smile. "I understand Haze is used to alleviate general anxieties. You needn't be nervous, your activities up to this point have been quite legal."

"Me, anxious? Hardly, I'm neither an addict nor refugee from reality. It's more... sentimental." Rebecca's words slipped out, flush with smoke, as she waved her hand. "I had a life outside Silver Star, you know."

Silvera tilted her head. "What does that mean for us?"

Rebecca crooked the corners of her mouth. "Good question."

[Signal Shift...]

A cheery wind wound between the shining monoliths hung from Silver Star's ceiling, rippling the gardens and stony walkways strung between them. In time, it rolled across a large park suspended from stalactites' tips. It lingered there, awed by Silver Sea's prismatic waves.

The man beside it was less impressed.

"This is the Galactic Arm's greatest democracy? It looks... more insignificant than I expected." Suman's grin was wild and captivating as his flying locks. Leaning over the balcony, he looked down hundreds of meters to where High Street's blazing EYE dimmed into the crisp orange of Fall leaves. Something rustled behind him, no more than a whisper.

"Fine, I'll take a closer look." Sighing dramatically, Suman threw himself off. He descended softly as a cloud through the electric sky until. Little by little, the colorful motes scattered across the neon bridge resolved into a cheering mass.

"Silver Star Alone! Synders Go Home!" Their shouts twisting like whirlwinds, the Silvers surged toward the obsidian trio of Syndicate towers brooding on High Streets side. The Syndicate Wolves stationed there stood safely behind crimson Fetter-Fields, stoically shrugging off the bottles and howls hurled their way.

Suman smirked. "Any chance they pose a threat?"

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“Everyone does Mr. Kai.” The wind whispered, in Suman’s ear without bothering the riots below. The same was true for a uniformed man with rifled eyes who appeared beside Suman.

Suman grinned. “Surely they’re not all equal.”

Nodding severely, the flint-eyed official pointed to a robed group patrolling the mob’s perimeter. Their garb, a blue vest over a white kimono, blended tradition with modern kevlar. The owners were equally pragmatic; sporting chromed and grafted muscles while decorative blades bounced on their hip beside guns and explosives. Not that they needed either; for whenever the crowd brandished something more dangerous than an empty bottle, stern looks sufficed to bury it.

“Ah, you mean Yuri Takemura and his little family. I suppose they see themselves as Silver Star’s self-appointed protectors, though I find nothing romantic in swinging a sword.” Suman rolled his wrist, and the scene melted. What remained was a criminally tidy room, Suman, his Uniformed guest, and a third man sitting off against the wall.

“Gideon!” Kai cried out to the seated man. “Having fun over there all by your lonesome?”

The man lifted his head. He was a somber soul, whose eyes narrowed like worlds rested on them. An ironic twist on his lips straightened itself as he beckoned Suman over.

“I make do with what I can, Silver Star is a graveyard of ambitions.”

Chuckling, Suman Kai sauntered over to his friend like a cat trapping prey. “Whose ambitions? Don’t tell me you threw your Artificial to the dogs just to make Rebecca look bad.”

“See, this is why we’re friends.” Gideon shook his head. “I never have to explain anything.”

“That predictably will get you killed one day.” Absently adjusting his hair, Suman gestured at nothing in particular. “Rebecca won’t be so easy to upset, and I’m sure you noticed that Glamour is seeding all kinds of doubts. The question is, what does Stellar Communications stand to gain?”

“A young, inexperienced leader. Much easier to lie to Ms. Ernst than Ms. Bellen.”

“Really? You’re not the sort for redundant effort.”

Gideon shrugged. “I explained to the Board that Artificials are wasted in Silver Star. But they’re even more stubborn than Silvers.”

“I doubt they’ll learn their lesson, but that doesn’t explain why you called me.” Resting his chin on his fist, Suman smirked. “Unless... you want the show to go on?”

“Silvers dislike foreigners, and when they talk, their Daemon listens.” Gideon tapped his ear with a faint smile. “Now, several of Artemis’ employees survived the Netburst. It may be nothing of importance, or they might have a... unique perspective.”

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“So you want them for yourself, while everyone bleeds out chasing the election. I take back what I said about being predictable, well done.” Chuckling, Suman clapped softly then rose. “In any event, it’s time I go. Places to be, people to chat, and all that..”

Gideon stood to embrace the man, then pushed him fondly toward the door

“Do take care. You said it yourself, Silver Star is a graveyard of ambitions..” Squeezing Gideon’s shoulder once, Suman strode out the door. Once he was gone, the uniformed man turned his mahogany eyes on Gideon.

“Yes, Captain Briggs?” Gideon didn’t look up as he ran a thumb over his wrist.

Briggs bowed. “You asked us to examine the Netburst for irregularities. My team has determined Artificial activity was involved. It sources back to Takemura Tower. With normal traffic resuming the patterns are hidden again, but we stand by the assessment.”

“And?”

“I have every reason to believe the current situation is untenable.”

“No doubt we all feel that way. But such is life,” Gideon Hayabusa closed his eyes and let a satisfied smile crease his face. “Win over the people, win over their Daemons; winner takes all.”

Captain Briggs nodded. “I couldn’t have said it better myself sir.”

[5] Scope Creep

“I find the line between political and personal preference very thin indeed.”

- Richard Jung, *The History of Everything*

Vals stared into the Silver Sea, wishing he wasn't so far from his crew. The NeuralLink told him they were alive and moving, but he wanted to see it with his own eyes.

Holographic waves lapped the stone beneath his feet, their gentle susurrations painstakingly recreated from Earth's faraway beaches. MegaHabs and spires pierced the surface or lingered just below, acting like reefs for the digital leviathans. Further below, the Tangle was a stone seabed, constantly fluctuating with the clear, white waters.

Lifting his gaze to the misty horizon, Vals saw nothing but the endless sea and the metallic spires lit by its reflections. It was dreamy in that way, and fitting; High Street separated worlds.

Above, Heaven's inverted skyscrapers glittered like icicles, slender reflections of the fifteen concentric rings below. The first, Ward One, looped around Silver Star's circumference and tied itself to either end of High Street with meandering walkways and maglevs. The others sank further below the shimmering waters, all the way down to Ward Fifteen, where Vals' crew trawled the gutters.

Their stars were just out of reach; intangible as dolphins playing in the surf and oppressive as the elegantly dressed Synders frowning at his battered jacket.

“Stay alive down there.” Muttering his goodbye, Vals relinquished his white-knuckle grip on the railing and turned around.

A lush park greeted him, rife with willows that whispered in the rain. High Street's EYE, an orb of screens, crowned the rustling trees. It was the most visible thing in Silver Star, and President Bellen took full advantage.

“*Silver Star stands alone, and it costs us.*” Eyes pinched, the titanic woman gazed down her city like an overcast sky. “*Ward Fifteen is our latest trial, but Silver Star is strong, that is why I will go before your Senate without qualm or hesitation. We will not be divided, we will not be cowed.*” She pressed a hand to her heart, revealing a scar that rippled across her forearm, wrist, and palm. “*Silver Star Alone, but Silver Star Together.*”

Slouched against the railing, Vals listened to the polite applause as President Bellen retreated in the EYE's chaotic swirl. He was about to reach toward Castella's star when a hummed rendition

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of Silver Star's anthem drifted across the park. Seeing the smiles disappear from his company, Vals looked back to the EYE.

Glamour filled the EYE's heart, eyes closed and starry hair floating as if in freefall. Unlike President Rebecca Bellen, she could not command the whole surface, so thousands of ads flickered at her side like strobe-lights. Her eyes snapped upon, and the humming stopped.

"You ever wonder if the world is out to get you?" She cocked a scintillating eyebrow, the wicked light in her eye reflected in her blue lips. *"I mean, after Gutter Fifteen, Silvera either isn't up to protecting us or isn't trying."* Her backdrop morphed into a smoking ruin, where medics hauling body-bags to watchful Gunhawks and pointed guns at curious Silvers.

"Elections are such a beautiful tradition. Welcome to Silver Star, enjoy your stay." Glamour blew a kiss with blue-tinged fingers, then whispered. *"And don't mind the bodies."*

"Because you really want peace and love." Muttering, Vals looked over his shoulder to check the sea, and one its lights rose to greet him.

<<Hope things are going smooth up there boss, because they went to shit here.>> Basir's huff was more sullen than usual. <<Ein's never shot someone and Castella is helping as much as you'd expect.>>

Vals suppressed a sigh. <<She's one of us, Basir.>>

<<'That mean I can't call her out?>> Basir snorted, but his frustrations turned inward. <<She's gotten better, but you'd think eight years would—>>

<<She grew up with Saigo, of course she's bitter.>> Vals checked Castella's star, and winced at its red throb. Despite the damage, it showed no signs of slowing down. <<I really don't deserve a crew like you.>> He shook his head with a faint smile. <<Anyway, going to finish up here, company call later.>>

<<Seeya boss.>>

Vals started walking as the connection dropped. Engrossed in a new flurry of conversation, the Synders paid him no mind. They didn't even try to lower their voices.

"I wonder what kind of bodies she really means. Glamour is never that transparent." At a table just out of reach, a woman lazily drooped against the parasol as she spoke. Her tone was dreamy; its detached-indifference the result of three trillion conversations crammed into her Janus

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implant. She probably sighed when Janus told her too, tangled her fingers into forlorn knots when Janus thought it best. “If the Wards start blaming the Senate, who knows how it stops?”

“You’re being dramatic, she means corpses, not political bodies.” A man across from her smiled kindly. “The issue is that Ms. Bellen has overstated her welcome, twelve years is a long time for anyone to be president. She’ll take the fall for this and we’ll move on, you’ll see.”

“Will we?” The lady lay her head on the table. “The Netheads are scared, entire Dens were wiped out today. Nobody up here will say it, but we might have brushed the Daemon Circuit.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” The man yawned placidly, though it didn’t disguise his keen attention.

She fixed him with a needling grin. “And don’t be deaf. They may not be Synders, but the Netheads aren’t dumb.”

Though intrigued, Vals kept moving, and the conversation faded as he brushed aside the dewy willows. It wasn’t long before he escaped into a rolling field, where the trail ran parallel to Assembly Hall’s legislative wing, whose arched windows and marble dome stretching half a kilometer in either direction.

He followed the walkway until the building’s wall dropped away for the semicircle plaza at the building’s front. With the EYE dimming overhead, Assembly Hall cast a long shadow. But in its center burned one light. The Liberty Door, bright as ever, was always open to all. Scoping out Silver Star, Vals had read that less than five percent of Silvers ever even saw the door. He believed it, but that put things in perspective.

Ten thousand thronged the space tonight, their collective murmurs loud as thunder. Less than an hour ago they had been calm, but the promise of democracy in action- of a trial- had them squabbling for a place in line. Vals spared them a glance, but saw little harm in their huffing indignation. He spotted a handful of Silvers glaring at the building, but they melted into the crowd when he so much as blinked.

“Rebecca should’ve hired more people for this.” Shoving his hands into his pockets, Vals braced himself against the dragging rain and tried to look innocuous as possible. Beyond the chattering plaza, ornamental lanterns snapped on, painting High Street proper in a watercolor sunset. The closest tourists broke into applause and admiring coos.

Vals ripped his eyes away with a grunt. Instinctively he looked to his right, which was the shortest distance to Silver Sea and Castella’s team. But along the way, his gaze caught on three shadowy monoliths lurking near the water’s edge. Each was brightly crowned by a name: Ksama

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Quantum Securities, Hayabusa Combined Enterprises, and Stellar Communications; the three Syndicate titans.

Other stations gave each of those three a block of their own, but Silver Star crammed them into one corner. Not only did it force the spiteful siblings to get along, it exposed them to Silver Star's whims, like the fifteen thousand jeering Silvers gathered outside their doors. And while they were safe behind their walls, the Syndicates were neither passive nor cowed.

Hissing and spitting, the crowd parted around a detachment of Hayabusa Synders. Too proud to acknowledge their hecklers, Hayabusa's delegation slunk toward Assembly Hall. Blowing his cheeks out, Vals turned toward the lanky young man settling in at his side. The boy wore an Artemis jacket and an easy smile.

"Just our luck, right Matt?" Vals pointed at the commotion.

Matt scratched the back of his scruffy head with a shrug. "Eh, it was bound to happen after what Cas found. I'm just glad we didn't run into any trouble"

Still staring at the Synders, Vals pursed his lips. "You don't feel we're missing something?"

"Dinner." Matt rubbed his hands, closed his eyes, and made a show of drinking in High Street's greasy smell. "Been on my feet all day, I'm starving."

"Gonna go broke feeding you guys. Not sure what I pay you guys for if you don't buy your won food." Giving a sad shake of his head, Vals started forward.

Matt grinned. "You sound like a Synder." He got one step before a flash of light dragged his gaze up to the sky and melted his grin.

"*Meet Artemis Contractors, the men Rebecca hired to keep you safe.*" Images of Vals and his team filled the EYE as a man's grizzled timbre provided the voiceover. "*But are they Saints?*" The scene jumped to Castella ripping a bloody chip out of a Silver's neck. "*Or Superkillers?*" It slashed to a bird's eye view of Gutter Fifteen, where she stood in wispy smoke, bright beads of blood on her visor and sword. It faded into smoldering words.

This message brought to you by Inferno Media.

Looking askance at the Silvers sprinkled through the crowd, Matt thumbed his collar. Setting his finger on a hidden button, he tossed his chin to Vals. "On second thought, maybe we should keep a low profile."

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“C’mon, we came all this way, might as well live a little.” Reaching up, Vals turned his collar off. Without checking on Matt, he nodded to himself. “Think about what the others want, I’ll bet Mei forgot to eat again.”

“Artemis.”

Vals flinched around, a hand shooting his waist. The woman behind him had taken advantage of the crowd, even now that he knew what to look for he barely found her disturbance in the Inferred-Motion-Field. He couldn’t tell if she took any pride in the fact, for her voice was blunt and her face hidden by a black hoodie. But, seeing the NeuralLink, he pried his hands off his gun.

“You going to sneak out of the Senate like that, Ms. President?”

Beneath her cowl, only Rebecca’s smirk was visible. “Actually, I was planning to sneak up on them. I prefer my opponents off balance.”

Managing to shrink his eyes back down to normal size, Matt looked warily at the woman, then to Vals. “Are Presidents usually like this?” Vals flashed his palm in reply, and Matt bit his tongue with a rapid nod. He nodded once more then Rebecca turned her shadowed face to him.

“I had a life before Silver Star, and learned all sorts of neat tricks.” Grin widening, she adjusted her hood. “For instance, if someone comes to you surreptitiously, they might not like you blurting their name out.”

Vals locked eyes with Matt, then snapped them over to Rebecca. Inhaling deeply, Matt fixed a fake smile to his face and dipped his head.

“I apologize for the misunderstanding, won’t happen again.” Chin still down, he rolled his eyes toward Vals with a gleam. “Any complaints can be directed to my manager.” Rebecca tilted her head until one gleaming eye found Vals.

He shrugged. “Leaders take responsibility, right?”

“Agreed, most see that as a liability, not strength.” Rebecca slouched, hands in her pockets and a sneer in her voice. “Today has made me doubt my usual security apparatus. Which is why I have two tasks for you.”

Vals cleared his throat. “You trust us?”

“You value your reputation, unlike most of my sycophants.” Rebecca waved a dismissive hand. “In any event, I want a team protecting Ms. Jacquelyn Erst and another in Takemura Tower.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Takemura? What, the Samurai finally get under their skin?”

“You are overthinking this,” Rebecca’s tone was bored. “Takemura Tower is the largest polling place in Silver star. If the Syndicates bite, I expect your team to cut their head off. The Gutter Fifteen team would do nicely.”

Vals waited for Matt to finish an appreciative whistle before pointing at Rebecca. “Let’s say things go South. Who pays us if you’re not president?”

“Your contract with Silver Star will be honored.” Her answer carried hints of a smirk.

“Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.” Drifting away, Vals started toward the food stalls.

“I recommend Tio’s Bar if you’re looking for food. Their house pies are to die for.” Rebecca said brightly, already twisting back toward Assembly Hall. Then she was gone, but Vals still felt her smile weighing heavy on his neck.

[6] War Room

“Unfortunately, I suspect Daemons know what we want better than we do.”

- Elora Liskow, *Mother of Daemons*

Resting his head against the rain-splattered window, Ein listened to the rain. Outside, the watery flash of emergency lights flounced over Gutter Fifteen, not quite eclipsing the reflection of a young man with bags under his eyes.

Save for the window's kaleidoscope glow, the room was dark. But he didn't feel tired, the sight of Uniform's stomach hitting the wall had ensured that much. It wandered through his thoughts, tugging his attention inward. It would have been so much cleaner, for all of them, if he hadn't missed the shot like that.

<<Ein.>> Castella tapped his NeuralLink, a fraction of her will freezing his musing.

<<Right, overwatch.>> Relieved to have a distraction, Ein pulled up the MegaHab's Subnet and let it consume his doubts.

MegaHab 15-08's halls were crammed with busybodies, gangers, and machines. Living conditions like that engendered coarse neighbors, but even then there were limits. Tall and splashed in blood, Castella cowed even the boldest gossips. But once she stormed by, their excited tittering redoubled. Ein rotated his view, making sure none of the voyeurs aimed at Castella's back. Engrossed in his work, he missed her stop at an unremarkable door.

“Cas?” he looked up, blinking as the door snapped open and light poured in around Castella's silhouette. In response, Castella ducked her head and stepped inside. The motion-activated lights burst to life, making Ein squint.

“What a fuckin' disaster.” Stomping in, Basir slammed the door behind him, then sagged against the wall and stared at the floor.

“Disaster? Did you two see yourselves?” Unable to hide the grin creeping across his face, Ein pointed at Castella. “I mean, Cas jumped right into the middle of four Dreads and barely got scratched! And that Ghost? Did you see Basir's shot?”

Seeing the two veterans remain quiet, he turned his palms up. “C'mon guys, we even saved Tam, he's alive!”

“We saved a braindead husk.” Castella replied.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Ein looked to see her pulling off her helmet. Once there would have been a noble severity to her, like a classical statue come to life. But time had chipped away, adding scars to her snowy skin until it resembled flawed marble. Buzzed, white hair complemented the stony illusion, though it was ultimately ruined by golden pupils that glared at the world.

“He’ll get better.” Ein dropped his hands, the smile fading.

“Maybe.” Dropping her helmet on the table, Castella shrugged off her jacket. Dull pain filled the trio’s NeuralLink as armored plates dragged across her ribs and she dropped onto the couch.

Biting back a yelp, Ein couldn’t help but check the damage. His gaze caught on a demonic-mask inked on the muscle of her right shoulder, then dragged down as she peeled up her tank-top; exposing bruised ribs caked in sweat and blood. Unaware her pain was bleeding into the NeuralLink, she probed the damage without flinching. Ein cringed as he felt her ribs creak.

“Hardly scratched.” Basir snorted.

“They’re cracked, not broken.” Shooting them both a dry look, Castella stopped toward three duffels piled near the wall and pulled out a ball of white wraps.

“If you say so.” Basir dragged himself off the wall, then raised an eyebrow as Castella layered a bandage on her side. “Should shower first, those won’t stick and you smell like death.”

“Open a window then.”

Basir’s head rocked as he rolled his eyes. “Starting to think you like the smell.”

Cheeks burning, Ein tuned the bickering veterans out and stared at the floor. his first real mission and he already looked like an idiot; talking about saving and hurting like he knew anything about either. He wasn’t even worth correcting.

“If you’re not going to shower, I will.”

Ein jumped as Basir disappeared into the bathroom. However, it gave him a chance to see Castella kick her feet onto the table.

“You shoot to kill?” Her question was cold.

“Yeah. I know I fucked up” Ein looked out the window. Although Silver Star’s night was fast descending, he recalled the scene well. Whether it churned his stomach because he missed, or because he shot a man, was something he hadn’t figured out.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“What did I tell you?” That question

“If someone tries to kill you, kill them first.” Dropping his head against the couch’s back, he blew his lips out with a sigh. After a moment under Castella’s narrowed stare, he mumbled into his legs. “You also said ‘you’ means the team.”

“Uniform killed that Synder even after you shot, could’ve been me.” Seeing Ein still hunched up, she lifted her cybernetic arm into the window’s waning light. “No one is invincible. You hesitate, you die.”

Turning his head sideways, Ein responded with a weary smile. “Don’t blame me, you brought a sword to a gunfight.”

“Good way to die, right? I would’ve died, back on Ebon Array, if it wasn’t for Vals.” She palmed her hilt, eyes dull. “So I kill and bleed for him. I expect my team to do the same.”

“Do you expect us to die for him too?”

“No, can’t serve dead.” Castella rose, tracing one hand along her collar before stopping with a stare that punctured Ein’s heart. “Actually,” her tone reminded Ein of a distant childhood. “I expect you to die if you betray the team.”

A lump of ice formed in Ein’s throat, reducing him to a whisper. He scoffed and put on a smile anyway. “What? Like kill ourselves?”

“Saves me the time.” Pulling her jacket back on, Castella reached into her pocket and tossed three chips on the table. She studied them a moment, then slunk away.

Ein looked up to the ceiling as she did. It wasn’t until the water hissing in the bathroom stopped that he came back to earth. Basir exited the bathroom in a steamy cloud, running a towel across his head.

“Man, I needed that, rain makes my skin crawl. Cas? Where are, its...” The blood drained from his face as he spotted the chips lying on the table.

“Those are from the gutter, aren’t they?” Basir gripped his head in both hands. “Fuck me, that’s criminal evidence Castella! No wonder you’re so worried about Dreads.”

Digging for fresh bandages, Castella shrugged. “You trust Silver Star to tell us anything?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“If it means not being wanted criminals, then yes! Man, let’s hope Rebecca hasn’t put a price on our heads.” Grumbling, Basir waved at the wall, transforming it into a large screen. In the center, an Artemis Jacket caped in shredded mists stood atop bloodied Dreads.

SPECIAL ELECTION REPORT: Fear and Killing in Silver Star

“Well folks, we got a new superkiller on the loose, zeroed four Dreads all by herself.” Glamour appeared on scene, her mood-lipstick an incendiary red as she lovingly touching the Jacket’s black helmet. *“Get this, Artemis Contractors were hired by President Bellen herself. So why kill Dreads? Don’t worry your pretty little heads, our Senate is on the case.”*

She snapped her fingers and banished Artemis’ grim representative. In its place was President Bellen, tall and proud behind the Meteor Desk. Translucent figures crowded at her back, their faces the practiced indifference of statesmen. As the ghosts jealously eyed President Bellen, she turned to face them while the chyron changed.

SPECIAL ELECTION REPORT: Bellen on Trial

“That’s right folks,” Glamour chimed in, swinging a hand over Bellen’s transparent foes. *“Senate Majority Leader Grayson and Senator Dawson announced an emergency hearing for President Bellen and Dread Director William Kant. Don’t worry about getting your fix just yet, the hearing is set for tomorrow morning.”* She winked. *“I’m sure that’s plenty of time to prepare, no rush at—”*

A drone buzzed the window, broadcasting an override that replaced Glamour with Inferno Media’s burning skull. Something sparked in the black gullet, before blossoming to illuminate a cluttered workshop. Ein gawped at the guns lining the walls, then blinked at the hoodies, shirts, and jackets hung from the ceiling. They all depicted a skull biting a pair of scales, complemented by vapid taglines. *ObeY the Law. Trust me, I’m a LAWyer. The Long Claw of the Law.*

Before he could cinch his jaw back up, a mountain of armor and synthetic muscle pushed aside a curtain. The woman enthroned inside leered at Ein, her face creased with augments and scars. Brushing lank hair behind her ear, she stabbed a finger at the camera.

“Anyone else of it all? Everyday, Dreads, Hayabusa, or Takemura beat us down. But today? Today Dreads targeted Jacky, killed Silvers, and let an Artificial in. That superkiller though. Funny thing is that sword, only Pale Oni could bring that to a gunfight and walk away.” Speaking in a throaty growl, Law hefted a twin-barreled Hayabusa Paladin and racked the slide. *“That bitch was so hard-ass I bet she cut her way out of the womb. Hell, I would’ve died for her.”* Letting the bolt snap back into place, Law rapped her brestplate.

“But then she went corporate, started killing for paycheck. That’s not the Samurai way, is it?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Movement dragged Ein's attention to the left. Bathed in the screen's sickly glow, Basir had turned toward Castella. Arms crossed, she stood still as a statue, intentions hidden behind her golden pupils. Perhaps sensing Ein's attention, Basir looked back to the screen and squirmed into his chair like nothing happened. Ein followed his example.

"Now what about Hayabusa? They sent an Artificial after us, got Glamour to blame Artemis, now they've got that spineless worm Grayson inviting them to a sham trial. Fuck that. We elected Rebecca, not them, and I'm going to beat that into their skulls." Law shouldered the gun and sighted down the barrel, her voice bitter as ash. *"You hear that Pale? I'm not afraid of you."*

"She wants to kill me, she'll have to get in line." Castella stomped into the kitchen and started sifting through stacks of instant meals.

"If she gets all of Silver Star gunning for us that's gonna be a long damn line." Dismissing Law & Murder with an angry swipe, Basir propped his cheek on a fist. "We got the after-action now, you telling Vals?" The pop of plastic seals answered him, and Basir rolled his eyes as Castella came back with a half-dozen hot meals crammed into her arms.

Ein didn't notice the man's exasperated look, not with his stomach rumbling and mouth watered. But when Castella set the food down his appetite dried up like his mouth. The tangled, sauce-drenched noodles reminded him of Uniform's bleeding on the street.

"Eat." Castella punched his shoulder. "you're dead weight on an empty stomach."

"Is there..." Ein looked furtively met her stare. "Anything else?" Keeping her eyes locked with his, Castella swapped the bowl for a waxy box stuffed with barebeque.

"Thanks." Smiling, Ein felt more alive just looking at it. As he pulled off the attached utensils, she stepped back to the refrigerator for a milkshake.

<<You know, spicy ramen is her favorite, so she thinks it's everyone's favorite and won't hear otherwise. Samurai, am I right?>> Basir came across surreptitious over the NeuralLink, and when Ein looked at him, the man was entirely too engrossed in his Pad Thai. Ein twisted his mouth to the side, wondering what the man meant.

<<Keep staring at me like that and she'll get pissy.>> Looking the other way, Basir licked a line of grease from his fingers. <<Besides, she's right, you need to eat.>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Knock it off.” Shake and ramen in hand, Castella dropped onto the couch hard enough to make Ein bounce. She put both down, broke out a fork, and started shoveling the noodles into her mouth. Ein blinked and a fourth of it was gone.

“Told ya.” Chuckling, Basir rolled his hand in a circle. “Cas, meeting, Vals is waiting.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Taking a slug of her shake, Castella slipped a disk onto the table. It flowered into a projection, where Vals waited beside a woman bleached by a monitor’s glow. Artemis’ boss looked up at the sound, then grinned.

“There you are, you two giving Ein a hard time?”

“Don’t worry about him,” Castella managed around a mouthful. “I’m the one getting shot.”

“Relax, I worry about you too.” The wrinkles around Vals’ eyes deepened. *“You walked from that last fight, but are you good to fight? Rebecca wants you keeping the peace in Takemura Tower.”*

Castella lifted an eyebrow. “Sure that’s a good idea?”

“Keep your helmet on and no one will notice.” Vals took a deep breath then let it out the corner of his mouth. *“Now, let’s review.”*

“Found Tam Whitewalled, Zeroed four Dreads.” Castella answered around her straw. “Then one killed the Synder and the Netburst happened. Was hoping Mei could tell me what happened next.” She shrugged, punctuating her thoughts with a slurp.

Vals raised a hand. *“We’ll get there, basics first. Anja?”*

A young woman with highlighted hair tucked a notebook away as she appeared in the middle of the projection. *“Alright, so Vals asked me to try and make sense of the footage. Starting with our Eraser here.”* A view of Gutter Fifteen came up, showcasing Dexter Takemura slumped against the wall.

Seeing the victim up close, Ein had to put his food down as it turned to ash in his mouth. And as rectangular highlights emphasized the dead man’s tears and track marks, he saw Basir make a face. Castella remained unphased, contentedly finishing her dish and reaching for more.

“While Erase is not strictly illegal in Silver Star, it’s common for Erasers to use in a remote location. The Takemura Group is the largest NGO outside of the Syndicates, so it’s even less surprising to find him here. However, overdosing on Erase is hard, most users forget what they’re doing on the third dose.” There was a breathless passion in Anja’s voice as she continued pulling up documents Ein only half understood. He was content to take her word for it.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“However, consider the Silvers...” Anja changed the screen to show the comatose civilians lumped in the Gutter. *“Now, the outage began early morning, typical Silvers would have no reason to group up like, unless they had common cause. According to polling, Silvers unite most against Synders and for independence.”*

“And we found a Synder. But what about the fall?” Castella put her food aside, more interested than disgusted. “Tam was seen on the streets, how’d he end up in the Gutter?”

“Right? It’s like they all threw themselves off at once. And they’re not even all hardliners, Tam’s political affiliation was fairly moderate.” Anja answered, her expression flickering. *“I’d normally guess some sort of psy-op, but judging by their expressions I’d say some kind of new back, it lines up with the Eraser too.”*

“Maybe,” Cas reached for her food. “Sounds more like the Syndicates to me.”

“I have thoughts on that.” Mei, the woman beside Vals, tersely interjected as she pulled up the image of a man with black robes and cutting eyes. *“After the NetBurst, Castella’s NeuralLink recorded her seeing a man who, according to her jacket’s telemetry, didn’t exist.”*

“I know.” Castella snapped, her clenched teeth grinding the straw to pieces. “Saigo’s dead.”

“You’re not the only one Cas. I saw my brother too.” Reaching into his jacket, Basir pulled out a Haze-stick with a hoarse whisper. “Thought it was just a dream but...” He lit the Haze and shuddered. “How’d they know?”

“Give me a day and a dedicated rig, I could profile anyone’s psyche.” Mei’s soft tone didn’t reassure Ein. *“But this hit over open air. I suspect an Artificial.”*

Ein started out of his reverie. “Artificial? Those are real?” He blushed under Mei’s droll look.

“Yeah,” drawling, Castella lifted her heel and dropped it loudly on the table. “Fought a lot of Synders back in my day and I never saw any.”

“They’re quite real, I worked on Ksama’s.” Impatience strained Mei’s professionalism. *“We aimed to load general-intelligences onto nanomachines and implant them in a human host. Theoretically, if the two synced, Daemons would only see the human, not the GI. It didn’t work because thinking like a machine is hard.”*

Castella furrowed her brow. “Is that what hacked my arms?”

“Hacking isn’t so simple, hardware is isolated. And Hayabusa would certainly limit their Artificial to clear and specific instructions to avoid accidents. Assuming this uniformed Dread is responsible, he likely panicked and thought ‘stop her.’ Binding your legs was the obvious solution.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“So how’d something like that get caught?”

“A mental hack like the one you experienced. In an Artificial, like any computer, the human is the weak point. It might even explain the Silvers.” Mei pressed her hands together and frowned. *“However, that would require unthinkable leaps in Silver Star’s technology. It’s also somewhat complicated by the fact you are both still here. Consider that theory in development.”*

Nodding, Castella scraped her shake-dregs with the straw. “That square with the Netburst?”

“I don’t know. Bear in mind, the model I’ll show you is for human consumption. The addresses are not actually falling, that represents increasing latency, data corruption, and signal loss.” Mei brought up a snapshot of Silver Star’s beautiful net-lattice collapsing like cut grass. She centered on one system, slowing its fall to reveal a ghostly afterimage.

“These are two responses to a single ping. I believe this is a reply from the Undernet.” Her frosty stare alighted on Ein. *“For those who don’t know, the Undernet is a non-affiliated universal middleware that everyone uses to integrate their devices. It usually runs in the background, but a massive data-influx might crash its transmission layer and expose its call-responses.”*

Ein sat a bit straighter at the explanation. “An influx like an Artificial?”

“Precisely. But, it occurred when the Artificial was stabbed. I think it was a death scream.”

“Fun. Just one thing, Silver Star does have new tech.” Castella reached to the table and grabbed the smallest of the chips “Dug this out of that octopus-Dread. Doesn’t match any licensed models or standard port.”

Mei frowned. *“Bring it to the ship, I can’t do anything from here.”*

“Alright, let’s review,” Vals started counting his fingers. *“One, Hayabusa probably sent an Artificial. Two, a dying Artificial caused the Netburst. Three, whatever Whitewalled Tam probably hit the Artificial. Four, the Netburst exposed the Undernet. Four,. I miss anything?”*

He looked around the room, then clapped his hands. *“Alright, I know we all have questions but let’s get to sleep. We get through tomorrow and we’re out of here.”*

Castella shut the disk with her heel. Despite the exhaustion creeping into their NeuralLink, no one moved. Then Ein glanced at Castella.

“You saw Saigo?” Asking the question was like digging his own grave.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Saigo was... my brother. He asked me to kill for him.” Her voice softened like melting steel. “He wasn’t a good man, but he was right. Apathy is death.” She didn’t dwell on that answer, but instead slammed her feet to the floor. “Must have figured they could guilt-trip me.”

“Guilt?” Ein’s mind turned toward Basir lying face-first in the gutter, his NeuralLink; eager and peaceful. “Maybe it wanted you dreaming like Basir.”

“I don’t dream, I do.” Slamming her helmet back on, Castella marched to the door.

Flustered, Ein rose to follow when Basir grabbed his shoulder.

“Don’t worry about Cas, her head is screwed on so straight she can only look forward.” Basir cracked a yawn, then clapped Ein on the back of the head. “You, on the other hand, need to get some sleep. Didn’t do half bad for your first job, you’ll feel better in the morning.”

Nodding to himself, Basir stumped over to a sleeping back puddled on the floor. Plucking a pistol from his side, he shoved it under his pillow then lay down with a grumble. “Just... try not to dream, those turn into nightmares.” He was curled up and snoring before Ein could reply.

Suddenly alone, the day weighed on Ein like a mountain. He sat in a daze, struggling to adjust to the pressure, and when he finally did, someone had shut the lights off. Dragging himself back to the duffels, he started digging for his toothbrush when he noticed the shadow by the door.

“Cas?” He asked quietly, not wanting to disturb.

“Taking first watch.” The answer slithered toward him without a trace of movement.

Staring into the black glass of her helmet, Ein forced a smile. “Thank you.” Pulling his jacket off, Ein tossed it onto the couch and crawled into his own bag. For a moment he thought of Basir’s wisdom, and whether he should say goodnight. By the time he even thought to lift his head, sleep had already claimed him.

[7] Midnight Games

“Silver Star has it figured out. Guns keep the Syndicates off your back, not because they couldn’t zero your ass, but because killing customers is bad business.”

- Suman Kai, *Winning and You*

Castella’s eyes snapped open. The room was quiet and still, haunted only by the city’s night-time whispers, and Ein’s dream-induced twitches. She watched for an uneventful second, then switched to the MegaHab Subnet and its camera. The hall outside looked empty.

Dismissing the screen, she pressed flush to the wall. There were no vibrations to suggest movement, but her scalp tickled all the same. She frowned, then the sensation enveloped her like the arms of a grapple-grenade.

Inhaling, she expanded her lungs before the unseen tendrils tightened and choked her. She waited patiently at first, but then an old memory stirred. Nauseating pain flared across her waist, followed by asphalt’s molten embrace, and devouring flames. She sunk into the memory, and it burned her discomforts to ash. Through the NeuralLink, she saw the others struggle.

Basir was curled in a ball and wheezing softly, a trembling hand squirming under his pillow. Not far away, Ein thrashed against the invisible forces, his eyes bulged as his lungs shrunk as his panic stampeded across the NeuralLink.

Fetters, pain, or panic, Castella shoved it all down.

<<Stop.>> Addressing both of them, she leaned on Ein, willing him to lay still. The boy looked back, mind light without oxygen and half-formed objections on his lips as she eyed the door. <<They’re reading room activity. Inferred Motion.>>

Ein and Basir froze, their shallow breathing dimming their NeuralLinks. Castella exhaled as the seconds dragged on, relieving her swollen lugs. Eventually, the wall hummed as the door slid open and three shadows spilled across the floor. The one in the middle was cowed, and moved clumsily like he was starved of oxygen. The two beside him suffered no such debilitations as they shouldered their rifles.

Castella pivoted on her right foot, drawing as she swept into the doorway. The tip of her blade caught the point-man's neck, popping his gorget and sending the ripple of parting meat up her arm. She wouldn’t have spared it a thought if not for the knife pushing into her throat.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Knowing that to look was to die, Castella yanked her sword free. The Dread fell, and that blade in her neck disappeared along with those strange fetters. Rushing the Dread to her left, she grabbed him by the wrist and pulled. Spine straight as a spear, she rammed her crown into the man's visor, then hurled him inside.

<<Basir.>> Pointing her thoughts at the dazed Dread, Castella flowed out of the room, blade snaking toward her last target.

The man retreated, dodging death by a hair as he fired back. Bullets screamed past Castella, ripping open the hall's digital-wallpaper like popped blisters. Exhaling, Castella dropped into a crouch and sprung forward, left arm folded up against her ribs. Her bones rattled as three hits punched through her armor and flattened against the steel limb.

A heartbeat later, she drove her knee into the man's sternum. As he doubled over, she dropped her sword. It ground to a stop halfway through his neck. Wrenching the blade free, Castella splashed the walls with red tears before bounding back. In the NeuralLink, Ein sputtered, an arm hooked around his throat and a gun pressed to his head. Basir was nearby, glaring at the Dread who pinned his hand beneath an armored boot.

Stalking up to the side of the door, she paused. At her feet, the cowed figure gurgled, and those strange fetters flared enough to make her sway.

"Put the sword down. Now." A hoarse voice issued from around the door's corner. The Dread tightened his grip on Ein's neck, and ground the gun against his temple.

Castella's eyes twitched involuntarily as Ein closed his. Lowering her head, she locked eyes with the cowed man, then kicked his throat.

If she could cry, she would have been blinded as the muscles in her neck spasmed. Instead, she tore around the corner, egged on by the Dread's wet cough. A shot rang out to meet her, but it went wide as the Dread clutched his throat. He shoved the gun toward, and squeezed off a shot that bounced off her hip.

Before he got another, Castella grabbed the pistol and ripped it away. The man's fingers broke with a brittle pop, and he staggered back. He managed a single step before Castella kicked the side of his knee, folding it like paper.

Castella kept advancing as the Dread fell, stopping only when he held both hands up by his chest. Kneeling, she reached for the man's helmet.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Who are—” She dropped her question as the man convulsed. Rolling him over, she took her sword by the tip and cut into the back of his gorget. Steam rose from her incision, smelling of cooked meat and char.

A muted drumming from behind turned Castella toward the door. There, the cowed Dread went through the same convulsions. Padding over, she tilted her head to look the man in the eye, then kicked him in the ribs to turn him over. He was dead before he landed, the nape of his neck an oozing pit, and the last invisible weights falling away from her.

Back in the heart of the room, Ein inhaled loudly and Basir spat.

“Fucking superkillers.” Basir wiping and staggered upright with an ugly laugh. “Two Dreads and whatever the fuck that was. You didn’t even break a sweat, did you?”

“Cleaners will be here soon, put him in the hall.” Pointing at the Dread in their room, Castella slunk back in and dropped against the wall. Closing her eyes, she crossed her arms but pointed a finger at Basirs’ throat. “Call me that again, I’ll gut you.”

“Wouldn’t that just make my point?” Cracking his neck, Basir rotated toward Ein. “You up for moving the big guy? I think it’s our turn to be on guard anyway.”

Coughing, Ein shook his head. “Isn’t this a crime scene?”

“Never stopped us before.” Basir grabbed the corpse’s ankles then looked up. “What? You waiting for Vals’s orders? He watches the NeuralLink, he’d let us know if he disagreed.” Basir wrinkled his nose. “We don’t know who to trust, just keep your head down and we’ll get out fine.”

Nodding mutely, Ein reached down and took the corpse’s arms.

[Signal Shift...]

Six minutes later, someone came knocking. Gesturing for Ein to keep quiet, Basir inched the door open to meet their guest. The cleaner was a stout man, hidden behind a gray visor and a sterile-white uniform. Others like him milled about the hall, photographing blood sprays or knocking on doors. This man moved carefully, and his voice was the exhausted drone of a graveyard shift. Basir sympathized, his eyes were heavy as lead.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Name, id, and occupation.” The cleaner tapped his pad.

“Basir. Artemis Contractors.”

The cleaner’s previous indifference vanished. Holding himself straighter, he swiped across his pad twice then looked ahead with an attitude that made Basir’s jaw tighten. He stuck a thumb over his shoulder. “How were you involved in this?”

“You have cameras? Check those, why you asking me?” Rolling his shoulders, Basir reached into his jacket, fished around, then offered a crumpled Haze-pack.

“You would know we lost access, I have you on-record as querying the Subnet on an Emergency Key.” The Cleaner scribbled his index finger across the pad, dry indignation withering his voice. “We were asked to cooperate with Artemis, I was hoping the feeling would be mutual.”

“Well, aren’t you polite.” Jostling the Haze-pack, Basir snagged one in his teeth then leaned on the doorframe. He inhaled lazily, too busy enjoying the way his headache faded to notice his guest shake his head.

“Yeah, we pulled it up. Didn’t show us anything, don’t suppose you could tell us if that was faked? Because right after that those three showed up.” Basir tossed his chin toward the wall’s latest mural. The Haze made his eyelids sag as he waited for the Cleaner to check. A grin was stealing across his face when he saw the poor man whip back.

“They entered without permission?” The Cleaner whispered.

“Not ours.” Shrugging, Basir puffed out a cloud. “But we kept the door locked and they got right in. Reckon they had someone’s. Maybe the same one who took out your cameras.”

“We don’t have anything like that on record.” Lowering his chin, the Cleaner went through the last of his list with a noncommittal cough. Seconds later, he tucked the pad to his chest. “You dealt with them after the fact then?”

“Couldn’t exactly run away, and they pointed guns at our heads.” Basir inhaled deeply, enough to make his head spin. “We going to have trouble?” He let a fraction of his doubts into the NeuralLink and Castella stirred like a beast sniffing blood.

“Officially.” The Cleaner bobbed his head toward the hall. “But obviously I can’t speak for Dreads. I can offer you a secure location with my team, but beyond that...”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“No can do, got a job waiting for us.” Sliding himself out the door, Basir limply waved his hand down the hall. “And while I appreciate the concern, Artemis can take care of itself.”

The Cleaner scoffed. “I’d say I hope so, but I don’t think that’d make my job any easier.” He threw one hand up as he sauntered off. “Think of the little guy next time. See you later, Superkiller.”

Basir puffed out his cheeks, let his shoulders relax, then grimaced at the puddles of sweat under his arms. Trying to move as little as possible, he took another breath, but not even Haze let him forget his jacket’s slimy interior. “Need another shower.” Grumbling, Basir glowered at the useless smoke leaking from his mouth. Then he glanced back as the door hissed open.

“Didn’t Vals tell you to stop?” Ein poked his head out.

“Rules don’t apply to Syndicates, there is victory and there is nothing.” Basir grumbled as Ein shuffled out, dropped his head against the wall, and stared at the ceiling.

“What? I thought you kids all loved Suman Kai.” Basir’s question made the Haze wagged like a reprimanding finger. “Everywhere except Silver Star apparently.”

“I wish I was a kid, I’m twenty-nine,” Ein scrunched his face. “Feel a lot older now that I killed someone though.”

“Eh, I’m not big on rites of passage, you’re a kid to me. Reminds me of something Richard Jung wrote.” Basir rolled his shoulders to get comfortable, then pinched his Haze and held it up to admire the smoldering tip. “According to him, people back in the day stopped school before they were twenty. Died before they were a hundred. Can you imagine?”

“I didn’t know shit when I was twenty.” Ein snorted. “Won’t when I’m a hundred either.”

“Any other job, you and I could expect two-hundred, Synders can make it three.” Drek rolled the stick in his fingers, no sign he even heard Ein. “As it is, we might make it to seventy, but then we’ll start to slow down, eat a bullet.”

“Or puff Haze until we forget where we are.”

“Listen, I’m waxing philosophic here.” Basir moved his hand, carrying the Haze like incense to baptize the bloodstains. “We’re living longer than ever, and this is where we end up, dying for no good reason. Living longer just means a better damn chance of getting your head blown off.”

“You’re sounding like Cas right now.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“She’s a kid too, just turned thirty-six.” Basir snorted, spewing more incense. “Only difference is she’s been a killer half her life, like she was born in the fucking stone age.”

Ein chewed his lip to hide a wry smile. “Is that why we’re out here?”

“You saw what happened to the last guys that woke her up.” Plucking the depleted Haze from his mouth, Basir tucked it into the carton. “Wouldn’t want to ruin her beauty sleep.”

Four hours and five Haze-sticks later, Basir’s mind was a heavy churn. He glanced over to Ein, making sure the boy was still on his feet. Nodding, he stepped back inside. Uneven lights from the window rippled across the wall, illuminating the empty beds.

“Go time?” Castella’s voice slithered out from a shadow at his side. She leaned against the wall, still in her armor and reeking of violence. Swinging her arms across her chest, she rolled her neck, then padded up.

Basir grimaced. “Slept standing again?”

“Don’t be jealous.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, I like my bed.” Croaking his answer, Basir grabbed a bottle from the kitchen. The water was warm, but he relished every drop. With the clouds parting in his mind, he activated the wall’s screen.

“Hope you all slept well because we got some hearts to break! Don’t worry, if you’re seeing this, you still got time to get your ass to High Street before the party starts.” Law’s voice was coarse as crushed diamonds, and her eyes glittered likewise. *“Remember that trial? Last night, folks saw Hayabusa Synders waltzing on in Assembly Hall. They just can’t stay out of our business, can they? Gotta put their finger on the scale even for a fuckin’ kangaroo court.”* She laughed, a rumble like a landslide. *“But you know what? Assembly Hall is the people’s house. Our house. Time to show them that famous Silver Star hospitality.”*

Then a black screen and burning words replaced her.

*This Message Brought to you by Inferno Entertainment
Law & Murder: Going Live Later Today*

“I’m sure she’ll help cool things off.” Basir pressed the bottle to his head and looked at Castella over his shoulder. “Good thing we have Samurai to keep level heads.”

“Do you trust Hayabusa?” Ein asked, mesmerized by Inferno’s crackling flames.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Being mad is one thing,” Basir snickered. “Killing is another.”

“Synders play for keeps,” Castella the pair jump by slamming the door open. Halfway into the hall, she faced them, her helmet reflecting Glamour’s smoldering words. “Samurai play to win.”

[8] Intervention

“I’m fascinated by democracy, what better way to win than millions cheering your name?”

- **Suman Kai, speech to Hayabusa graduating class**

Stopping at the door, Jacky felt a pang of regret. Or maybe it was something more, her heart had come loose, bouncing through her chest like a rubber ball. But it would all be over by tonight, and her friends would be safe. Her hand found the door, but before she could push it open she stole one last glance over her shoulder.

The hotel was waking up behind her, packed with early-rising tourists eager to see the great machinery of democracy in motion. Every one of them glowed, smiling and babbling with the excitement only voyeurs knew. Compared to the empty faces she had seen all last night, she felt like an intruder in someone’s dream.

Taking a sharp breath, she shoved the glass door open and hurried out. High Street’s mountain baritone shook her, a reminder that the tens of thousands crammed in. She checked the time, then the hotel.

“They’ll be at breakfast.” She told herself, then hurried along. Not five steps from the hotel, progress became a dance, weaving left and right to take advantage of the crowd’s openings. She took care to duck around a man with a visor over his eyes and his head in the Net. Watching him barrel on as if he had never seen her, she touched the agent in her pocket. It was turned off, leaving her invisible to anyone living in the Net.

“Wonder what it’s like.” She whispered, the nape of her neck tingling as she imagined the surgeries required to join the common man. The notion of being able to touch someone’s mind baffled her, she couldn’t imagine the right words. Shaking her head, she dove back into the sea.

To those not lost in the Net, Jacky was an indistinct ball of color from the neck up. Blurs were a rare show of privacy and far less dangerous than Blackwalls. That slowed her progress, no one hurried out of the way from a young woman hiding her face.

It didn’t help that High Street, already packed with its usual pedestrians and holograms, was choking on an influx of protestors. Shouting encouragement to each other, the growing mob pushed their way toward the Syndicate towers. And that was before High Street’s vendors started handing out government-provided meals to everyone who voted. Checking she still had time, Jacky veered to her left and to High Street’s Eastern flank..

Slipping between two men in lotus-patterned robes, she reached her destination. Before her, Silver Sea rippled with life, the submerged MegaHabs glittering with all kinds of life. Her heart

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

steadied as the holographic waves crashed beneath her feet, though she wondered if all beaches smelled so much of sweat, grease, and greed.

Leaning on the railing, she indulged in a moment of wonder a moment before looking to her right. Assembly Tower filled the horizon, outlined by the EYE's orange glow, and held at bay by the Syndicate Towers' black peaks. Her mood dashed itself on those three fangs, but she persevered, drawn to Silver Star's shining EYE like a moth.

"Well here we are Silver Star, Election Day! We got everything you can ask for, free food, freedom, and most importantly, me. Here's to another four years of greatness!"

Fireworks crackled as Glamour threw her arms to the sky. Applause picked up around Jacky until it blew like a gale; thousands of foreigners eagerly putting their hands together for the display. Every second of the tumult made Jacky shrink; she wondered what exactly they were so excited for. The wild energy subsided little by little as Glamour lowered her arm and pointed at the screen.

"Now, for those of you worrying that you won't get your doom and gloom, don't worry, don't, I got you covered. We still have a trial to get through and I'm sure that will be a doozy." Glamour winked, then rubbed her hands together with a loud clap. *"But for the rest of the viewing public, we have a special guest. Love him or hate him, put your hands together for Suman Kai!"*

Jacky sniffed as the camera pulled back to share Glamour's newest friend. She had heard Glamour called a peacock before, but Suman seemed more deserving of that title. Every inch of him was radiant; a black hole of attention draped in silk. A black vest snugged his trim frame, completed by a red jacket with asymmetrical lapels.

"I'm delighted you fit me into your busy schedule Glam. And if I may, you look marvelous." He took a seat beside Glamour, his smile enough to rub against hers.

"I always do." Glamour leaned heavily on the side of her chair, eye flashing like lightning as she dropped a cheek on her fist. *"Now, be a dear and tell us what brings you to our humble city. It's not like this is our first election. Don't tell me you came all this way just for the violence."*

"You wound me!" Suman clutched his heart and waved her away.. *"No, I am, like always, inspired by winners. Now I don't presume to know who will stand victorious tonight, but I do know that there is one young woman who has been doing this her own way, against all odds, against all advice. And, if I recall correctly, she is polling in second place."*

Jacky blushed as the crowd cheered. It went on far too long, then grew hoarse when her likeness appeared on the digi-clouds floating overhead. She wanted nothing more than to drop her head to the rail and vanish, but her mother had taught her better than that.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Now, I don’t mean to be rude but I think Silver Star is perhaps too fond of this ‘doom and gloom’.”
Suman curled his fingers about his words with a sly quirk of his lips. *“Think of it like so, you are trapped in a hell of violence. My friends, if Jacky were here, what would she say?”*

He made a show of looking around as if he could see the street, then pressed a bejeweled finger to his throat. *“She would say, ‘you can’t see Heaven from Hell.’”*

Stomach jumping into her throat, Jacky made a show of checking the time. Nodding blindly at what she saw, she fled, long strides carrying her through the thick crowds to Assembly Hall. She couldn’t escape the rousing cheers, but she avoided Suman’s parting words.

“And she’d be right.”

[Signal Shift...]

Vals smirked as Matt checked his wrist. In an age where a single thought would pull up the time anywhere, the man preferred a ticking chunk of gold strapped to his wrist.

“Alright Matt, what time is it?”

“Fifteen to six,” The man dropped his wrist and scanned the crowd. “She should be here any minute. We know what to expect?”

Vals chose to yawn instead of answer, distorting the thick scars on his neck. “Blur.” he managed the word while covering his jaw. .

“You’re kidding me, that’s it? After what happened to ‘Tam?” Matt held a hand to his brow and squinted at High Street as its thousands slithered by like a titanic serpent dressed in kaleidoscope scales. Even with image-recognition, picking out the right face was as slow as it was imprecise; the human eye had evolved to track movement, not faces. Science hadn’t quite erased that technical debt.

Having learned to lean on his strengths, Vals spotted a scale bobbing in and out of sight, but set on a straight-enough path against the tide. But Vals didn’t let Matt know; experience was the best teacher. Soon enough, the young Jacket gave up with a shrug.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Welp, she’ll show when she shows.”

“You could say that.” Vals enjoyed Matt’s scrunched expression a moment before the man dropped his head with a mumbled curse and snapped back toward High Street. He was just in time to see the young woman slipping away from the main tribe, her head concealed by a blue orb. Wearing jeans, t-shirt, and light jacket, she was unlikely to be hiding any threats.

<<Fucker.>> Matt dropped the hand on his gun. <<Could have said something.>>

<<Relax, I’m not letting anyone get shot.>> Fixing his hands in his pockets, Vals knocked shoulders with Matt as he ambled forward. <<Now, let’s go meet our girl.>>

The Blurred woman slowed as they approached, exhibiting a certain skittishness that Janus would never have allowed. Imagining the wary look hidden behind that digital veil, Vals dropped his shoulders. He had practiced enough in the mirror to make it innocuous to him, but he knew better than to risk his smile.

To his surprise, the woman moved first. Clearing her throat, she stuck out a hand and addressed him in a clarion voice. “Are you Mr. Artemis? I’m Jacky.”

“Call me Vals, Artemis is the company name.” Vals took the hand and was surprised by a firm and energetic swing. Sinking her fingers into her Blur, Jacky pulled it down. Youthful fat trimmed her cheek; all too-human, just like her imperfect skin and wide grin. The crooked grimace Vals called a smile threatened crept up on him.

Leaning in, Matt tapped his brow. “Feel free to tell him if you think its stupid.”

“No! I like it, Artemis fits.” Jacky brightened, then looked to the ground with a raw inflection in her voice. “My dad read me those stories when I was a kid. He said I should remember them if they stuck around that long.”

“He must have good taste, the lady who chose it for us was something else..” The awful expression on his lips spread despite Vals’ best efforts. “That said, you came alone?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry...” Jacky gestured vaguely, with a tone like she was eager to move the conversation on. “I don’t like bodyguards or entourages; I’m not that special.” Brushing her legs brusquely, she laughed once. “I hope I left a good impression. Mo... Rebecca spoke highly of you.”

“A politician unafraid to brave the crowd? Look and talk normal?” Vals nodded, more to himself than anything. “I see what people like about you.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“You don’t see a paycheck?” Jacquelyn held eye-contact with Vals a few seconds then giggled. “It wasn’t that bad! Sear or Necropolis would’ve cost twice as much. Still, it says something we do it at all...” She looked to the Syndicate Towers with a sigh.

A mob dressed in Law’s morbid style, amber and skulls, clogged High Street, howling themselves hoarse at the dispassionate towers. Tourists and commuters squeezed by as best they could, while every arriving tram disgorged more grim-faced protestors. Dressed in lotus-styled robes, Takemura’s Samurai tempered and sustained the outrage, providing food and water like ammunition.

Hayabusa responded with their own show of force. A pack of Wolves guarded the doors, rifles held across their chest as Gunhawks loitered overhead. Completing the army was a squad of Urban Enforcement Vehicles; six-legged tanks armed with rotary cannons. Impressive as it was, the display was blunted somewhat by the private drones trundling overhead, broadcasting the scene to every corner of the Net..

Vals forced down a hollow laugh. “I heard Silver Star had a rebellious streak.”

“Just wait until the trial, then things will really explode.” Jacquelyn puffed her cheeks out and made a face. “It’s so easy to be brave when Fetter-Fields keep you away from the consequences. I can’t even imagine what would happen if someone started shooting.”

“The Syndicates can, should’ve heard what Suman Kai was saying back in Ebon Array.”

Jacky nodded glumly. “What?”

“Something like, ‘Democracy turned the largest independent station into hell.’”

“I knew it.” Sighing, Jacky ran an ink-stained hand through her long hair. “I should’ve known better than to call anything hell, people live here, you can’t simplify it anymore than you can simplify them. I just want to show Silver Star is more than Heaven or the wards. ”

“Well, you do kinda pretend to drown them.” Vals shoved both hands in his pockets. “But if that’s what gets people going at six in the morning maybe it’s not so—” Cut off by uproarious applause, he followed the crowd’s attention up to the EYE. Jacquelyn Ernst emerged there, dressed in white, hair tied back, and a perfect smile on her lips.

“Silver Star is a refuge to those escaping the Syndicates and I’m proud to call it home.” Jacky blushed as her skyborne twin pressed on. *“But when we forget each other, we make space for Syndicates to steal in. As President, I will unite Heaven and Hell, because neither survives alone.”*

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“That cost us more than a MegaHab’s annual budget,” Jacky mumbled, the color lingering in her cheeks. “That money could help so many.”

“You don’t think it was worth it?”

“No, I wanted to actually help Silver Star. My advisors wanted to blame the Syndicates and promise to fix everything.” Chewing her lip, Jacky shuddered. “I caved, and now people love it.”

As Jacky’s digital doppleganger dissolved into background noise, one of the EYE’s market-profilers saw opportunity in Jacky’s uncertainty. Accessing Silvera’s API, it hooked into a street-level hologram for a personalized touch.

“The right smile can change the world,” Jacky jumped as Galmour pressed painted lips to her ear. *“This Election day, get fifty-percent off Janus implants.”*

Squawking, Jacky shoved her hand through the hologram. Glaring at its fading motes, she shook her head to hide her embarrassment. “I hate that, they should know I’m not interested.”

“A big name like you? Not a chance.” Matt replied, distracted by his own Glamour. Jacky pursed her lips but said nothing. Perhaps sensing as much, he shook himself away and pointed at the mob. “But you know, I think they’re doing us a favor. If they weren’t so busy with Hayabusa we’d have to be putting up Fetters here.”

Jacky’s face knotted at the notion. “Assembly Hall is always open to everyone. We’d break something sacred if we lock it off.”

“And you’ll be breaking some skulls if you didn’t.”

Vals sent him a sharp look, but held his tongue; Jacky was bristling.

“I won’t think like that” Sweeping her hand over High Street, Jacky tried to embrace everyone. “I think Fetter-Fields are a poor replacement for words.” She clutched her chest and looked up to Heaven’s. “They’ll see eventually, I know it.”

Vals looked up to Heaven’s shimmering icicles. “Even them?”

“I have to. They just don’t have a reason yet, because they have everything up there.” She bit her lip. “They said I’ll fail because I play nice, but we need to rise, not fall.”

“Maybe you’re expecting too much from a city that loves Law.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Yeah, maybe I should lean into that,” Jacky stiffened her jaw and feigned a growl. “People aren’t talking, that’s why we gotta show ‘em what hell is.”

“Honestly? Kind of like it.”

Jacky laughed brightly, losing some of the shadows under her eyes. “It’d be easier, but we’d run out of body bags before we ran out of disagreements...”

Vals swept behind her, forcing Jacky to awkwardly forget her words and turn around. Before she was done he was pushing her toward Assembly Hall, one hand on his hip.

“Move!” As he barked the order, handfuls of white-dressed figures began breaking out from High Street’s stream to race toward Assembly Hall. That their elegance didn’t waver in their panic identified them as Angels more than their clothes. Still, fear leaked through Janus’ masks.

Hand on Jacky’s back, he retreated, firmly shoving the woman toward the capital’s stony safety. Matt was soon beside him, rifle pressed to his shoulder and swinging for threats. High Street started to roil, the sudden flight creating a viral terror. Thousands reared up, ready to crash down into the plaza like a tidal wave. Then pylons jumped up around the plaza, their red lanterns paralyzing the charge. Hundreds toppled to the floor, paralyzed with confusion stamped across their faces.

From above a howl went up as the digi-clouds spat blistering guitars like volcanic ash. Some singular force swarmed High Street’s Net, hacking the neon-sky, the EYE, and Hayabusa Tower. A skull appeared on all of them, *LAW* stamped on its forehead while its bullet-teeth ground against a pair of scales. As shrieking notes reached their breathless crescendo, flesh, muscle, and metal seeped over the skull’s face, morphing into a scarred woman who spat the scales and spoke.

“The Law Has Arrived. Did you miss me?”

[9] Bring Down the Law

“Best way to stop Law? Beg for mercy, she might die laughing.”

- Unaccredited

Crammed in the Gunhawk’s belly, Law thrust a hand up toward the low ceiling. A camera mounted there adjusted its zoom, making it look like she took hold of the screen, pulled it to her face, and bared her teeth at all six million of her viewers.

Law & Murder was live.

“Any of you remember what Saigo said at the start? ‘So long as good men resist corruption, this war will never end.’” Law flung open Gunhawk’s bay door. High Street blurred by, shrouded in neon mists that thinned around Assembly Hall, and the stone plaza insulating it from the masses. Law stabbed a finger there, pointing not at the mighty edifice, but at insignificant dots scuttling across that stone ocean.

“Are you good men? Or are you going to let them steal your president?”

Shots began to ring. Some, she purposefully injected into the stream, but not all. Perking her ears, she leaned out of the bay; rushing wind made her locks flutter like dried intestines. Rocked by the uneven thermals, she giddily inhaled the belligerent mood. Then she lunged inside, grabbed her stream by the throat, and dragged it over the edge with her.

“Looks like you bastards finally grew a spine.” Law focused on Hayabusa Tower where, the raging Silvers broke from Takemura’s grasp. Hundreds toppled into the Fetter-Fields, while a smaller number took potshots from inside the crowd. Unimpressed, Syndicate Wolves waded into the red glare and sparking bullets to throw back the paralyzed victims.

Other eddies rippled High Street as wandering Synders realized danger. Hayabusa or not, they faced toward Assembly Hall or the Syndicate towers, while their guardian Wolves molted civilian façades to blaze a trail of broken bones.

At first, High Street backed away, its component organisms looking at each other in confusion. One by one they looked to the digital-clouds and saw the madness enveloping Hayabusa tower. Tourists gasped, their previous excitement transmuted to equal horror as, around them, the crowd crashed down on Assembly Plaza. They stumbled and froze in the Fetters, falling hard on the ground before being buried by their zealous companions. And the Synders continued to escape.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Laughing, Law thumped her chest. “That’s the Silver Star hospitality I’m talking about!” She threw her head back and howled, then snagged her Paladin from the wall. “Now buckle up Silver Star, we’re about to bring down the Law.”

She slammed to the wall as the Gunhawk lurched into High Street’s airspace, diving into neon clouds. Unseen to her viewers, an automated course-override attempted to redirect her. With all the finesse of a haymaker, she shoved an Emergency Key into the program.

User: [REDACTED] *Authenticated*
Silver Star Alone

With that, the overrides vanished, letting the ship continue its advance. Exhaling softly, Law slid her feet out and synced herself with the ship. Her arms pressed themselves to her sides, while she set her jaw; determined not to close her eyes.

<<You good?>> Murder’s voice warily touched her NeuralLink.

<<Perfect, just like old times.>> Law swung her eyes toward the cabin like she could spear the man to his seat. <<Now put me down.>>

She came off the wall slightly as the Gunhawk pivoted into a bone-breaking dive. With the G-forces dragging at her, she clamped one hand on her Hayabusa Paladin, and the other on the bay door. Moving smoothly despite the ride, and darkness gnawing her vision, she dropped over the side.

User engagement soared in the face of her dizzying drop. Deaf to their excited jabber, Law studied her target; it was all coming back to her. The screaming winds were but a whisper to what she had heard before, and this time she had a view. Burying the distractions, she kicked her feet under herself and let the synthetic muscle absorb her landing. She barely had to bend her knees.

“Easier than I remember.” Booming out over the plaza, Law rose to her full height.

A wall of Wolves faced her, faithful dogs baring their teeth at their masters’ enemies. While a woman dropping out of the sky was alarming even when she wasn’t armed to the teeth, the Synders simply dusted themselves off and straightened their clothes.

“Welcome to Silver Star boys,” she cocked her head, testing their patience with a relaxed smile. The Wolves waited for the signal, their lives not yet worth risking Silver Star’s sovereign wrath.

“Why the long faces? Just wanted to give you a warm welcome, whaddya say?” Law held her hands to her chest and switched her stream to first person. Staring at the impassive Wolves, she lifted her shoulders and crooked the corner of her mouth.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“No?” She dropped her hands. “Then I’ll make it quick. Welcome to hell.”

She fired the Paladin off her hip like a gunslinger of old, though firing solutions printing to her vision were a modern addition. Taking full advantage, she swung the bucking machine up while angling a shoulder to minimize her profile. Only once the first Wolf vanished in a wet thump, did Hayabusa grant its men permission to kill.

“That’s more like it!” Howling with laughter as the bullets cracked off her shoulder, Law knocked her head forward. As a helmet snapped over her ruined humanity, she rolled down the line, smashing Wolves into scarlet puddles until she rattled through her magazine. Hurling her empty Paladin aside, wheeled around ignoring the groaning wreckage behind her. A hundred fifty meters ahead, fresh prey huddled on Assembly Hall’s steps.

“You bastards ready?” Growling at her viewers, Law shifted into a sprinter’s stance. The Wolves opened their collective jaw, rifles and launchers glinting like teeth. For an instant, all was still, then Law charged.

The scene erupted around her, tungsten slugs flattening like raindrops against her hardened chest. A few went wide of her, tracers screaming into the packed Silvers and leaving behind crimson ruin. Linked into their Gunhawks above, the Syndicate tracked those misses, using them to concentrate and calibrate. The storm became a wall, reloads staggered in an unending assault.

Smashing her way upstream, Law dropped and rolled to her side, disappearing from Hayabusa’s crude triangulation. As the death overhead scythed into the Silvers she presented her key to Silvera’s local sub-Daemon. It chimed obediently, exposing High Street’s cinematic controls while listening obediently.

“Been waiting for this.” Cracking a vicious grin, Law let the Daemon in. Without waiting to see it work, she sprung up and punched her way through the thinning ash. She emerged as legion, a dozen clones on each side. Her lips hurt from smiling as the Wolves split their fire, sparks and scars emerging where Silvera’s nanomachines intercepted the bullets. Winking to her viewers, she crossed thirty meters of no-man’s land in a blink.

The Wolves withdrew as best they could, but space was tight and Law was fast. Snagging a straggler, she pulped his spine with a knee. A second Wolf slipped under her, putting a burst in the back of her knee before Law lazily kicked the woman’s head off. Snorting, she stomped into Assembly Hall’s secondary Fetters, leering at the Wolves who let her pass.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“What? Synder got your tongue?” Asking in a sing-song voice, Law eyed the elegant men and women crammed at the top of the stairs. “Awww, is Liberty Arch closed? Shame, now you’re stuck out here with me!”

Twitching, Law threw a hand backward and impaled a Wolf creeping up from behind. Tossing him away with a cackle, she peered down at the other hugging her the back of her waist. “That it?” She raised her ruddy arms, fresh paint dripping onto the patio. “I thought—”

Eyes lighting as the pins dropped, she fondly looked at the Wolf. “Nice try sis.”

The blast rattled her teeth. She staggered, blinking though the static on her visor as damage-reports scrolled in. Dismissed them before her stream got a good look, she ran a diagnostic over her agent. Multiple armor-ablations registered along the back of her legs..

“Long as they can still run.” Whispering to herself, she shook her head one last time then stomped out of the blast.

“What’d you expect, another Shiroyama?” Stomping out of the smoke, she sneered at her stream and prey alike. Her growl devolved into a raspy chuckle as more Wolves encircled her. “Pathetic. Have your dogs stand down, or you’ll lose the whole pack.”

She waited a second, scoffed, then pounced before the Wolves could settle their sights. While some Synders jumped away on post-conception augments, Law scooped two shocked employees. Holding them to her side like children, she waded into the group. The Wolves stalked her, waiting for a clean shot.

“C’mon, who’s your boss?” Morbid delight in her voice, Law swung both passengers in front of the gawking crowd.

“Put them down.” A dour man shoved his way in front of Law. Tall ever for a Synder, he looked miserable craning his neck to see Law’s full height. “I represent Hayabusa as far as you’re concerned.”

“Your Majesty,” dropping the pair, Law bowed. She waited for the man to blink before grabbing his shoulder and yanking him scandalously close. “We doing this the easy way, or hard?”

“You misunderstand, Silver Stars calls, and we answer.”

“That’s the problem.” Law peeled her helmet back to meet the man’s sneer. “I’ve seen how much you donate, you really don’t expect anything in return?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Our policy is—”

Law put a bladed finger in his mouth. “I asked you a question,” she hissed. “Silvera couldn’t access Ward Fifteen while your man was there. Then Silvers and Dreads died and all of a sudden you get a say in the election with your little trial.” She popped her blade out through his cheek. “Strange, isn’t it?”

“If you have accusations, use your courts.” The man spat blood on Law’s face.

“Mr. Hayabusa, don’t treat us like idiots. We know you want Silver Star,” humming throatily, Law wrapped a hand around his head and pulled him to his toes. “Silvera going down, Netburst Whitewalling Dreads, that’s no coincidence. Last chance.”

She peeled one finger away to let him speak.

“That isn’t evidence.” The man snarled. “Hayabusa respects Silver Star’s sovereignty, we’ve done nothing to—” Law put him down hard, bending his head past his shoulders. Letting go of the limp thing, she shook with dull laughter.

“Our sovereignty. Any of you remember voting on Ward Fifteen? Voting for Hayabusa to come here? Nah,” she pointed a claw at Hayabusa Tower. “He didn’t mean our sovereignty.”

[Signal Shift...]

Jacky’s heart floundered like the Synder’s head. Watching the human wreck drop out of sight, she swayed dangerously. Around her, the crowd receded from Law, crushing its fringes against Liberty Arch’s unyielding walls. Driving Vals back a step, the inexorable force turned on her as well, determined to grind them all into a ruddy pulp.

Seeing Law cackle and scoop up another Synder, Jacky jumped forward. Deaf to Val’s confused shouts, she pulled herself up his shoulders until she was above the crowd. Falling forward, she yelped as Vals grabbed her arm.

“Ask next time.” He grunted as he pushed her upright.

Nodding, Jacky balanced herself until only her stomach wobbled. Breathing low and deep, she forced it down before belting her words, just like her mother taught her.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Stop it Law!

“Which one of you grew a spine?” Law snapped around, exuding violence that made the Synders shrink back. Then her furious glare warmed.

“Jaaacky, you crying for Synders?” Law wagged a bloody finger. “I love ya girl, but ya got to learn some people can’t be saved. And Hayabusa is at the top of that list.”

Mouth drying out, Jacky still swallowed, hoping to dampen the blush filling cheeks. “Law, this is Silver Star, we get justice with courts, not bullets.” She half turned her head when Law cocked an eyebrow, but as Vals held her in place she nodded instead. “Rebecca asked us to believe in the process. I do.”

“Even with Hayabusa sticking their fingers in it...” Sighing, Law hung her head then shrugged. “Fine, I’ll go fill out my registration.” Taking a half step back, she tossed her chin at Vals.

“Hey Artemis, about that monster of yours. Tall, buzzed head, gold eyes, uses a sword,” she snickered at Vals’ stony silence. “Keep her in one piece, yeah? We got business later.”

Jaw hanging, Jacky watched the woman saunter toward where her Gunhawk touched down, unbothered by Hayabusa’s Gunhawks. “Vals,” she whispered as Law clambered inside. “Why aren’t they stopping her?”

“They don’t want to.” His answer thundered in her eyes.

Jacky nodded, then jumped as Law hammered her ship’s hull. Swinging an arm out, she addressed the battered plaza like a departing rockstar. “Remember to thank Ms. Ernst for saving your sorry asses.”

Lips crushed into a thin line, Jacky watched the raging Silvers follow Law’s ship toward Silver Sea. Having seen them brave the Fetter-Fields, she expected them to careen over the edge, but they stopped short as Law dove beneath the waves. Trembling as they bayed Law’s name, she risked a glance at Liberty Arch.

A cowed Dread stood there; not enough to physically block the door, but not one Synder had tried to muscle by. Fighting a miserable sigh, she slipped off Vals’ shoulder and landed elbow to elbow with Matt, who was studying the Syndicate Gunhawks floating peacefully above the crowd.

“Hey boss, the fuck is a Shiroyama?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“No idea, why don’t you ask Cas?” Vals answered blithely over his shoulder as he straightened his jacket.

Matt pursed his lips for a moment, then shook his head. “Don’t want to know that bad.”

“Good, we should be worrying about Hayabusa. Something tells me it wasn’t Silver Star’s legal team stopping them from knocking Law out of the sky.” He spoke aloud which, Jacky realized, was for her benefit even though any of the Synders could hear her.

As Vals wheeled around, Jacky did her best to smooth her face. She managed to stomp out the nervous twitch of her lips, but her hands were white-knuckled and palms sweaty. Despite that, she held her head and locked eyes with him. Words, however, fled her.

“Jacky, I don’t need to tell you you’re in danger, let’s get you inside.” He stepped up to her shoulder, where he lowered his voice so the others would have to work to hear him. “Hayabusa would have stopped Law if they wanted to. They might have been planning on you talking Law down, making you look complicit with her.”

“I am aware.” Jacky lifted her chin toward the sky. She couldn’t trust herself to look at the company around her. BUt their faces filled her thoughts; dour, pained even fearful. Those weren’t emotions Janus would let through, unless the user wanted them to show.

“Law was right about one thing.” Vals’ tone was grim. “Hayabusa is—”

“Ms. Ernst, before you go, we at Hayabusa appreciate your empathy.” A gray-haired Synder interrupted, her voice lifeless and flinty. “It is clear that the people of this city listen to you, perhaps the Senate will do the same.” she flashed an implacable smile. “No doubt you agree Law’s indiscretions have gone on too long. A firsthand account might finally... resolve the matter.”

“I... will not promise anything.” Jacky fixed her faltering smile just like her mother would have; speak to her vision. “I did for you what I would anyone. All I want is to make Silver Star a better home for all. Right now, that means unifying us.”

“Does it, Ms. Ernst?” The question vaporized Jacky’s confidence as the Synder woman drifted closer. “I suppose that includes Law as well? Is that why you—”

“We’re moving to a secure location.” Imposing himself between the two women. Vals shuttled Jacky along.

Stepping forward, she dislodged his grip as politely as she could while continuing under Liberty Arch. She passed the cowed Dread stationed there without incident, but Assembly Hall

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

troubled her. It's obsidian walls recorded Silver Star's laborious constitution, interrupted on each side by thin staircases whose velvet steps lead to another floor where Angels gathered. Vicarious survivors of Law's assault, they were fascinated by the shell-shocked aftermath trickling in. And those lofty smirks widened as Jacky entered.

Though her heart sank, she yanked around when Vals shivered. By the time she turned around to look, he had already shoved her past the Dread and toward one empty corner.

"Kid, the less you say Synders the better. Do you really want people saying you're currying Hayabusa's favor before you're even in office." Pinching his brow, Vals didn't show any of the disquiet Jacky had expected. But she did see Matt fidget, look nervously over his shoulder at the cowed Dread. Tearing herself away, she forced a smile no one else would.

"You sound like my mom, she'd say I was impeaching myself." Snorting loudly, she considered her bubbling question. "She would also say I don't watch my surroundings." Aware of Vals' attention, she rolled her head toward Liberty Arch. "Is that Dread's new toy?"

She bit her tongue when she saw Vals knit his eyes.

"You feel anything?" He said at last.

"No, but you did." Jacky nodded in satisfaction as Matt whistled his admiration.

Shoving his hands under his arms, Vals nodded curtly. "Like a chill down my spine. We don't know what it is, but it's related to yesterday." Pressing his chin to his chest, he gave the Dread a meaningful look through his shoulder. "Just going to say the obvious, careful who you trust."

"I'll trust everyone, until they give me reason not to." Jacky firmed her back; Vals' silence was dubious and Matt was making a face. She half-turned from them, partly to give weight to her words, partly to hide her grin. "You really do remind me of my mother. If she were here, she'd tell me the Syndicate will rip our throats out if we roll over."

"She's right about that." Vals dropped his hands with a snicker. "That's one good reason to keep Law around I suppose.

"Maybe, but she's earned life in prison a dozen times over. I always wonder what I would do with her and..." Jacky looked into her palm. "I didn't just let her walk away, I told her to vote.."

"So?" Vals' growing smile tugged on his neck's thick burn scars. "You're running for President, not judge and jury."

[10] The Summons

“We don’t need a new beginning, the past doesn’t go away because you asked it to.”

- **Jacquelyn Ernst**

Rebecca Bellen brooded. Framed in the glass wall of her office, High Street continued its convulsions. Emergency lights warbled across the plaza as AeroMedical ships touched down, disgorging medical teams that rushed among the wounded. Hands clasped behind her back, Silver Star’s President was cold and grim.

“Fifty-seven dead Silvers, I hope Law is happy with herself.” Rebecca’s upper lip curled. “At least she has the decency to risk her life too.”

“That’s why we love her. Her methods may be terrible, but she is genuine.” Silvera’s ghostly shape appeared, and the apparition walked to the window and pressed both hands to it like she wouldn’t fall through.

“Please, a crowd does not think, it acts.” Departing the window, Rebecca stopped at her desk. It was all tucked away, save for the picture of a grinning child. Turning it down, she straightened her blazer. “I trust Senators Grayson and Dawson have the decency to look me in the eye? It would be such a shame if they postponed the trial to handle recent events.”

Silvera nodded as she faded. “They arrive as we speak.”

Unbothered by her sudden isolation, Rebecca stepped around her desk and opened the door. She found herself face to face with a young Senator, who bushy hair defied his laconic expression. Behind him were four Dreads, six capitol marshals, and Director William Kant. Kant dipped his head in greeting, mahogany eyes aflame with purpose.

“Ms. Bellen, the Senate is expecting you.” Senator Dawson stepped back from the door like his words were a leash. “Forgive the company, recent unrest requires precautions.”

“If we are the voice of the people, Law is their heart; feckless, cruel, and honest.” Striding confidently out, she favored them all with a shallow nod. “We shall ask ourselves how we so grossly failed them later, a president ought not keep her people waiting.”

Dawson lowered his head, but said nothing more before moving out. Lengthening her stride, Rebecca forced him to jog to keep the front. She nearly passed him as he ground to a halt where, moments later, a yawning hole opened in the wall and two Marshals stepped out. The group swept in a second later, and the wall sealed itself back up.

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Inside the fortified passage, harried Angels and statesmen hustled down a broad path. Rebecca let herself fall to the rear of the ground, taking careful note of Dawson's place. The man stopped, then beckoned William Kant over. After a whispered conversation, the pair shook hands. From the corner of her eyes, Rebecca watched Dawson head upstream the tunnel and out of sight. Director Kant, meanwhile, merely brushed his hands and waved for the others to follow.

"Is Mr. Dawson not joining us?" Rebecca asked loud enough that the passing Angels stopped to listen.

"He has done his part." Kant answered. "Now, we do ours."

"As we always do." Rebecca fell silent after that remark. It was only when an austere light bloomed at the tunnel's end, that Rebecca hit her stride and left her guards behind. Proud as ever, head held high, she entered the Senate.

There was no applause as she stepped into the light. The chamber was fuller than ever, with Hayabusa Synders cluttering the upper reaches. Smirking in their lofts, they were content to watch her fade to irrelevance among the thousand Senators who, like their friends above, wore Janus-masks.

Pulling back her shoulders, she marched down. Hostile looks followed, but Senators and Synders alike gracefully slipped out of her way, until she arrived at the bottom row. Reserved for witnesses, few of these seats were taken. Chief among them was a titanic man, broad-shouldered and a hand taller than Rebecca.

"So good to see you again Rebecca." Lips barely moving, Gideon Hayabusa indicated the seat beside him with a sigh. "I hope we discuss today's catastrophe. Three Synders and twenty-one Wolves." Gideon sighed. "Such a heavy loss hasn't been felt since Ebon Array. But, losses are expected in democracies, no?"

"To live is to lose." She favored him with a murderous smile. "Now please, to the point."

"I shall be sorry to see you go, honesty is such a refreshing trait." Gideon folded his arms, threatening to burst out of his suit. "In that case, can you tell why you suspected an Artificial? Far be it from me to promise anything, but who knows what might come up during trials." It was his turn for a cold twist of the lips. "Rather, who knows what might not? Some history ought stay buried."

"Saigo thought himself clever, look what happened to him." Rebecca met his gaze. "Synders to cinders, as they say."

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“Spare me the platitudes.” Rolling his eyes, Gideon spotted the next man walking down the steps. This time, he rose and embraced the newcomer.

The men clapped each other’s backs, then Gideon pulled back and shook William Kant by the shoulder. “It’s been ages, look absolutely splendid!”

William Kant extracted himself from Gideon’s grasp with a broad smile. “That would be because I love my job.”

“Is that so?” Rebecca asked, drawing the pair’s attention. “And what would that be?”

William met her with a courteous nod. “Stopping Daemons.”

[11] Simple Questions

“Truth cares not whom it cuts, only who wields it.”

- Elora Liskow, *Liskow vs Ksama - Opening Statements*

In many ways, at least all the ones that mattered to her, Mei was terrifyingly close to home. The familiar screen blinking before her was equal parts taunt and invitation.

Welcome to the Ksama Interstellar Repository (KIR) - Where Knowledge is a Right

The Ksama Interstellar Repository was the Net’s public library; offering millions of petabytes free to even anonymous users. Any information in the upper archives was free to peruse or download, save for those pieces which linked to the lower vaults. There, Ksama’s famous Blackwalls had burned many enterprising Netheads. Tempted as she was to try those Black walls, Mei limited her search to the public database:

Showing Results for: Whitewall.

Whitewall (Noun/ Verb). As defined by Elora Liskow, a Whitewall is a safeguard within the Undernet, though their specific function is unknown. Victims of this safeguard enter a relaxed, coma-like state. Given the casualty rate, this phenomenon remains unstudied. See ‘The Two Minds Experiment’ for more information.*

**Elora Liskow uses the term ‘The Daemon Circuit’ in her published literature.*

Clicking on the *Two Minds* hyperlink, Mei was met with a crimson warning. *Access Denied.*

“Do not resent that which you do not control.” Reciting the old adage, Mei closed her eyes and pictured the archives as they had been when she visited as a child. Its towering bookshelves and curving gantries had left a vivid memory, and she found the book as she remembered leaving it. The binding creaked with age as she cracked it open.

“The Two Minds Experiment.” Mei read. “With no volunteers, Elora wrote a letter volunteering herself. She subsequently cloned her brain and connected it to the Undernet. This resulted in her arrest for violating the Humanity Preservation Act. All findings remain unpublished”

<<Wasn’t a Whitewall Sis.>> Castella arrived in her NeuralLink blunt as a cinderblock. She always was. Mei suspected that was intentional, a way for the woman to go unnoticed when, for example, she was listening in to someone’s research.

Mei closed the book with a snap. <<Is it coincidence a dozen Silvers were Whitewalled?>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

<<Yesterday, we saw Netburst and those memories. That didn't happen when our guests came knocking.>> Castella was detached as she conjured a NeuralLink record of her brain, highlighting an electrical spike in the bottom half. <<That's my insular cortex. An emotional center might sound like a slow hack, but Artificials would see standard attacks a mile away.>>

<<I know! I was on Ksama's project.>> Running a hand through her hair, Mei exhaled slowly. The specs had been clear; the Daemon would handle hacks, chemical attacks would be decomposed by the nanites, and biological disruptors were mitigated with specialized implants.

"So what was this one?" The MegaHab skirmish had no half-remembered ghosts, no Netburst, just a neural spike. Realization hit like a runaway maglev.

<<Bleedover.>> She hissed. <<If they could directly manipulate the brain, you would be dead. And secondhand emotions are something you can ignore. You do it all the time.>>

<<NeuralLinks couldn't be hacked.>>

<<Everything is impossible until it's been done.>> Mei's thoughts raced, logic jumping ahead of reason to call Silvera. The Daemon rose from the Net like a breaching leviathan, and Mei hurled her query like a harpoon.

"List major events involving Silver Star, mass casualties, and Whitewalls."

"Sijabo's Mistake." Bitterness laced Silvera's reply. "An outbreak of Whitewalls claimed twelve hundred victims, including Silvers without a Net connection. Despite multiple quarantines and failsafes, an emergency Net shutdown was required to stop the outbreak."

"Sijabo Bellen claimed responsibility, stating it was a failed experiment in protecting Silver Star against Daemons. While related documents are deemed state secrets, and relevant data was lost in the shutdown, independent analysis has supported the conclusion."

<<'They improved it.>> Castella murmured. <<Or they ditched the Whitewall.>>

Mei smiled icily. <<I'm impressed Cas.>>

<<Brother raised a Samurai, not a mindless killer.>>

<<Good, mankind exists to do the impossible. Hacking a NeuralLink is unheard of, to do so here and now reveals a power play.>> Mei grinned, it had been too long since she had played politics. <<Law backing down, Suman Kai in town, Rebecca on trial...>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

<<And we're a loose end.>>

Humming, Mei wound her fingers, surprised how much she had missed this. <<Law is certainly operating on her own, Rebecca wants the status quo, and Hayabusa wants Silver Star. So what do the Dreads want?>>

<<You mean what Kant wants. He's been a career sycophant for twenty years, he didn't suddenly lose control of Dread.>> Disgust thickened Castella's answer. <<Divide and conquer, that's what Synders do. And you saw Hayabusa got a seat at the table.>>

<<Quite. Do you actually have proof or are your biases showing?>> Suspecting Castella's tone was pointed her way, Mei didn't hide her bemusement.

<<Evidence? Look at Ebon Array, they poured gas on the fire and bought the ashes.>>

Mei pinched her brow. <<My mistake, I meant to keep politics out of this.>>

<<I thought you liked politics?>> Sensing the shape of Mei's thoughts, Castella's golden eyes weighed Mei. <Or are you upset a thug like me can play your favorite game?>>

<<Have you been like that your whole life?>> Mei regretted the question immediately, and took advantage of Castella's brooding patience. <<In any event, we have our orders.>> She called back to Vals' authority. <<You should be contacting Takemura, not raging at Kant.>>

Castella glared at Mei now, seeing a Ksama Synder instead of an Artemis Jacket. <<Question is, what are you doing? All that Synder training and you still haven't opened those chips.>>

Mei struggled not to flinch, but an old part of her enjoyed the challenge's refreshing change from Syndicate politics. She readied an answer when a heavy sigh filled the NeuralLink.

<<How many times do I have to tell you all, no fighting in the family.>> Vals glared at them both. To Mei's smothered vindication, he turned entirely to her other. <<Cas, you know Mei isn't any more of a Synder than I am. Or you are.>>

Mei had a moment of vindication before Artemis' boss turned on her.

<<Mei, don't think you're off the hook, wouldn't kill you to apologize. Now, how are those chips doing?>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

<<I tried Rebecca's Emergency Key without any luck, and won't get much further without hardware access>> Mei pulled up another monitor to let Vals see the results. <<Damaged as the chip's are, virtual proxies won't help.>>

<<You do know this is life or death, right?>>

<<I'm sorry, I forgot I was your miracle-worker.>> Mei rubbed the bridge of her nose, then buried her face in her hands. She languished in that self-imposed darkness. There, she saw Elora Liskow's book again, along with the words that had sparked her imagination. *The Net is strong because it is vast and connected. Unity is a lauded strength, our Daemons learned the lesson we did not.*

Dragging herself out of the dark with a sigh, Mei dropped her hands. <<Apologies, both of you. Castella, please connect the cowled-Dread's chip.>>

A teal logon screen populated the NeuralLink. Diagnostics in the corner listed a thousand warnings until Mei filtered them down.

Chip Integrity: 55%

Algorithm Protocol: K10-99a8Sd

Health Check: Failed

<<'This is Silver Star's branch of Ksama-10 encryption.>> She circled the diagnostic. <<It regularly checks the Net to find sniffers, sync telemetry, and install patches. The curious thing is the encryption is still running at what should be failed-integrity. Silver Star has a higher tolerance.>>

Vals cleared his throat. <<So they know we're watching?>>

<<Of course, this is the age of surveillance. The better question is, who noticed? We haven't been officially approached by Silver Star, have we?>>

<<No.>> Vals' response highlighted Castella's continued silence. Mei shivered; she had seen far too many people die in that quiet.

<<If they tracked it, then you almost got me killed >> Hearing Castella's voice made Mei sigh in relief. Castella didn't talk to someone she hated.

<<I admit to overconfidence, but that's not the point.>> Mei expanded the diagnostics to show a list of mutating addresses. <<These are what this chip is using. Assuming Hayabusa is dumb and hasn't updated their patterns, I could reverse engineer this to find where other chips are in the Net. But I don't want to know where they are, I want to know where this was.>> She looked at Vals carefully. <<If time is the issue, I'll put bounties on them.>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

<<Do it. Cas, keep an eye out for visitors.>> Vals watched Castella sink into Ward Fifteen's streets like a hunting shark then sighed. <<Glad to see you two getting along good as ever.>>

<<I let my emotions get the better of me.>> Mei had no qualms admitting that; it was like training an algorithm.

Sensing Vals lower his mental isolation, Mei dived deeper into his link. Through his eyes, she saw Assembly Hall cluttered with shocked and bloodied victims. Outside Liberty Arch, medical teams deployed auto-doctors and scraped survivors off the pavement.

A grim exhaustion filled his NeuralLink. <<What do Syndicates say about throwing good men after bad?>> Vals mumbled to himself, studying one Wolf cinched into a stretcher that was being loaded into a nearby ship. Even as the soldier disappeared, another armored figure hopped out from the ship and advanced toward the milling crowd.

<<You mean sending healthy men after the dead? Ksama executives would educate you on the sunk cost fallacy and tell you to stop being so... poetic.>> Mei turned her hand over, examining its bluish veins. << Is this where you tell me that's what separates us?>>

She waited as Vals lifted his chin to study Assembly Hall's tiled ceiling. It depicted a nondescript man holding hands with Silvera, working together with her to support a rustic simplification of Silver star. No Ksama Executive would have allowed it, but Mei kept that to herself.

<<What do you think Cas would say?>> Vals' question came in a museum's whisper.

<<Is this about her replacing you?>> Mei closed her eyes; her thoughts were more human without stimulus. <<I think it's a bad idea. To put it bluntly, she is better at making corpses than decisions.>>

Vals put on a terribly bleak smile. <<Well, we do make a lot of decisions about corpses.>>

<<Regrettably. Perhaps there is...>> She trailed off as a bounty-notification chirped. With Vals' tacit approval, she took control of the NeuralLink and switched its input to the message.

FROM: H

METADATA: ENCRYPTED

ATTACHMENT: RAW

Careful what you wish for ICEDagger,

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Addresses tie back to one individual, but you already knew that. Said individual rotated through gradually and masked geolocation, found him out using latency of Net pings. There's others.

Individual spend most of their time in the Port, but toured in other Wards. Long stationary periods in Port, inactivity. Others did too. Who exactly did you find here? Regardless, I have attached my work.

Fun little puzzle, now I'm interested in you!

<<If anyone links ICEDagger back to Artemis I'm dying of embarrassment.>> Vals' tone was deadpan.

<<Netheads and Executives are vain creatures. I play by the rules which is why I get good data>> Mei opened the attached code and highlighted a section knowing full well it meant nothing to Vals. <<Whoever H is, faked the addresses and queried devices on Silvera's public API. If they responded faster than average, he assumed the individual had been there before.>>

<<He did it that fast?>>

<<I never heard of 'H', but Silver Star has plenty of famous Netheads. Skulldance spent years here.>> She tapped a few more keys, immersed in the code. <<I can improve this. H only used Silvera's public API, I'll use Rebecca's key, and... done.>>

<<You're putting H to shame.>>

<<'That's what you pay me for.>> Mei put on a professional smile as she brought up a map of Silver Star's Port. It was dotted in hotspots, which wound through the region like burning vines. A small clutter of warehouses existed in its vivid heart. Block 16.

<<Better, but not much.>> Vals grumbled. Mei nodded appreciatively as the man plugged the location data into Silvera. His grumble fast became a scoff. <<'Takemura rents it out. Figures.>>

<<If I didn't know better, I'd say Rebecca was a Synder.>> Mei stared at her monitor. <<But why would she send Casthen?>> She was surprised at how long it took Vals to answer.

<<Whatever it is, Cas will be the last one standing.>>

[12] Chasing Shadows

“Don’t turn your back on this city, it was taught to eat you alive.”

- Yuri Takemura

Basir squirmed to get comfortable. Bad as the inter-ward maglevs were, the Ward 15’s local lines were worse. Even without the jacket, his elbows would have been pinned against his side. It hadn’t stopped him from dozing off, but their ride was quick and the Maglev was slowing to a stop. Taking the chance to peer out the window, he blew his lips out and shook his head.

“Ain’t that a sight for sore eyes?”

Station Zero rose in the heart of Ward 15; its towering structure black as a lightning-struck tree. Maglev platforms sprouted from its sides like mushrooms, laden with topiary, rock gardens, and a network of maglev rails. As both a community center and transportation hub, it was perpetually busy, but the Fetter-Fields’ red tinge was growing fast.

“*Attention travelers,*” Silvera appeared on the obelisk’s face and the tram’s ceiling screens, her sad smile tugging her grafts. “*President Bellen has issued a general travel advisory and screening. We apologize for any delays, but they are for your own safety.*” She vanished then, leaving fifty thousand disgruntled commuters to stew in growing lines.

Basir rolled his eyes as grumbling filled the car. With the car pulling up to the platform, he eagerly stood and shook himself out. Lurching toward the door, he surveyed their destination. On the platform’s Southern edge, a pair of Synders lounged on a bench, laughing at the commuters’ misery.

A pair of soft footsteps dragged him rightward, where Ein shuffled up to the doors. The boy looked at the pair intently, much like the commuters did. The insight made Basir loosen his jaw, though he couldn’t take his eyes off the Synders. Now they were pointing at the car, whispering among themselves, smug confidence stamped across their faces.

“Focus, we’re not here for them.” Castell hissed, snapping her fingers under his nose, she stormed out the opening doors.

“No, but we’re supposed to pay attention,” Basir ground his teeth as she kept barreling along. “Seriously, what are you so pissy about? Vals chewing you out?” He got no answer, Castella simply busied herself shoving through the crowd. Sensing a flutter in his NeuraLinks, he turned back. Ein was looking at Castella like he would a wounded puppy.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Don’t worry about her kid.” He said so she could hear him. “She always has a stick up here ass.” Where his other barbs had failed, that one managed to anchor Castella. She stopped like a ship, inertia tugging her forward until finally she came to rest.

“You mean what’s left of it.” She snorted, then twisted back to face them, her pitch-black visor obscuring any trace of emotion. “Ein’s not going to learn anything if you keep covering for him. Same for you, if Synders are the only thing you noticed.”

A thousand explosions ripped the sky apart. Like she had planned for the occasion, Castella casually peered up at the holographic clouds where fresh detonations rumbled like distant thunder. As the commuters bolted and clogged the exit, Castella kept her eyes on the sky, where Glamour emerged from the holoclouds in a flash of lightning.

“Good to see Silver Star still kicking ass, anyone else get shivers seeing Law work?” Closing her eyes, Glamour savored the moment’s thrill. *“About time someone pushed back on Hayabusa, our Daemons sure weren’t. Who knows, it’s time we—”*

A Gunhawk ruptured her forehead, trailing strands of her wispy flesh. Jinking toward Station One, the ship spat tracers from its side, slicing apart a pursuing drone-swarm. Drawing close enough to kick dust-devils down the platform, the ship froze for a moment, skull and scales glimmering on its side, before tearing off into the drooping, cable-sky..

“The Tangle?” Castella muttered. “With all the signal interference, she might lose them. But,” she dropped her eyes “We got better things to worry about.”

“Like you?” Ein’s thoughts fixed on Castella’s cracked and bruised ribs.

“Ein,” she growled. “Pay attention.”

For once, Basir agreed with her. Ein started abruptly, just now recognizing the three figures cutting through what was left of the commuters. Clad in floral-robos, the trio of Takemura Samurai stopped an arms-length away, and one stepped forward in a deep bow.

“May you never wet your sword,” the man intoned. “President Bellen has informed us you will be assisting today. Mr. Takemura is grateful.” Reaching slowly into his robe, he withdrew a small bag nestled in the palm of his hand. “There is little time to share tea, Takemura hopes you will accept his gift instead.”

“Save it,” Castella folded her arms. “He’s the one needs help.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Basir winced, privy to Castella's disdain over NeuralLink. The bleed-over was strong enough he saw them like she did; arrogant pretenders to a title they never bled for. The Robes noticed her tense; Takemura's youngest man stiffened, only to be stalled by his leader's hand.

"We simply share a destination." He said. "No slight was meant."

"Never thought there was." Castella tilted her head. "But you've got plenty of reasons not to want me. Might be easier if I never showed up."

The young Robe sprung toward Castella's throat like a guided missile. She unfolded; locking the boy's sword-hand to his sheath while her elbow crumpled his nose, dropping him. Keeping her hand on the knife, she drew it as he collapsed.

"Looks like Takemura needs me after all." Spinning the gilded blade once, Castella tossed it into the grass. "Guess I have to do everything myself."

"Ronin." Clawing back to his feet, the fallen warrior spat. "You can't run forever, you'll die worse than Saigo did."

"Heard that a thousand times, and here I am. But let's talk business." Squaring herself with the Robe, Castella pulled up Mei's search for Block 16 and pinged it over to Takemura. "We'll take the tea if you can tell us who works here."

<<Basir.>> Ein reached across the NeuralLink. <<What's she doing?>>

He almost laughed at the kid's incredulous tone. Instead, he nodded solemnly. <<She's operating. Saigo didn't bring an entire station to its knees with a bunch of screaming maniacs.>>

Takemura's man closed his eyes, leaving meta-level logs for Castella to follow as he dove into Takemura's Subnet. He recited the information even as he passed it along.

"Three organizations rent warehouses from us; Sear, Necropolis, and Kantago Shipping." Eyes still closed, he tilted his head. "Will there be anything else?"

"You mind telling us what Kantago brought in? Manifest versus actual shipment."

"Point of origin: Ebon Array. The manifest lists medical supplies, large quantities of Erase, and six passengers categorized as Zeroes. It is the second such shipment, none others scheduled." He opened his eyes, and there was something in them that made Basir's skin crawl.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Officially both manifest and shipment match. However, Ebon Array’s footage shows six restrained persons. Our records show six ambulatory persons, and possible weight-loss in the amount of shipped Erase.”

“Describe these six.” Castella’s gaze was cutting even from behind her helmet. “Age, occupation, class demographic, all of it.”

“Mr. Takemura would be happy to answer in person.”

Basir was about to comment himself when he noticed another Jacket listening. While Castella dealt with Takemura’s men, he reached for the star.

<<Sorry! Didn’t mean to eavesdrop.>> Anja recoiled, then composed herself with a guilty grin. <<But an Erase shipment with Dreads? That much Erase could wipe someone clean. What is Dread doing with that, making sleeper agents?>>>

Basir squished his mouth to the side and suppressed his shudder. <<Maybe.>> He didn’t linger long on it though; Castella was cracking her knuckles. Bracing himself, he waited for trouble. Anja did the same, staring across the NeuralLink like they were wild animals.

“A decade later, Ebon Array is still shipping Erasers. Funny, my past keeps catching up to me.” Castella chewed the words like a car gnawing off a head. “Well lucky for you, I don’t mind cutting it down when it does.” With that, she barged through the trio and toward the red-washed checkpoint. She only stopped when the young Samurai scrambled off the ground and dragged a thumb across his throat.

“Hierophant drew death, ronin. Justice will see that it is yours.”

“Tell that to Ebon Array.” Waving over her shoulder, she strode into the station’s Fetter-Field, contractor license letting her pass

Basir held his own breath until he was through, then shook his head. “That could have gone better. Can we not piss off the people we’re trying to help next time?”

“They started it, be glad I didn’t end it.”

He rolled his eyes, but was ready to drop the matter until Ein raised a question.

“Um, who is Takemura?” The boy wilted as both his partners rounded on him. Throwing up a hand, he stammered. “I mean, what do they have against Cas?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Bunch of wannabe Samurai thinking they can pick up where Saigo left off.” Castella said, tone glum. “Some of them think that means killing me.”

“What is going on?” Whispering to himself, Ein clutched his head. “Why does everyone want to kill us?”

“Because we took a job,” spinning on her heel, Castella dragged them along with her cold tone. “Now’s the easy part, all you have to do is survive.”

Looking at Ein’s bloodless face, Basir wanted to say something, breathe a little life into one so young. But his tongue was heavy with doubt, glued to the bottom of his mouth where it could do no harm. Fortunately, Silver Star was more than happy to oblige. Hierophant’s voice issued from a thousand devices as, on the hacked screens, The moons of his eyes glinted.

“Inseparable, Death and Justice have found us, and taken the first of their tolls.” he lifted a card split lengthwise by a gleaming void cruiser, the stars mere streaks at its back. *“For in blood we pay The Chariot’s price. Bringer of change and destruction, it carries us inevitably toward the future.”*. The skeletal man folded his hands. *“Take heart Silver STar, the balance shall be broken.”*

[13] A Voice Unknown

“Propaganda is never subtle, it has to appeal to the masses.”

- Suman Kai

Pen working the margins of her notebook, Anja studied the food court from around her jacket's high collar, striving to capture her impressions of the room. Between Law's flamboyant supporters and a ceiling covered in displays, there was plenty to work with.

“Silver Star,” President Bellen's rigid reflections looked over the room, austere as marble statues. *“No doubt some of you sympathize with Lam, or comfort yourself that her target was Hayabusa, but she risks more than you know.”*

“To balk at this trial, to fear on my behalf, and to incriminate our Senate is an indictment of ourselves. You elected me, and you elected our Senate. So I only have one question, do you have so little faith in yourselves?” As President Bellen's stony words rolled over the space, Anja hurried to record them, to capture that vital essence lost in film

“Do not think so little of yourselves Silver Star, For I chose to believe in you.” President Bellen smiled, like dawn creeping over a mountain.

Then she was gone. One by one the screens exploded into colorful ads, babbling gossips, and, of course, Glamour. Anja was quick to note the woman had changed her outfit into a lurid red dress, though no one else seemed to care.

“Thanks Reb, but I think we all know you care, elections will do that.” Glamour leaned in, mouth carefully downturned. *“You know who isn't? The one responsible for this whole mess, anyone?”* She put a finger behind her ear, jewelry chiming in the momentary silence. Anja had no trouble jotting down the whispered answer. *Silvera.*

“Now I love Reb much as anyone, she's been fighting the Syndicates and trying to keep us out of harm's way,” Glamour chuckled, a sound that struck Anja as somewhat nostalgic. Looking up, she winked and lifted a hand, conjuring panoramas of the thousands mobbing Hayabusa Tower.

“But sometimes, you have to let the kids grow up. She can see we're old enough we can handle the Syndicates.” Dismissing the image with a flick, Glamour folded her arms. *“And we're old enough to be told the truth about Daemons. Unlike dear Reb, they're not elected. No, they lurk in the Net, connecting us. Protecting us. If that's the case, they have nothing to hide. Isn't that right, Suman?”*

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

The camera panned out to show Glamour cross her legs and beam at her guests. Caught adjusting his coat, Suman paired his guilty grin with a shrug.

“Really Glam? Pushing me outside my expertise like that?” He tutted softly, but smoothed his pant legs and tapped his chin. *“I don’t pretend to speak for everyone, but it does seem out of place for Silver Star. Can you call yourself a democracy if the Net’s administrator is neither elected nor appointed?”*

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.” Glamour clapped her hands softly, her gaze fixed on her audience. Then she turned her palm up and reached for them. *“Now, before you tell me Daemons are made of the people for the people, tell me how we can be sure that’s our people.”* She closed that hand into something that wasn’t quite a fist, and the light in her eyes turned ashen.

“Even if we were sure the trillions using the Net only influenced their own Daemons, what happens when they come to our city?” Now her hands knotted into fists, though now Glamour’s rings had become bloody knuckles. *“After all, this didn’t happen until Artemis came.”*

“Now, now, Glam.” Suman straightened in his chair, a firming of the spine. *“They were brought here by your dear Reb.”*

“Oh, I love the woman, but make no mistake,” brushing her lips with jewel-laden fingers once again, Glamour narrowed her eyes. *“We all have our own agendas.”*

Anja stopped her pen, better that way to make sure she heard right. Any doubts of what she had heard were readily banished.

“You did it! Your kind brought the Artificial in, Hierophant warned us!” Jumping upright, a woman dressed in skin-tight black yelled at Anja, pointing at Artemis’ logo. She was too slender to look dangerous, and she swayed while finding the right words.

“Shut up, you’re not Hiero, you’re drunk.” A man scoffed, scowling around his drink while the woman was dragged back down by her friends. Relief crossing his face, he turned back to his table and nervously laughed off his friends’ looks.

“We all have our own agendas.” Repeating Glamour’s words to herself, Anja carefully penned the latest scene into her notebook. While the room’s conversations were picking back up, they didn’t yet mask her accent.

“Hey, Ksama, knock that off.” The man turned from his friends to point at Anja, voice loud enough to put on a show. “None of that spy business, had enough of you Synders.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Reminded that, despite five years with Artemis, she still spoke in Ksama's exaggerated vowels, Anja flashed an apologetic smile and tucked the pen away. When the man looked away, she stealthily took a heron-marked pen from her sleeve and resumed writing.

<<Anja!>> Ein's voice leapt into her head, breathlessly excited. <<Did you see Hierophant's latest?>>

<<Hey Ein.>>She rubbed her brow with a smile. <<You mean the Chariot? Yeah; conflict, triumph, even defeat. Typical stuff for elections.>>

<<That's not...>> Images of Gutter Fifteen flashed through his NeuralLink. His thoughts settled there with a quiet, almost apologetic, tone. <<You're not worried about what he's saying? Basir and Cas aren't.>>

<< I'm an anthropologist Ein, this is what I love. Well, most of it.>> She shifted, getting as comfortable as she could with her submachine gun suddenly poking her back before picking up her chopsticks and poking her noodle bowl. <<Anyway, Hierophant is only as dangerous as people want him to be. There's a reason he's choosing platitudes like Death or Justice.>>

<<For mass appeal? What does he get out of it?>>

<<Why don't you ask him? But If I had to guess, I'd say influence and money, most agendas boil down to that.>> Spinning a ball of ramen, Anja took her first bite as she finalized her sketches. A moment later she coughed, downed a glass of water, and thumped her chest. <<Ugh, how does Cas eats this stuff?>>

<<You are what you eat.>>

<<If that were true, she'd eat razor blades and bullets.>> Wiping her teary eyes, Anja blinked furiously to clear her sinuses. <<Now that I think of it, I suppose she does.>> Over the NeuralLink, she saw Castella stomping through Station Zero, sending other commuters cowering.

He noticed. <<What do you think?>>

Anja pursed her lips. <<She's addicted to violence and needs help.>>

<<You ever tell her that?>>

<<I did, went about as well as you'd expect.>> Anja furiously stabbed the noodles. All she had wanted to do was help, but Castella had looked down with those lifeless eyes. It was enough to make her throw her hands up and lean back. <<She's a mad dog.>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

She froze, realizing that had leaked that into the NeuralLink. Somewhere in it, Castella's burnished stare found her.

<<Maybe you have it the wrong way.>> Oblivious to the exchange, Ein nodded as the maglev rocked into motion. <<Could be Vals hopes I'll be the good influence.>>

<<Good luck.>> Anja pushed her bowl aside with a sigh. <<Watch yourself, and let Cas take care of trouble, okay?>>

He hesitated. <<I can't promise that.>>

<<Well then just play safe, shouldn't be long before Vals pulls us out.>> Anja looked back to the screens above, where scenes from Hayabusa Tower filled the sky with flame. She shook her head, then mumbled. "And if Hierophant is smart, he'd bail too."

<<'That's enough. Ein, you didn't see those Samurai, you shouldn't be distracting yourself..>> Blunt as ever, Castella dropped into the conversation and, before Ein or Anja had a chance to respond, she dropped out. With a sorry look, Ein followed her example.

But the mood she left behind made Anja shiver.

"Mad dog is right." Rocking onto her stool's hind-legs, Anja pretended to study the ads rippling overhead. Then a ping from her Stack.

Message From: Unknown

I saw what happened in Gutter Fifteen.

Anja blinked, hackles rising. When nothing happened, she surveyed the room; too bad she hadn't finished her minor in *Perception and Subterfuge*. Seeing frighteningly little, she nudged Mei's NeuralLink. In moments the other woman was rummaging through her agent.

<<Its source is obfuscated but I can't find any hidden links. Normally, I would advise against opening it. And whatever it is reached you through my Blackwalls.>> Professional disclaimer out of the way, Mei cleared her throat. <<However... it is pertinent information.>>

<<Should I reply?>> Anja hoped she kept the trepidation out of her voice.

<<Knowledge is power as often as it is a trap.>> Mei's tone was a calculated shrug.

<<Real helpful Mei.>> Anja traced a circle on her notebook, then penned an answer.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Message From: Unknown

It wasn't a hack. I'll tell you what really happened.

MegaHab W2-01, Apt 15-9B

The address was nestled between Wards One and Two. Reviews were high and the neighborhood was safe. Frowning, Anja rubbed her brow again.

“That’s... convenient.”

Mei clucked her tongue. <<I take everything back. Officially, and unofficially, I recommend against this, a physical visit is a bad idea.>>

<<You’re just mad he said it wasn’t a hack.>> Checking her gun, Anja slipped from her seat, out through a graffiti-soaked arch, and into Ward Two’s holographic streets. Despite her nerves, she grinned like an idiot. <<C’mon Mei, you can’t tell me you’re not interested?>>

<<That hardly means I approve.>>

<<You’re old, I have my whole life to regret this.>> Anja flipped her notebook open and touched her scrawls. <<All I ever wanted were answers.>>

[14] Weep for the Weary

“Simply put, people need to separate their facts from their truths.”

- Jutha Ksama, Head of Ksama Research

Stand tall, mom always said. Jacky tried; practicing in the mirror, with her friends, until her shoulders no longer hunched or shivered. Now, as Law’s shell-shocked victims stumbled in through Liberty Arch, her arms shook and sweat sheened her fingers.

“I’m sorry mom.” She choked, dislodging her dry tongue. “I’m not you.” Squeezing her nails into her palms, Jacky watched where the survivors collapsed against the walls. Medics swarmed them, moving briskly to the worst casualties, wasting no time on those few readying blue vials.

Jacky couldn’t blame anyone, she too wanted to wipe the horror from her memory. Inhaling, she jerked her eyes away, up to the second floor where bureaucrats and Senators lounged. Janus’ gentle dignity was gone, replaced by unfamiliar, feverish eyes that tracked her covetously. Smart jewelry and liquid-PolyCloth couldn’t hid that. For once, she was glad she couldn’t see the Net coil around her. But she saw Vals’ mask flicker.

“What are they saying?” She whispered from the corner of her mouth.

Expressionless, he pointed across his chest at a Senator leaning on an elbow “That one is asking, ‘what is Jacky staring at like that?’” He answered softly, though it was impossible to keep to Jacky’s ears alone. Despite that, he shifted his hand toward a beaming Angel. “She’s saying, ‘she stared down Law, but perhaps we scare her, I’ll take it as a compliment.’”

He frowned then, and dropped his hand. “Rest are trying to figure out if you’re acting.”

“Oh.” Hurriedly dropping her eyes, Jacky found herself reflected in the glossy walls; eyes gaunt and an unexpected smudge on her cheek that she didn’t remember. She wiped it away, only to sigh a little when she saw how little difference it made. Seeing the opposite wall pull open behind her, she spun around to face the man stepping through.

“Ms. Ernst,” wearing a thin smile, Senator Dawson stood beside the door and waved toward its throat. “If you would, we will take a secure route to the trial, the main entrance is closed.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Not so much seeing as feeling Vals bristle, Jacky shook her head; proud of the weight in her voice. “Mr. Dawson, the Assembly Chamber is meant to stay open.”

“I’m afraid the people have not taken well to activating the Capitol’s Fetter-Fields. The situation is... deteriorating.” He gestured over his shoulder, summoning a small EYE. In it, Glamour waltzed across Assembly Plaza, viscera squishing underfoot as she pointed to the capitol’s red glow.

“So, get this, the Senate locked us out.” Bright and cheery, her voice fit the scene. *“If they’re pulling that stunt, I’d say Law has the right idea about justice. Except for one thing.”* Glamour snapped her finger, sending the camera lunging forward until it found Jacky standing on the red-rimmed steps; glistening tears visible to all.

“Ms. Ernst of Citizens for Reform Today, was the only one of our leaders who braved death and confronted Law.” Glamour’s tone soured as she crossed her arms. *“If this trial doesn’t redeem them, Jacky is the only one worth our time.”*

Jacky felt her jaw hang a fraction, ready for words that wouldn’t quite come. Her mind was locked in the metadata rolling beside the screen; the seven million Silvers tuned in. Something in the sheer weight of that number held her tongue.

“Yes, it is more pointed commentary than we would like. All the more reason for us to hurry.” Dawson indicated the portal again. In a daze, Jacky stumbled inside; aware of neither Artemis behind her, nor the wall sealing itself back up. She barely noticed Dawson beside her, unceremoniously scratching his wrist.

“One piece of advice,” he said, distracted by the itch. “While we all respect the President, the evidence against her is severe. I encourage you not to tie your fate to hers.”

Jacky sagged, her gut hollowed out by the words fleeing her. “You made up your minds?”

“Not quite.” Dawson cleared his throat and tugged his sleeve back down. “It is pragmatism. You are not one of the accused, it is best to remain that way.”

Looking again at Dawson’s orb, Jacky like she was looking in the mirror again; her cheeks burning and shoulders trembling. Breathing deep, she compacted all the uncertainty bubbling in her gut and wiped her cold hands. Her voice wasn’t imperious, but it was a start.

“Will I have a chance to address the people?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“If you wish.” Dawson coughed loudly, scratched his wrist again, then turned his chin toward her. Jacky gleamed a pained light in his eyes before the man took an unsteady step, then dropped to the wall. His face writhed, as he collapsed to the floor, muscles spasming uncontrollably.

Her mind blanked. Staring at Dawson’s increasingly frantic motions, her previously trapped doubts resurfaced. She recoiled a step before the guilt started gnawing her heart. Unable to break from Dawson’s straining eyes, she staggered forward, then jolted as Matt grabbed her shoulder. Fear and guilt continued their battle in her heart, until Vals hurried to the man’s side.

“Be more careful Ernst, this isn’t safe.” Voice hard, Vals steadied the man with one hand and pried open the eyes with another. By then the man was limp, a final breath rattling from his throat. Smooth and unhurried, Vals plucked a hypo from his jacket and slammed it into Dawson’s chest. When nothing happened, he took a needle, sampled Dawson’s blood, and tucked it in his jacket.

“A Senator’s dead,” Jacky whispered, a listless witness as Vals rolled Dawson over. She flinched when he ejected the dead-man’s chip; expecting the sickly scent of charred flesh. Instead, the only curiosity was a gray stain on his gloves, though it soon evaporated. Shaking free of her morbid vigil, she rubbed her shoulders. “We have to call off the trial. What if the Senate isn’t safe? What if—”

“It’ll be okay,” Vals softly and tapped his helmet. “Putting her on now.”

Jacky didn’t have time to object before President Bellen crisp voice filled the hall. “*This better be important.*”

“Dawson is dead. Jacky is fine, in one of the service-tunnels now. Is the chamber secure?”

“*Presumably, but to take no risks. There are safe rooms in those tunnels, withdraw there.*” Vals nodded to himself, and was about to move on when he caught on something. Spinning back, he pointed to Jacky then to his head.

“Ms. President,” Jacky said, stepping forward to be better heard. “We need to say something, people need to know that things are okay.”

“*Agreed, when word gets out the trial will look even worse. You should speak to them, just get to safety first.*” Jacky felt the woman’s boundless surety even without a NeuralLink. “*And Jacky, your mother would be proud, I’m sorry she isn’t here to see you now.*”

Smiling delicately, she lifted a hand to touch Rebecca’s voice. “She is.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Then I am sorry I am not there. But please,” there was a tremor hidden in those words. *“We don’t need to embarrass Artemis, they have a lot of work ahead of them.”* Then, the woman’s voice terminated with a definitive click. Fortifying herself with another breath, Jacky met Vals’ stare and nodded. He took the cue to plunge ahead down the empty hall.

Every muscle atremble, Jacky needed no urging to keep up; Dawson’s empty stare was enough. Not long after it had vanished from sight, Vals stopped in front of a heavy bulkhead. The door chirped, recognizing his state-ID before it soundlessly opened. Stalling her with an upraised hand he ducked inside, then reappeared to wave her in.

The room was utilitarian, occupied by seats and a cooler. Its walls came alive as they entered, defaulting to Silver Star’s favorite channel. Jacky’s skin prickled at the image of Senator Dawson beaming at the camera.

“We’re not done yet Silver Star, Silvera’s official registry is reporting Senator Dawson dead of heart failure. Strange thing for a man his age.” Glamour’s voice was smothering. *“I’d say there’s trouble in paradise, but you already knew that. Except, Dawson was the trial’s sponsor. Maybe that made him enemies, or maybe the real culprit is hiding their tracks.”*

“Silvera gave us API access, we can stream you directly into the capitol’s Subnet. You ready? You’re going to have all of Silver Star watching.” Oblivious to the stream, Vals addressed Jacky from the center of the room. Jacky tried to focus on him, but it was like fighting against a dream. She was amazed she still heard him.

“Don’t force it.”

“No,” jolting awake, she saw Vals studying her. The liquid-metal of his helmet obscured his face, but she still saw the pity in his posture, more than he had shown for any of the Silvers bleeding out on the pavement. She reared up, defying the notion.

“If I want to lead Silver Star, I have to speak when they need me, not when I want to. So, I’ll make the address, no one else will. Put me on, they need to know we’re listening.” Ignoring that her throat was like shattered glass, she waved Vals on.

Wishing she couldn’t hear her every syllable, she stared Vals until he lifted both hands. One held a holographic orb that displayed her, the other had three brandished fingers. When the first of the trio curled down, she exhaled, letting her thoughts and worries flow out. When the second fell, she locked the wounded in her mind. When the third dropped, and Vals pointed, she spoke.

“Sometimes, it feels like everything has gone wrong, doesn’t it? It’s easy to feel powerless like we’re screaming into the void.” Voice catching, she pressed her fists to her hip and dared her

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

mirror to falter. It didn't, nor did she. "When I was young, my mother showed me the High Street. At first I thought it just a colorful riot; loud, feckless, and fun. But she took me there, showed me the people living beneath its wild colors."

She trailed off, memories dragging her into silence. Making a point not to look at polling-data running beside the screen, she locked eyes with herself and pronounced each word clearly. "I remember thinking how small everyone must look from the EYE, from Heaven. And when I went home, I wondered if they even lived when I stopped looking."

In the corner of her eye, viewer sentiments spiked. Not daring to see how or why, she wet her lips and looked beyond her own image.

"What happened today reminds me that I'm not the only one with those doubts. We are a city apart, eager to see caricatures and failures instead of people. I know it's empowering, but when I went to sleep that night I felt like I might be the only one in the world. I didn't want to be, I cried myself to sleep thinking that maybe my mom wasn't real either."

Choking on the word, she couldn't help but cover her mouth. Through her welling tears, Vals nodded once, and rolled his hand for her to keep going.

"That's..." Hearing her muffled words, Jacky dropped her hand. Her reflection did the same, revealing a haggard countenance. It was too late to change that now, so she embraced it with a flattering smile. "That's not what I want for this city, for all of us. I want us to all come through this together. Please, like Rebecca said, trust the process."

The orb winked out of existence, taking her strength along with it. Her trembling legs managed to hold long enough for her to sit on the floor before giving out entirely. Blinded by tears, she rubbed her eyes, glad at least she wasn't sobbing. In that warm dark, something heavy rustled as it settled into place. Opening an eye, she shimmied away; plagued by images of Law's bloody gauntlet.

Squatting on his haunches, Vals rested both hands on his legs as he watched the far wall. He didn't stop Jacky, nor reached out, content to bob his head at her. His helmet melted away, exposing a smile only slightly battered by his burned neck

"I get the idea Rebecca's hard to please, but I see why she's proud of you." He half-chuckled, then shook his head. "Janus would never allow a show like that."

Sniffing, Jacky bit back a dark laugh. "I must look like an idiot out there."

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“I wouldn’t say that.” Something in Vals’ voice made Jacky look to the image-wall. Glamour was there, intent on a small window encapsulating Jacky’s delivery. Blood rushing to her face, Jacky tore her eyes from the scrutiny. Her ears filled with Galmour’s sweet platitudes, each more demeaning than the last.

Then she heard the applause.

[15] The Politics of Violence

“He who fears secrets, fears the narrative.”

- **Gideon Hayabusa**

Gaunt as she was, Jacky reminded Vals of the Synders out in the hall. They hadn't cried, but the same emotional rawness was as obvious as it was unconscious. He'd say the same for the sharp looks she cast at him; though they probably wondered why he didn't look the same way. That question had almost stopped bothering him.

“It doesn't feel right.” Jacky whimpered, and he realized she was once again staring at Glamour. That insight made the woman's applause fill the silence. Drawn to it himself, Vals hardly caught Jacky's quiet addendum.

“Like she's celebrating death.” She hadn't meant for any of them to hear.

“Shock is a helluva thing, ain't it boss?” Matt spoke aloud, confident his words wouldn't reach the woman. Since he was busy guarding the door, Vals made sure to let him see Jacky vacantly turn to face the sound.

“Is that what it is? I feel like I'm going to wake up any second, but I can't tell if it's a dream or nightmare.” Jacky blinked lethargically and held up a hand for scrutiny. “It didn't bother me when I was talking.”

“That's because adrenaline is a helluva thing too” Matt pushed back his sleeve and tapped his watch. “Do we even know what time the trial starts? We can't just sit around and wait, right?”

Jacky scrunched her face. “The Senate won't, they'll use Dawson as an excuse to start early.”

Rising quietly, Vals took a step and leaned against the wall, waiting for the pair to look to him for answers. They did soon enough, but Silvera spoke before he did, forcing Glamour from her spot on the wall. The three of them huddled around that glow like a campfire, taking no comfort in its light as a Daemon emerged from the depths.

“Attention, Rebecca Bellen's trial will begin now. During this time, the Assembly Chamber will be locked and all citizens moved to secure locations.” Silvera paused, sorrow wrinkling her grafts and voice alike. *“Know that while I am here for you, you must be there for each other. Stay strong, Silver Star.”*

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

[Signal Shift...]

Like amphitheaters of old, the Assembly Chamber descended in circular rings toward the main stage while the alabaster walls above curved into golden vaults. A red carpet-tongue rolled down the middle, separating the unmarked benches; seats and placards inspired individualism.

Silvers and tourists crammed into the middle region, emotions ranging from confused to smug. Hayabusa's Synders, meanwhile, arranged themselves into a bloc as far down as they were allowed, every one of them looking somber as death. Scarcely to be forgotten, Silver Star's Angels flocked to the higher regions, dressed in puffy, cheery whites.

Murmurs echoed through the cavern, quick and alarmed as wingbeats. Its pattern reached to the Senators as well, who clumped together as they examined small screens. Aides flit among them, carrying documents and signatures that did little to stem the confusion. Forgetting them, the camera cut to the front row, where President Bellen sat with crossed arms and a scowl.

"Shall we begin? We have already squandered the lives of charges, shall we waste their time too?" Asking in a bored voice, Rebecca looked to the row behind her. The Senators there pointedly ignored her, until one of their number rose. Every surreptitious murmur cut off like a thrown switch as he coughed softly. After a terse moment, a gavel rang a dutiful voice spoke.

"The Speaker recognizes Mr. Aquitaine Dawson."

"Ms. Bellen is, regrettably, correct. We cannot dally, already our numbers dwindle, my own brother among them." In the grim silence that ensued, he searched the eyes of his compatriots, and held a hand to extoll them. "We gathered to discuss Artificials, violations of our sovereignty, but now they threaten us. Our process was not meant to hold up under assassination and assault, let us do away with the pleasantries and get to business."

A resounding cheer answered, until the falling gavel battered it down. "The Speaker recognizes the request, and the wishes of the Senate. Granted."

Dipping his head respectfully, Aquitaine returned to his seat, and raised his voice. "Ms. Bellen, you lauded your efforts to secure this station against the Syndicates and their Daemons. What have you to say about this latest incursion?"

"Offense will always be ahead of defense." She shrugged as if the room wasn't hanging on every word. "Daemons would inevitably get in, I envisioned Dread damage control."

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Would you say they achieved that?”

President Bellen lifted her shoulders a fraction. “Artificial 9817 was in Silver Star for less than an hour. Not even Hayabusa has the finances to invest billions in such a trial.”

Aquitaine slid his stare to Gideon. “Any comment?”

“You have my thanks, for making the Board look like fools.” Gideon beamed back. “Despite my protests, they overruled me in this.”

“Very good. Now, Ms. Bellen, can you comment on how exactly Dread identified this Artificial? Did it not avoid Silvera’s attention?”

President Bellen glared back at him. “I do not know the particulars, perhaps you should ask Mr. Kant instead.”

“We shall.” Flipping through his notes, Aquitaine rolled his hands to move on from the matter. “In the meantime, any comment on the methods used? Silvers were Whitewalled in this attack. Does that not alarm you?”

“You’ve seen the charter Senator, no lethal force is authorized against Silvers unless express clearance is granted after a full review. No such permission came from my office.”

“And yet here we are, with Dread knee deep in the dead. not to mention Artemis’ unfortunate involvement.” Aquitaine dropped his papers and clasped his hands. “Ms. Bellen, you are deeply involved in this matter. Is there nothing more you can say?”

“Artemis was hired through their own review and assigned to recovering Mr. Tam Kassan. The Dread unit they engaged was unknown and unapproved by my office.:

“So they were rogue then?” Aquitaine gave voice to the swirling rumors with a grin. “Does that not stand in contrast to your statements on their efficiency?”

“Some might think that.”

“What I’m trying to understand, Ms. Bellen, is not just how Dread managed to resolve this matter, but how everyone involved seems to be unaware of each other. Silver Star is large, but surely it is not that ungovernable?”

“In the timetable you seem to expect? Perhaps.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Aquitaine shook his head, cheeks wrinkling about his eyes in a friendly way. “You find insult where there is none meant. You see,” he leaned over his desk, addressing the entire chamber now. I cannot help but see commonalities, what others might call coincidences.”

He enjoyed the hush a moment, then cracked his knuckles. “Consider this, there is only one entity involved with internal communications and responsible for our Net. Is it inconceivable she would alter reports? Did she not already lose control of the Gutter Fifteen Subnet?”

“What exactly are you saying?” Rebecca’s question cut the silence, stealing Aquitaine’s time in the spotlight.

“The question we must ask,” the Senator continued as if he had heard nothing. “Is, how much longer can we be blind in our trust? Can we audit a Daemon? Verify she did not have access nor modify data? Not to my knowledge, because those that pry too deeply fall victim to Whitewalls.”

Aquitaine had the fleeting satisfaction of thoughtful silence, before deep laughter rose from ahead of him. Pressing a hand to his mouth, Gideon Hayabusa played at stopping the noise, even gave the Senate an encouraging wave to go on without him. The Senator narrowed his eyes.

“Is something the matter, Mr. Hayabusa?”

“Forgive me,” he twisted the corners of his mouth. “I didn’t realize that supposition played such a role in your courts.”

“Perhaps you can laugh, but we are not all Synders capable of conforming facts to our desires.” Jaw clenched, Aquitaine snarled his rebuttal. No matter how much you and Ksama try to bury Ms. Liswell, some of us wonder if maybe she was right.”

“By all means, chase your fantasy. Just don’t expect others to indulge it.”

“It must be easy to accept Daemons when they benefit you. After all, only the Syndicates have resources enough to bypass them. Regrettably, that brings us to one last matter of business.” Keeping a detached tone, Aquitaine flipped through his note. “Ms. Bellen, you married Sijaho before coming to Silver Star, correct? Then later became a naturalized citizen.”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“And when Sijaho met his untimely end, you took up his campaign and led it to a rather successful finish.” Aquitaine pushed a finger across the table as he recited the facts. “Tell me, Ms. Bellen, are you familiar with Hanza Pharma?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Stony as ever, Rebecca eyed her interrogator before answering in clipped tones. “They are... a large organization, some might even call them a minor Syndicate. Recently, they have grown in size and influence thanks to their production of Erase.”

“And one final question, Ms Bellen,” leaning over the table, Aquitaine let his smirk show; though no doubt Janus warned against it. “Do you know a Rebecca Hanza? She is the daughter of Hanza executives, and while she’s vanished from their records, was last involved in Wangchuan City’s initial Erase production.”

He chuckled when silence answered his question. “You see,” while he pointed at Rebecca, he addressed the rest of the hall. “Rebecca Hanza vanished from the company some time ago, but not long before a Rebecca Bellen was entered in our records.”

Locking hands behind his back, Aquitaine puffed himself up. “Understand, we expect transparency from our leaders. If there is anything you can say to reassure the public, it would be greatly appreciated.”

Rebecca smiled politely. “Of course Senator. I resign.”

[Signal Shift...]

Vals whistled as the chamber erupted. The camera panned out; Silvers jumped to their feet, capitol marshals poured in, and Senators barked for orders. He tore the scene apart, searching for some order or mechanism that might lurk beneath the surface. The closest he got was seeing Aquitaine Dawson sitting comfortably at his desk, unmoved by the disturbances. Armed with that information, he focused on his charge. Bathed in the screen’s stale glow, Jacky’s face was a pale moon. It slimmed in half to face him.

“They can’t do that.” She whispered.

“That can and did. Someone had a plan and executed it.” He made an effort to keep his voice warm, despite his instinctual chill.

“No.” Jacky shook her head, desperate to escape a dream. “This isn’t normal procedure. Aquitaine just rambled, it wasn’t close to right, even if they went along with it.” Vals watched as the woman stood up, still hugging her arms, and retreated to the wall. “This was supposed to be a trial for the President, not a citizen. It’ll have to be restructured, but what happens meanwhile...”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“I don’t know anymore.” She sighed, and looked mournfully at Vals. “If... she’s in danger, you’ll help her, right?”

“Getting her out of political trouble wasn’t in the contract.” Something in his chest wilted when Jacky sagged, mouth moving without a sound. Then, his resolve firmed a fraction when Matt lifted his chin. The kid was going to say something, so he didn’t give him the chance. “But even if it were, she’d let us know if she was worried.”

Unimpressed, Matt sneered. “You heard Mei and Cas, we can’t trust our NeuralLinks.”

“All the more reason to stay put, I don’t spend lives like the Syndicates.” Vals forced himself to keep eye contact with Jacky. There must have been doubt on his face; she had the beatific look of one willing to forgive. That made it hard to turn and face Matt’s outburst.

“You think we follow you because it's safe? If that’s what I was worried about I’d have taken a desk job.” He threw his hands up, lips curling like he was about to spit. “C’mon, you think Cas signed up so you could keep her safe? Shit, even Ein is an idealist.”

“Yeah, he’s an idealist, not a killer. Neither is Anja.” Pinching his nose, Vals centered his swirling emotions. Young as he was, Matt was free of wrinkles or scars, free real estate for righteous indignation. It made the tortured flesh of his neck itch.

“We’re more than just mercenaries Matt. We’re also a sorry excuse for a family.” Vals dropped his head and sighed into his chest. “And you don’t put strangers before family.”

“Um, Mr. Artemis,” Glued to the screen, Jacky interrupted Matt as he bristled. Both men settled into an uneasy truce as she waved them over. “Are you still watching?”

Silently breaking eye contact with Matt, Vals looked to the screen. He thought he had mastered his temper, but he felt an eye twitch as Senator Dawson, William Kant, and a squad of Dreads marched Rebecca Hanza out of assembly.

[16] Riding the Line

“Home is where the war is.”

- Saigo, Reflection on the New Bushido

Cinching her arms tight, Castella impatiently scanned the car; which was lumbering along like it was made of lead. The Silvers who had been in first had crammed themselves in back; eager to give Artemis a wide berth. That didn't stop them from glaring when she turned her head.

Leaving them to sulk, she checked her side. Ein sat on the bench there, hugging his rifle. She waited for him to notice the hostile looks, but he stayed buried in his reflection. Contemplating whether to point it out, she focused on the other side of the car.

Basir had a bench to himself, and was enjoying it. Both hands stretched along the seat's back, he rested his head against the window. He stared vacantly past her, captivated by whatever holographic fires lit up the car. Unlike Ein, he showed signs of life.

“Happy, Cas?” He raised a hand toward the window. Following it, Castella saw Law's holographic titan lift a man by the throat.

LAW vs THE SENATE
Only on Inferno Entertainment

“Why would I?” She answered lightly, but turned to her augments' subsystems. Her diagnostics had come back clean, but that didn't stop her from digging into them. The slow, methodical progress made Basir squirm as he watched over the NeuralLink.

“Not going to find anything Mei's tech didn't.” He grumbled.

“Think that's good enough to take on Law?”

“Not a chance.” He relented, busy watching ads writhe along MegaHabs like animated cave-paintings. After a long pause, he tilted his head to the Tangle. “You really think she's up there?”

“Wouldn't be a good hideout if you could see it.” Ignoring how Basir deflated in his seat, Castella turned to the window. Like plastic dredged from the sea floor, a warning floated there as the car crossed into the next ward..

WARNING: Entering Designated Competition Area
Please Remain Seated, Avoid Windows

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Message from: Hayabusa Combined Enterprises

Operations in this area are currently suspended, relief will be supplied instead.

Stay Strong, Silver Star

She looked down to a neon-smudged mall squeezed between MegaHabs. Beneath the holographic canopy, hundreds of Silvers lined up for handouts from a Hayabusa setup. Then her gaze snapped to a flicker of movement.

“Huh, Hayabusa’s doing good for a change.” Ein tapped the window. “Too bad it took—”

Darting across the car, Castella shoved Ein down as a man-sized drone flit up to the window. She kept holding him down as anxiety rippled off his NeuralLink. Basir rolled his eyes and smacked his arm away.

“C’mon Cas, if they wanted us dead, they would’ve sent a UEV.” He sank further into his seat, then caught himself as the tram rocked. A rectangular chassis filled the window, its legs shimmering with camouflage before catapulting the thing into the mall’s passing lights.

“There’s your UEV.” Grumbling, Castella checked the ceiling monitors. She had used Rebecca’s key to mute the screens earlier; now she undid her damage.

“Have you ever wondered what goes on behind the Senate’s closed doors? Of course you don’t, they never close their doors. Except when they’re sending President Bellen to a secure location for questioning.” Lounging in a wide chair, Glamour toyed with her raven-black hair. Her words were solemn as a mountain reflected in ice. *“Desperate times call for desperate measures they’ll say. Maybe they’re right, maybe that’s why Rebecca rented a bunch of killers-for-hire. Shame she didn’t pay them enough to do their job and protect her.”*

“Killers?” Bolting upright, Ein fixated on the screen. “What, does she want us to storm the capitol or not?”

“You care what she thinks?” Castella dragged her eyes down and studied his indignation. Then she looked back to Glamour, unaware of the sneer crossing her face and voice. “Thought I asked if you understood what this job meant.”

Ein trembled, jawed the air then dropped his eyes. “It’s not like that.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of, anyone would be embarrassed if Silver Star’s prettiest liar called them a killer.” Seeing Ein and the commuters shrink back, Castella gave voice to her festering temper. “Don’t worry, we’ll be at High Street soon. You can find some Erase and join the party.”

“Castella,” Basir pulled himself forward. “That’s enough. You can have your little pity party, but leave Ein out of it.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Cas, it’s not that. It’s just...” Taking a breath, Ein brushed his hair and tried to find Castella’s gaze behind her helmet. “Why are we the bloodthirsty killers and Law isn’t? She was having fun killing those Synders. We don’t do that... You don’t do that.”

“She’s no better than those self-obsessed zombies either.” Deathly calm, Castella focused on, the graffitied torii welcomed them to Ward Two. She glowered at the collection of lights dancing there until one flinched.

<<Oh. Uh, hi Cas!>> Though her NeuralLink jumped in surprise, Anja kept her voice steady. <<Hey, listen, I know what this looks like. But Vals gave me permission.>>

<<No he didn’t.>> Castella growled, drowning out Anja’s protests. <<You’re just running into trouble blind.>>

<<‘That’s rich coming from Artemis’ mad dog.>> Silence filled the NeuralLink.

<<I had a team.>> Castella gnashed the words.<<If something goes wrong, don’t expect us to bail you out.>> She ejected Anja before the woman had a chance to answer.

“Okay Cas, she was out of line, but really? Don’t expect us to bail you out?” Basir shook his head. “Do you think everyone is a hardass like you, or do you just not give a shit?”

“I’m the one eating bullets and you all just take it for granted you’re alive” Castella curled her fists, straining her thick gloves. “Next time Vals needs a door kicked, one of you can volunteer.”

“Yeah, but you also turn everything into a fight.” Basir snorted as Castella stomped up to his seat. “Kinda like that.” Slumped in the seat, arms thrown across the back, his lazy sneer made Castella bite her tongue.

“It’s alright Cas, I trust you,” Ein stepped between them with a smile too warm. “I know you care, even if you don’t think so.”

“Fuck.” Castella dropped her head into her hands, then dragged her fingers down her visor’s cracked glass. Holding it a moment, she sighed and dropped her hands to her sides. “Can take the Samurai out of the terrorists, but not the terrorist out of the Samurai.”

“That’s progress.” Basir relaxed with a weary laugh. “Last time we talked like this you broke my jaw.”

“You actually remember that?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“It was my jaw, dumbass. Figures, living with Saigo killed your social skills.” Basir tilted his head, then put on the wisest expression he could. From where Castella stood, it looked like he had stubbed his toe. “Vals doesn’t keep you around just to eat bullets. He sees things different. Hell, I’m Hazed out of my mind half the time and he keeps me around.”

“I know what I am.” Stalking back to the wall, Castella settled into place as the car passed into the belly of Station Two. A ruddy half-light engulfed the car replaced the whirling neon, filled with archways and trams that flashed by like dreams.

“*Now arriving at Station Two.*” Silvera’s anodyne voice filled the gloom as they glided to rest at a crowded platform. Hundreds of Silvers squeezed tight as bullets in a magazine, elbowing each other for a chance at the doors.

Feeling some of her old temper return, Castella marched to the door. As Basir and Ein fell into place, she looked past the bickering outside; she had places to be. Then there was a shift in the car, subtle as a drawn breath. Checking the window’s reflection, she saw a groomed man at their backs. He noticed.

“Sorry.” The man said, languidly rolling a blue vial in his palm.

Castella shifted her weight back to grab Ein when the doors opened. A wall of sound and flesh pressed in, their combined weight enough to make Ein flinch. Gritting her teeth, she took Ein by the arm and swam through the river of limbs. It didn’t take long for the Silvers to give them some space, but she didn’t let go until they were off the platform and in the lobby. He was too busy gawking to notice.

“Wow.” Ein craned his neck back. “They all like this?”

While ten thousands Silvers raced by, Station Two was wide open. Granite ceilings vaulted overhead, hand-carved decorations draped in holographic banners. In them, Law stood, wrapped in obsidian smoke and standing on Senator Dawson’s throat. Public comments rolled across the footer.

*Long Live the Law! Death to Traitors.
Law doing Artemis’ job for them.*

Castella heard Basir sigh, then whisper to Ein. “They’ve really gone insane, haven’t they? Almost makes me glad we got her.”

Turning her chin, Castella saw Basir fumbling for a Haze-stick while Ein nodded his agreement. Neither noticed the vacant-eyed man gaining on them from behind until he slipped between them. Basir jerked away, then patted himself down. Once sure everything was still in place, he brushed his sleeve and glared after the man

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Damn, Erasers give me the creeps.” Noticing Castella’s look, he nudged Ein and started walking. “C’mon man, Cas is waiting.” Then, once she turned her back, he whispered furtively to Ein. “Ignore me next time, Cas is gonna kill me if you don’t pay attention.”

“You’re joking, right?” Ein hissed back.

Shutting them out, Castella stormed toward the main entrance. Whether it was her blood-stained jacket or common courtesy, the crowd hurried to make way before her. The only ones who didn’t were the armored Enforcers stationed beneath the marble arches. Bathed in the Fetters’ red glow, they watched impassively as she stomped up, then stepped aside. Not returning their curt nods, she finally broke into the open.

Takemura Plaza offered a reprieve from Silver Star’s oppressive sprawl. While MegaHabs still ringed it, the long space was free of the city’s visual noise and its reflecting pool was speckled only with sunlight. Three curving monoliths capped the plaza, looming over the lines of waiting Silvers.

“Artemis, we’ve been expecting you.” Speaking in the rolling accent of clan-tongue, a Takemura Samurai man with emerald tattoos stepped toward them. Three other honor-guards stood at his back, heavy rifles close at hand.

Castella met their stare cold. “You here to walk or kill us?”

“I am Yaro, of the Eleventh Claw. We are here to take you to Mr. Takemura. Regrettably, he fears Senator Dawson’s actions have cast doubts on today’s results.” Yaro raised a hand, cutting Basir off as he started into the mall. “My. Takemura will answer your questions.”

Basir sighed in their NeuralLink. <<Don’t like this Cas.>>

<<Too bad, orders haven’t changed.>> She said. <<Let’s go meet a Samurai.>>

[17] Samurai

“Loses are acceptable, losing less so.”

- Yuri Takemura

Drawing closer to Takemura Tower, Ein admired the group’s bluntness. Stamped above the tower entrance was a simple declaration.

*Support Rebecca, Support Silver Star
Our Vote, Our President*

He was wondering if it violated proper protocol for a polling station when Castella touched his NeuralLink. She didn’t actually force him to look up, but NeuralLinks were a matter of will, and Castella had that in excess.

He found himself staring at the tower’s ugly peak. Then Castella used his helmet’s zoom to magnify the image to twelve-times magnification. Now he saw the robed patrols, armed with bulky pack.

“Those are Syndicate-grade SAMs, could drop a Gunhawk. Either they got a permit, or they’re expecting serious trouble.” Tone brooding, Basir tapped his breast-pocket to make sure his Haze was still there. Castella knocked his hand down, and pointed to the lines

“They’re not worried about that.”

Stalls dotted the sidelines. Most were food, but the largest among them was stuffed with paraphernalia. Rebecca’s grim visage was stamped on most of it, but there was one corner stockpiled with gray jackets. Then Castella saw one trade hands; her own name came glowing to life on the collar. Glaring at the top of the stall, she saw Vals shielding Jacquelyn Ernst with his body.

Artemis: Protecting the Precious

“Why am I not surprised?” Basir sighed.

Coughing politely, Yaro veered left. With a final sneer, Castella led Artemis, eventually chasing him through a holographic veil hidden behind between booths. There, she caught up as Yaro stopped to speak with four Samurai watching a private entrance.

“How long did you know we were coming.” Her teeth audibly clacked as she drew her shoulders in. “And why the merch?”

“Would you rather be public heroes or Glamour’s bloodthirsty killers?” Reaching into the back of the nearby stall, Yaro pulled out a kimono. It shimmered as he ran his thumb across its

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

minute scales. “Or, if you prefer subtlety, Mr. takemura has made these available. It is his firm belief that elections are best without bloodstains.”

“You wanted a killer, you’ll get a killer.” Snorting, Castella brushed past Yaro and his Samurai. She watched from the corner of her eye as the man’s polite expression stiffened, before he waved Ein and Basir in with a fixed smile. Then she stepped through the door, and into the night.

No visible roof crowned the lobby, only a magnificent dark vaulting overhead before arching down into indistinct corners. Specks of light drifted in that obsidian sea, far away as any star and too feeble to lift the twilight. That fell to the softly-lit holos floating above voter lines slithering between carved stones and registration tables.

It wasn’t the countless threat-avenues that made Castella’s lip curl. But, as the other Artemis Jackets piled in, she exhaled through her teeth and prepared to march. Then the voice reached her, gentle enough to cut through the babble, dangerous as a hidden undertow.

“Just sign here Mr. Hodgeson, you may then take your form down to table nine” a man in white rose from one busy table to shake his client’s hand. This other man, Mr. Hodgeson, wore a grateful expression as he bobbed his head and uttered his thanks. Remaining polite, the dangerous voice firmly withdrew.

“It was my pleasure sir, but there are other guests I must see too.” With a final bow, the speaker turned and faced Castella. He smiled warmly as she lumbered up.

“I see the kimonos weren’t to your liking.” Yuri Takemura was tall, just a hair shy of Castella. Dressed in a white suit, he would pass for a Synder if not for the gray streaks in his hair, though it complemented his stately poise.

“We’re Artemis, we wear jackets.”

“Indeed.” Yuri nodded sagely as he stroked his chin. “Forgive me for hoping otherwise. My life would be much easier if they confuse the famed Pale Oni for a Samurai of democracy.”

“Or when they think you give a fuck,” Castella snapped back. “Now cut the shit.”

“Indeed.” Yuri Takemura steepled his fingers. “President Bellen assigned you here to deter anyone from disrupting the voting here. Now, I saw your capabilities in Gutter Fifteen, but allow me to even the odds.”

He gestured to one of his men, who brought out a small box. Taking it, he delicately extracted a black oval and held it to the light. As Basir jumped back, Castella took the chance to swing in and grab it, deliberately ignoring Yuri’s smirk.

“Are Fold grenades against the Samurai code? I could take it back.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Not mine.” Grimly tucking the grenade into her jacket, Castella folded her arms. “Now, tell me what exactly you and her have in mind.”

Yuri pinched the air and pulled a model of his complex into being. He pointed to a highlighted portion in the middle tower. “That is a fortified vault. I do not know the contents, but today I got a most curious message from the vault’s subnet.”

*To: Yuri Takemura
From: Floor 31 Subnet*

WARNING: Hayabusa has identified this system’s telemetry. Syndicate pings registered, physical presence can be expected.

“Uh huh, and Rebecca knew this yesterday?” Castella’s muscles tightened as she leaned forward. “And then, decided it’d be a smart idea to send in contractors to protect your goods?”

“I wondered the same thing myself, though for different reasons.” Yuri’s brows furrowed as he pressed his lips. “The construction of this building was prohibitively expensive until ms. Bellen offered funding in return for the creation of a certain vault. Until recently, I couldn’t care less what she had stored away in there.”

Castella clenched her jaw as the man who called himself a Samurai prattled on. His words dissolved in the blood pounding through her ears. She didn’t disguise her impatience and, to his credit, Yuri cleared his throat.

“I can see you have your doubts. Understandable, but I am sure you saw the UEV on your ride here. Hayabusa is on the move.”

“If they’re sending UEVs we’re way past deterrence. You’re asking us to fight” Castella tapped her jacket to make the point. “That means you’re expecting a full-on war, otherwise you wouldn’t be handing out Fold weapons or arming your men with surface-to-air missiles. And, just so we’re clear, you have no idea what you’re asking us to guard?”

Chuckling, Yuri stood. “Not quite. Gideon Hayabusa is a pragmatic man, he will send a small force he can trust. My men are simply equipped to make his life difficult. As for the vault? Perhaps it’s better I don’t know.” After fixing Artemis with a placating smile, he snapped his fingers. “Daro, show them there when they’re ready.” With that he departed, leaving Yaro to wait on Artemis.

“We’re getting yanked around here Cas.” Basir broke the silence first. “Vals wouldn’t blame us for bailing.”

“Too bad, orders haven’t changed.” She nodded to Yaro then started off. But when Ein lingered behind, she ground to a stop. To her surprise, she didn’t need to force her fists open, she was calm even when she saw Ein chewing his lip.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“What wrong?”

“I...” Jawing unrealized words, Ein dropped his eyes. Castella let him think, unsure what to make of the growing cavern in her chest. It closed up somewhat when Ein sucked his teeth and lifted his head. “Do you wonder if this is what Jacky would want?”

That cavern opened back up as Castella contemplated her answer. She wondered what might blunt it, but she was too honest for that. “No.” She turned and waved Yaro on. “Only one I’m worried about is Law.”

She heard Ein sigh and mumble a question. “Why does it always have to be like this?” The answer popped into her head before he even finished. Because that’s life.

It was the right answer. It was also Saigo’s answer. So she let the question go, all that mattered was that he followed.

[18] Mother of Daemons

“We call a group of crows a murder. What of Daemons? A circuit.”

- Elora Liskow

No matter how much Mei tapped her desk, the form wouldn't fill itself. It wouldn't be such a burden if anyone else in Artemis ever bothered to enter theirs.

Action Overview and Assessment

Employee: Mei

Event: Gutter Fifteen

Summary:

- Dreads captured Artificial by unknown means. (Purpose also unknown)
- Artemis engaged. (Controlled?) Artificial disabled Castella
- Possible psychological attack (Artificial?) Ineffective
- Dreads kill Artificial, Netburst

Additional Comments:

“It doesn't make sense.” She whispered; tempted to add that as her input and be done with it. Professionalism bristling at the notion, she turned sideways to a magnified model of one of Castella's stolen chips. The carbonized circuits called to her.

Picking out the memory-nodes, she left them floating beside the spinning core. Her finger traced them, then violently shoved back into the design. When it was complete, she curled her fingers as if to hold the chip before yanking her arm sideways. The rendition flew across a diorama of Gutter Fifteen, clicking into the neck of the uniformed Dread standing over Hayabusa's Artificial.

Mei rolled her chair around, eyes fixed on the thin cable connecting the Dread and Artificial.

“Why a hardline? They had a NeuralLink attack; slow but more useful.” Standing, she leaned on the desk, eyes moving up to the Dread's neck. “Did they need something on the chip?” Her brow crinkled. “No, I'm complicating the assumptions. The simplest answer is that the NeuralLink attack wasn't working...”

Mei flicked the diorama around to the other side of the gutter. There, dazed Silvers lay scattered across the floor. She rewound the footage, going back to the moment when Castella jumped across the gutter. A second farther and the footage cut out, but even in that last scene the Silvers stared back at her.

“Not a hack...” she dropped into her seat with a disgusted cough. Chewing the inside of her cheek, she watched the diorama play out until the Netburst dissolved it like burning film. For a split second, the Undernet's delicate architecture lingered in the embers.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Mulling it over, she pulled the latest reports; two-thousand Silvers Whitewalled within a thousand-meter radius. Satisfaction curled into her lips before turning to ash.

“Collateral damage.” Her fingers started a beatless dance. “The burst was controlled, wide enough to pick up stray Dreads. Maybe... Daemons are afraid of their tech.” Her heart picked up its pace and she looked at her screen like it had sprouted teeth.

An alarm shrilled. Suppressing her jitters, Mei checked her notifications. Somewhere in Ward Two, a Jacket was tinkering with her jacket’s telemetry. There were innocent explanations, but Mei wasn’t feeling generous.

<<Anja, get back to the ship. Now.>>

<<No. If that wasn’t a hack that could change everything. Tech like that could be used to hijack entire Daemons.>>

<<At least leave the telemetry intact.>> Mei sent a glower over the connection. <<I’m not watching you to hurt you.>>

<<Castella would.>> Anja sunk into a dreary whisper.

Massaging her temple with a finger, Mei took a deep breath. <<If you really think Cas would kill you for disobeying, you need to grow up.>>

<<And Assembly Hall is supposed to be safe. Someone has to do something.>> Anja paused, then disconnected with an upbeat thought. <<It’ll be worth it, you’ll see.>>

Linking her hands beneath her chin, Mei watched Anja move deeper into Ward Two. It was some small reassurance that her logging was still running, for what good it was. Unlocking her jaw, Mei connected to Vals and Basir.

<<Anja is in Ward Two hunting a lead that said Gutter Fifteen wasn’t hacked. She’s not leaving, but at least she’s keeping her jacket on.>> She pushed the conversation to the NeuralLink.

Mentally thumbing through the exchange, Basir sighed. <<You lot are worse than kids.>>

<<Yeah, and now she’s a sunk cost.>> Vals’ tone surprised Mei, it must have come across the link because he looked straight at her. <<You told her not to go, I’m not throwing anyone else into a trap.>> His words were as tight as his jaw. <<And Mei, if you suspect anything, take her out of the system. I’m not risking any of you.>>

<<We’re clear boss.>> Basir replied first, then dropped. Vals followed his example. Mei made no effort to stop them, her interest had moved back to the unsolicited message.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“What really happened in Gutter Fifteen.” She murmured. “How would they know...” Possibilities swirled through her head, but the one that caught her tongue was the personalized attack against Castella and Basir.

Her stomach dropped, worse than it had at Vals’ words. Feeling cold prickles of sweat, she pulled up Anja’s jacket. Watching its data flow in and out of Artemis’ subnet, she moved her hand to the big red button. *Eject.*

“No.” Taking her hand off the keys, Mei brushed her hair back and sighed. Slumping in her chair, she cupped her chin with a weak chuckle. “I’m sorry Vals, this isn’t a Syndicate.”

[19] Intellectual Exchange

“Long before Daemons existed, the price of knowledge was death.”

- Elora Liskow

Hands collapsed at his waist, Gideon Hayabusa calmly studied the Assembly Chamber’s live-feed. The proceedings themselves were cluttered and rushed; as expected from mob rule. It was less forgivable that his twin onscreen flashed a magnificent smile. Gideon sketched a note on the pad beside him; *review rhetorical matrices*.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Senate, Hayabusa’s Board did not listen to me, I hope you will.” The on-screen twin began, bold enough to make the Angels lean in keenly. Gideon suppressed a sigh; even if they had called for him, fascination wasn’t a good look.

“I shouldn’t be disappointed my job is too easy.” He muttered, then looked back to his clone and felt his stare grow dull. “But, really, we must have standards.”

“That is why we have called you here, we would appreciate it if you could explain Hayabusa’s action.” The familiar confidence of a Janus Persuasive Model rekindled Gideon’s attention. It flagged when he found the venerable Silver addressing the chamber. White-haired and face crinkled, she nonetheless hid her voice’s age behind Janu’s tender ministrations. Not wasting the breath to sigh, Gideon returned his attention to his cheery clone..

“The Hayabusa Board demanded it. You see, they panicked before your election’s rapidly approaching deadline. There were certain, unrealistic, goals passed with their unilateral approval and they were going to realize them.” Gideon’s twin shook his head ruefully. *“Obviously, their work left something to be desired. Not that they were without warning.”*

“Yes.” The Senator lifted a paper with an air of detached study. *“You opposed this, did you?”*

“I did. Unlike some I don’t see Silver Star as a future province. Your independence offers a rare spot of certainty in our supply chain. But the Board prefers control to trust, and Artificial’s promise that much at least. Too little did they realize what we stood to lose. I can only hope Law has made that most clear even to them.” The trin’s face darkened, and the warmth left his voice. *“It is regrettable that the humblest among both our families paid the price. And, frankly, that is the only reason I am here at all”*

“We shall discuss Law in due time. Now, shall we take it that you support our independence?”

“You may take it however you wish. But I understood that when Silver blood was shed, you would subpoena all my engineers in a vaunted display of action. Obviously, Law would take that opportunity to heart.”

“Your candor is appreciated Mr. Hayabusa.” The aged speaker waved generally at the floor. *“Director Kant, please escort our guests out while we establish procedures for tonight’s election and the power-transfer. In the meantime, prepare any materials they wish regarding Law.”* The camera cut.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“What a farce.” Resting both hands on his head, Gideon Hayabusa reclined. The shadows hadn’t yet reclaimed his office when a crimson whirlwind spun into existence.

“A rather poor showing from your rhetorical matrix.” Yama brassy tones boomed as the Daemon arrived, and Gideon met the being’s smoldering eyes with a heavy-lidded stare.

“What is that look supposed to mean?” The Daemon spewed ash that hung about it like a bad temper. “I hope you don’t feel me responsible for all this, my siblings and I have always let mankind make their own decisions.”

“You take offense?”

Yama’s burning crown flared, then simmered down. “More than I should, yes. But all this talk reminds me of Elora Liskow and her Daemon Circuit. Really, you and the Board have worked too hard just to have us claim responsibility.”

“They would say the same if your positions were reversed.” Gideon said, leaving his lazy stare on the Daemon.

“You do not trust me.” Yama’s pained voice accused him.

“The closed mind is a poor mind.” Keeping impassive, Gideon considered Yama’s rippled face, which was fierce enough to easily be read as anger. But it could be anything, assigning human emotions to the inhuman was a common mistake.

“I have another update.” Yama said, tone bitter as ash. “We have new visuals on Takemura’s patrols. While manageable, they will cut dramatically into our time table. The additional attention also means people, and by extension Silvera, will notice faster than originally planned.”

“That is why we held our little charity drives, to buy precious seconds.” Gideon’s cold contest with Yama broke as a new message arrived at his agent. Sourced outside of Hayabusa’s Subnet and flagged as important, he couldn’t help but look.

The Daemon must have noticed, but he wiped his desk anyway and busied himself with a scuff in the lacquer. “What about our friends in Artemis?”

“They remain scattered throughout Silver Star, though most have returned to their ship. As for the pair who survived the Netburst, they have moved into Ward Two and their current destination is unknown.”

“Is that all?” Murmuring, Gideon brushed his finger along his desk and frowned as his thumbnail caught on a gouge. Yet the varnish was clear enough for him to see Yama’s reflection grimace before answering.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“One individual was seen setting off on her own. However, she was not involved in the Gutter Fifteen incident and provides no use to us.” Gideon continued to pick at his desk’s wound while studying Yama’s gloss-ghost. The Daemon watched him just as carefully, before wearily soldiering on.

“Captain Briggs has asked me to remind you that we can have Takemura or Artemis, not both.” Yama’s brow flickered in what might have been a frown. “I trust you are not planning on splitting our forces. As it stands, tactical assessments already indicate heavy casualties among our operatives. Not too mention the possible attention.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Gideon looked up with a smile. “Tell the captain he has my continued support. Finding a possible Artificial is the absolute highest of Hayabusa’s priorities.”

“Very good.” Bowing stiffly, Yama disappeared in an ashen swirl.

Once the Daemon was gone, Gideon opened the message that had patiently awaited his attention. Clicking through two separate warnings about trusting unverified sources, he skimmed the contents. A faint smile on his lips, he tapped out a reply, he rose, took a Blend-cloak from his wall and set out.

At ground level, he waved off the approaching guards on his way to a side entrance. Unconcerned by their obvious reluctance, he tugged the cloak on and waited for the digital skin to match his surroundings before stepping out onto High Street. Crimson Fetters washed over him, a necessary precaution to insulate Hayabusa against the agitators still camped outside its walls. The Wolves and UEVs outside turned a blind eye to Gideon, no reason to tip the public off to his presence.

Gideon chose his path carefully, balancing accidental contact against his curiosity. It took him past a knot of young Silvers clustered around a portable stove. They ate and drank, priding themselves on handmade silverware. Yet they couldn’t help but turn to the matter at hand, not when they camped in Hayabusa’s shadow.

“You really think they bought off the Senate?” A young woman, more a girl, worked both hands around a cup; black tea, by the smell of it. She lingered over it, bewitched by the earthy scent, while mumbling her doubts.

“Of course they did, that’s what they do.” A young man drawled, beady eyes daring Hayabusa’s Wolves to disagree. Taking their silence as compliance, he nodded and thrust a finger toward Assembly Hall. “What would they need with all those Hayabusa engineers? They just want to show their masters what they’re paying for.”

The girl bobbed her head in agreement, but couldn’t stop herself. “So then... why hasn’t Hayabusa won any elections?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Because they don’t need to! They want you thinking like that. BUT the reality is, they don’t need to win any, they already did.” Looking to his fellows for support, the man puffed himself up on their eager nods. His eyes glinted with bold confidence. Faced with such surety, the girl nodded again, though she couldn’t keep the thoughtful expression from her face.

“How quaint.” Muttering to himself, Gideon set off with a rueful shake of his head. He did spare the girl one parting look though. It was a shame she stood where she did; he could use more thinkers in his circle. Making a note to identify the girl when he got back, Gideon left behind the frontlines and dipped into High Street’s clogged veins. Shoulder to shoulder, he doffed his cloak and walked with his head held high.

Of a thousand Silvers and tourists, not one called him by name. Even when their eyes met his, there was no flash of recognition, nor even a spark of interest. Some shimmied out of his way but they would have done that for any Synder. Equal parts bemused and indignant, he made a second note; *improve brand recognition*.

Setting a decidedly quicker pace, he made it to a park overlooking Silver Sea. Winding around self-infatuated tourists, he found a bench near the shore and took a seat. It wasn’t long before his fellow sightseers excused themselves; no need to risk being near a Synder. So he sat alone, until someone sat down beside him.

Bare-chested save for the jacket draped over his shoulders, the man kept both hands buried in his pockets and had as much expression as a drowned corpse. Paying him no mind, Gideon looked to the scintillating horizon. The stranger noticed.

“Why not me?” He asked, voice hollow.

“Because you are my asset, not Hayabusa’s.” Gideon turned from the skyline to look sharply at the lifeless visitor. “Besides, the Wolves have to earn their keep.”

“They are brittle.” Pulling his hands free, the man held up a Takemura-made knife and pinched the blade. It snapped with a loud ring, and he tossed the pieces down before meeting Gideon’s eye. “I socialize. I use. I dispose.”

“Which is why I have another job for you.” Gideon answered. “Artemis Contractors has a small team in Ward Two, the same ones that survived Gutter Fifteen. I would very much like to invite them to my office.”

“Dead or alive?”

“Alive, if it’s not too much trouble.” Grinning, Gideon admired his nails. “Normally I wouldn’t worry, but their Superkiller had a sword. She wouldn’t be one of you Gurkhas, would she?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“We use knives, not swords.” The stranger closed his eyes. “Do you know why?”

“Come now, I’ve never questioned your methods.”

“It is a symbol.” Opening an eye, the man rose to his feet. “A promise that we can get close enough to slit your throat.”

Gideon looked up, face tightening. “I did say alive, didn’t I?”

“Done.” With that, the man crunched over to the wall and dropped over the side. He was gone before anyone could tell him to stop. Gideon certainly didn’t. He was already gone.

[20] The Long Arm of the Law

“Don’t fight what you can’t outrun.”

- Silver Star street proverb

Hanging out of the Gunhawk, Law pushed up a fat spool of cables so the ship could pass under. Ahead, the Tangle sprawled like a jungle, filled with more metallic boughs eager to catch her. Gritting her teeth, she ducked through the cabin to the other side and shoved another out of the weight. She spat on as it fell behind, then snarled as another cracked the back of her head.

“I had them!” Snarling, she spun around and flayed the offending line. Breathing heavily, she let the sparks wash over her. Then she looked down to her claws and slowly curled them, imagining the gray-haired Synder stuck on the blades. “I had them.”

“I know you did, but you heard Hiero.” Murder crackled into her earpiece. *“He wanted us to head to Takemura Tower.”*

“I know! But now we look like a bunch of pushovers. I like Jacky but I’m not her bitch!” She roared, loud enough to get through the Gunhawk’s thick canopy. Nostrils flaring she shook her head clear and went back to shoving cables out of the way. It didn’t stop her from grumbling. “There’s better ways of making her look good. We got a reputation to keep, you know? Bastard never was committed to our way of doing things, was he?”

“Maybe not, but everyone liked the flyby Station Zero. That little stunt it at the top of the charts.”

“Until Heiro tells us to fuck off again? I didn’t get this far by listening to everything that asshole said” Now that adrenaline’s bloody rush had faded, her doubts were festering. She grit her teeth. “Next time we see him I’m getting some answers.

“Like what exactly?”

She gnashed her teeth as Murder’s wary tone. “Like how he gets us so much drone coverage for starters. Or what about the drone hacks? Or why he likes to got though you instead of me. Fuck!” Punching the ships’ hull, she exhaled slowly. “Yeah, I got a lot of questions.”

Murder was silent for a long while, and when he finally answered his dull tone, and equally dull query, made Law roll her eyes. *“Anyone on our tail?”*

“I told you, they fucked off, you fucking deaf?” She stretched to ease another monstrous cable over the wing. The Tangle’s homemade cables wreaked havoc with navigational system; Silver Star’s Gunhawks had broken off pursuit long before Murder flew them into the tunnels.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Good thing they’re not crazy,” Mumbling as he guided the vessel around a trunk, Murder tapped the brakes hard enough to halt Law. .

Hammering the hull in frustration, Law glared at a bobbing scav-ship tied to the other side of the pillar. The Silvers attending it scattered upon seeing Law’s ship. Most ducked out of sight in the Tangle’s many nooks, but one dropped what he was carrying and pulled a gauss-launcher onto his shoulder. He was taking aim when he saw Law staring him down. A toothy grin dissolved his sour expression as he threw up his middle finger.

She returned the gesture, and snickered as the man howled in delight.

“You have the weirdest fans.” Releasing a shaky breath, Murder angled the Gunhawk toward the tunnel’s bottom, where spliced wires cables sparked like deepsea feelers. Turning away, Law looked up to where the Silver Sea basked in the EYE’s sun.

“Life sure is grand when you don’t mind the boot on your face.” She eyed a bright maglev winding like a coral snake through the colorful ocean. *“One of these days you’ll wake up, see the fire all around you, and wonder why you never listened. And I’ll be there to see it”*

“Save the speeches, can’t even raise Hiero in here.”

“Then put us down! This is fuckin’ primetime, gonna lose fans if we don’t show.”

Murder answered by navigating the ship into a narrow strait. Sparks cascaded across the Gunhawk as it broke through the copper foliage, raising angry shouts from the shadows. Law stared them down until the Gunhawk dipped through an opening to putter along the Tangle’s belly. They were in its interference, Law could tell by the Tangle’s stable hum. She didn’t complain, just let its steadiness calmed her.

“Four more minutes Law..”

Law nodded; things would get complicated if they were spotted. Her eyes was drawn down past the ward’s neon clouds, to the MegaHabs three kilometers away. And with eyes like hers, there was a lot to see. Crowds huddled there, neither organized nor intimidating.

Her lips curled up, squeezing the last color from her scars. Those people were her people, the skulls on their jackets and their ratty locks of hair was proof. her admiration was broken when a void shot overhead, sucking up infrared and lidar scans. It was dumb luck that she saw the next one.

The ship was oblong, wings swept close to its fuselage, engines burning a low white. Law frowned, even if guns and brute force were more her style she wouldn’t forget the stealth ships of her past life. Pulling the image on a sunscreen, she checked the ID on the side. *D-21*. Punting the information into her NeuralLink, she watched the twin stars furiously ascend toward Ward Two.

“Who the fuck got their hands on Dread’s old stealth ships?” Murder whistled softly.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Gun it.” Ducking back inside, Law connected to the Net and ran the serials. Feeling poetic, she thought of the throughput as grainy; they weren’t out of the Tangle yet. After a second wait, one of Silver Star’s administrative Subnets lit up. She clicked in, then laughed like a sputtering engine.

“Those junkers are supposed to be in storage!” She tossed the results to Murder, her outburst settling into a purr. “These guys must have friends in high places. Maybe we need to go pay Aquitaine a visit.” Murder answered by jerking the ship back up to hug the tangle.

Hanging from the ceiling’s grab bar, Law bit her tongue. Her simmering question was answered as a flock of Dread Gunhawks cut the sky below. She watched hungrily, as the flight looped toward High Street without sparing a single glance for the most wanted woman in Silver Star.

“Murder,” her anger manifested in velvety words. “You’re supposed to be looking out for this kind of shit.”

“Yeah, well, they came out of the Tangle.” Murder snarled.

“Interesting,” Law’s eyes lit up. “What’s our Senate up to now?”

“Law.” Hierophant’s voice reached them from far away. *“I anticipate Hayabusa will attack shortly. Move into position, I...”* Static crinkled his words. *“Artemis will be there, do not...”* A final hiss of interference stole his words away, but that didn’t blunt Law’s smile.

“Pale’s going to be there? Why didn’t you say so?” Law returned to reality with a bright cackle. Murder gave her an apprehensive look over the ship’s internal cameras.

“I take it we’re not going there to vote?”

“Course we are, It’s the Law!” She threw her arms open. “Kill first, vote later, that’s how I do business. Now hit it, wouldn’t want to be late?”

“For Hayabusa? Never.” With more resignation than anticipation in his voice, Murder opened up the engines.

Swaying in the acceleration, Law dipped into her agent. Ignoring the saccharine support of her admirers, she opened her diagnostics. She grunted in pleased surprise; the joint-sheathing behind her right knee was frayed, but the impacts on safe operation speed were minimal. Better yet, her dorsal armor and weapons were fully functional.

“Imagine blowing yourself just to knick me.” Humming Slaughterhammer’s *Butcher to Prevail*, she clicked forward. Internal batteries were topped off, no damage to her spine, all systems green; she could deadlift a tank. She switched to the part she was waiting for.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“The fuck is this?” Squinting at the numbers, she turned her chin down and brushed a hand across her armor. Her fingers didn’t hitch on gouges or dents, just scrapped off flakes of ash, paint, and blood. Holding up her hand, she looked at the clean blades then checked her dashboard again.

Armor integrity: ninety-nine percent. She dropped her head back in a peal of laughter before hammering her chest like a war drum.

“I love me.” She leaned out the bay, enjoying the wind rushing over her scarred face. Then her pupils swung toward the cockpit. “What?”

Murder cleared his throat. “*Nothing, just thinking that’s easy to say when you got a Triumph full-body. How much did that cost you again?*”

“What can I say? Silver star’s retirement program was generous.” Law snickered, mood too good to be dragged down. Thrusting her hand out, she ran her fingers through the speed-thicke winds. Like heroes of old, she was strong enough to bend steel and catch arrows. It never failed to put a smile on her face.

Murder ripped her back to the present. “*They only stitched us up to get the job done.*”

“Oh believe me, we will.” Her dreams gone, Law turned toward Ward Two’s encroaching skyline. Takemura Tower held the center, a mountain of glass that, reflecting the MegaHabs countless lights, had become an entire constellation.

“Saigo would’ve loved you.” Black metal poured from the nape of her neck and closed over her head in a sleek fit. Her voice turned into a dragon’s growl.

“That man lived in the Ebon Array’s dark bowels, spent all his years trying to destroy towers like that. Takemura, you really think you can call yourselves Samurai?” She caressed the gun at her side with a throaty chuckle. Behind her faceplate, the dark gems of her pupils searched the fluorescent sky for fliers. She saw none; Takemura had officially closed its airspace.

“Nothing on scans. Looks like our junkers got an upgrade.”

Not interested in answering, Law peered down into the metal jigsaw of Ward Two. It swarmed with millions of microscopic movements, but in the mad glitter of her eye there was only one that mattered. She found the first shimmer atop one of the MegaHabs abutting the Takemura plaza. It skittered into position as she watched, its sight-lines perfect to overlook Takemura’s complex. A second haze dashed past it to jump to another rooftop. Sightseers ambled along, oblivious to the machines leaping overhead.

She guffawed. “Well look at that, UEVs on the hunt”

“They really planning to storm the place? No way Silvera would let that happen.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Yeah? And people said no one ever dies on High Street. Use your head.” Law pursed her lips as Murder sent the Gunhawk into a slow turn around the Takemura building. Eight million people were watching her reruns, but they were hungry for action.

Murder noticed too. *“Should we say something?”*

“Nah, don’t want to give Hayabusa warning.” Law jostled her machine-gun to check the belt of heavy shells, while her eyes narrowed on the armed patrols atop Takemura Tower. She whistled softly. “Don’t want to give ol’ Takemura a warning either, those guys are packing. Give me another loop Murder, something’s up.”

Hierophant must have heard, because he spoke through her helmet, clear as day. *“You are waiting time. Hayabusa has already encircled the building and Artemis is inside.”*

“And no one’s started shooting yet.” She snapped back. “Besides, what the fuck you doing with Takemura?”

“Hoping to avoid attention.” Hierophant’s grew cold. *“The same reason I haven’t explained the situation to them. Now get down, Artemis will be here soon.”*

Law sneered. “Fine, sit tight and let me take care of your mess. Put us down Murder.”

“What? We didn’t—”

She punched the cabin door. “When I say put us down, you ask where! Now do your fucking job and get me inside.” Murder grumbled something, but she shut it out to focus on Takemura Tower’s roof, where the patrols were hurrying about.

“Looks like they figured it out.” Humming, she looked to the ghostly UEVs perched on the neighboring MegaHabs. She was just in time to see a sparkling network of missiles lance out, flowering into staggered EMPs that canceled out Takemura’s layered magnetic fields. Then the real killers sprung in, splitting micro-explosives that drummed the rooftop like hail.

Men and women were scattered to the wind like bloody pollen, before crackling flames engulfed them all. Law held her breath, then broke into a smile as dark shadows emerged out from the flames, tattered cloth dangling off their polymorphic armor. Rail launchers briefly glittered on their shoulders, then spat their hypersonic rounds.

Picking a favorite UEV, Law watched it scuttle along the rooftop to minimize its profile. A projectile glance off its hull, crippling one of the forward legs. The UEV detached the limb without losing speed, avoiding more shots that sailed on to ruin someone else’s day.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Come on,” Law willed the murderous machine on as it darted forward, skittering around the craters blowing open around it. She jerked her head forward as it reached the MegaHabs edge and scuttled out of sight. Squeezing her fists, she bit her tongue until she saw a stream of tracers pour out from its hiding spot. Frantically running her eyes along the burning threads, she saw Takemura’s steel melt, taking a dozen obsidian-armored Samurai with it.

She chuckled, then cocked an eyebrow as a second blur jumping onto the Takemura building. Underneath its sisters protective fire, it shimmied to the tower’s roof. Inches from the edge, it was thrown backward, trailing debris and bodies. Electrified, she shivered as the mangled UEV crashed into the plaza, sending the Silvers running.

“Showtime.” Grinning, Law went live.

[21] Contact

“Fortunately for us, the Syndicates stand little to gain in all-out war.”

- Suman Kai, *The History of Everything*

Wolves weren’t meant for cages. Hayabusa Employee First-Class Adams had heard the saying a hundred times before, now he was beginning to understand it. Strapped into the breach-pod, his arms were pinned to his sides and his legs were locked in place. It was like someone put him in a mold and poured concrete in. The only difference was the excessive dashboard of lights and readouts sprinkled across the inside of his prison.

“How’s the new kid?” Luther’s voice came over the pod’s radio, loud and upbeat. The man was shouting, no other way to be heard above the firestorm outside. Adams latched on to the conversation, eager to forget the death exploding outside the ship.

“I’m missing my Sorcerer, those things—” Adams shouted, then choked as the ship lurched and his automatic harness tightened. Sputtering, he groaned as the ship leveled off.

“That’s why they make us drink breakfast.” Vice came across dull as ever, but she earned snickers from over the speakers.

“Shame we can’t bring your Sorcerer with us.” Feng spoke next, his voice deep in thought.

“Yeah,” Adams laughed, though it was hard in his restraints. “Those things were a blast. Missiles, miniguns, felt like I was a walking tank.”

Vice huffed. “Vow you’re stuck wearing paper, what a promotion.” Her sigh filled the moody silence. “Let’s just hope Takemura doesn’t have any, wannabe Samurai I can handle.”

“Careful, this a simple smash and grab. Get in, get our man, and get out. no grudges allowed. That means you Vice, we’re not here to put Takemura in his place.” Luther’s calm voice seeped in Adams, stilling the unconscious fretting of his muscles.

“Sorry,” Even though no one could see, he tossed his chin toward the high pulse and body temperature printed inside his pod. “Those are from the Sorcerer augments, residual nerves.”

Before anyone else from the team could chime in, a voice lacking any charisma crackled into their ears. “Attention Team Two, we will drop in ten seconds.”

“Briggs,” Feng’s displeasure was audible.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Enough talking, you’re going to bite your tongue.” Luther said.

Nodding his agreement, Adams licked his lips as black-enamel implanted in his gums slithered over his teeth. Then his world shook, throwing his stomach up into his heart. His head thumped back as metallic rain plinked against the pod’s hull like dead men trying to get in. His altitude alarm flicked and he braced for impact.

A hum filled his ears, buzzing up from the pod’s floor as a Fold-field burst to life. Instantly a square meter of fortified roof was crunched into the size of a marble. Adams’ pod trembled as the pod screamed through the opening and started eating into the floor while its stabilizing thrusters started to burn. As he settled into the rocking, Adams tried to distract himself with the destination countdown. Ten floors left. Five. One.

His prison disappeared as the pod exploded, sending its four walls hurtling. The outside world was painted in hungry flames while plastic’s acrid tang filled the air. Grabbing his gun, he surged forward as his restraints fell away. Noticing a blip on his visor, he whipped around and spat thunder from his rifle before rolling into cover behind one of his pod’s doors. In the gloom, a young woman lay stiff on the ground, her upper half smeared along the floor and wall.

More blips. He swiveled, enhanced reflexes halfway on the trigger when fiery ribbons streaked past his ear and tore apart the hall. Wreathed in the sickening reflection, Vice stepped forward, hosing down the hall.

“Wrong, I take point.” She was barely audible above the hunder, but it was enough for Adams to spin back around. In a moment she was methodically walking past him, unmoved by the tracks she made in the dead woman’s blood. Adams rose to join the other Wolves as they padded in behind her.

“Check your target next time. We’re not in Sorcerers this time, you’ll get us killed shooting blind.” Luther’s reprimand was light as he made his way through the ruined hall.

Feng grunted his disagreement. “His pod landed first.”

“Didn’t say I blamed him. But it’s not a great start for us.” Luther coughed a laugh, then clucked his tongue. Staring at the update on his visor, Adams felt the same way.

Parameter Update:

Danger - Law on premise

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Now I really wish I had my Sorcerer. Did Briggs really not figure this would happen? We knew Law was lurking around” Adams said, following Luther in Vice’s burning wake.

“Believe me, I’d pull rank if I could.” Luther sighed, and Adams' gut chilled as the easy confidence he felt before evaporated. And there was something more, hidden in the way he looked at Vice’s outline strolling through the flames.

“You got a plan?” From the silence he got in answer, Adams felt like his question was out of place. he felt just as guilty when Luther dipped his head.

“No, but we got a Ghost.”

[Signal Shift...]

“Feast your eyes Silver Star, this is what happens when Syndicates come knocking.” Pouring her heart’s wild energy into her enunciation, Law threw her arm out and over Takemura plaza. There, amid the smoke and falling debris, Silvers scattered to the wind, leaving behind mangled bodies and an unfinished election. She gnashed her quivering teeth.

“See that? Takemura can’t save you from Hayabusa, Rebecca can’t either, and don’t even think about counting on Pale Oni.” Scrunching her scarred lips to the side, Law shook her head. “Sad, isn’t it? If only there was someone willing to take the fight to the Syndicates.” She popped her eyes wide as eight million viewers spammed the Skull and Scales. Surprise melting into a sinister grin, she unfurled a finger and set it under the screen’s chin.

“Me? You think little ol’ me can save you chat? What gave you bastards that idea? The scars?” Tapping a finger under her eye, she stopped, smirked, then turned the bladed digit to the camera. “Or is it the knives? No, wait, don’t tell me; it’s my can-do attitude?”

Knives. Replied her fans, whether in words or images.

“I should’ve known, I break spines, not hearts.” Winking, Law reached up and ran a hand through her hair. “So sit back, and enjoy the show. And if you don’t already got one, pick up a premium subscription, this is gonna be good.”

Nestled deep in the wires and circuits of her chest, her artificial heart thumped in excitement. Stronger and more robust than flesh, it pumped her thundering blood, egging her on

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like war drums. Just as it reached its thrilling peak, the beat came to a screeching stop. Thumbing off her stream, Law snarled at the cabin.

“Murder, why the fuck aren’t we moving?” Her gaze was fixed on the glinting surface of Takemura Tower, which remained distant as ever.

“They got some serious anti-air Law.” Murder’s answer was dull as it was stiff.

“Had!” Screaming, Law slammed her palm against the hull once, then again for good measure. Nostrils flaring, she rounded about on the cabin door, teeth bared like she intended to rip it off its hinges.

“Had. And Hayabusa fuckin’ wasted it all. Now quit whining and get me there. Or did you forget who saved you?” She cocked her head, then spread her grin wider at the lingering silence. “Murder, don’t do me like this, it’s not good for your health.”

“You did Law.” And with that lifeless acknowledgment, he tipped the ship forward. Grunting impatiently, Law turned back to the bay door. Playful winds tugged at her scalp, but there was no sign as the ship passed through the tower’s magnetic fields. That was, until the blue screen, stamped with Takemura’s lotus, jumped up on her visor.

Warning: Violating Electoral Airspace

Depart Immediately - Lethal Force Authorized

That dynamo in her chest resumed its eager throbbing. Restless, she ran her eyes over the rooftop, or what was left of it. Hayabusa’s remaining UEV was still smothering any signs of life in a deluge of fire.

“Told ya,” Law bit down on the words as if to chew them to pieces. Her gaze slithered back to the rippling UEV, and her expression hardened. “Wonder how long it’ll be before Silvera locks ‘em down. She’s the only one who does anything these days.”

“Hopefully before they see us.” Murder grumbled.

Law ground her teeth, Murder was even whinier than usual. Forcing herself to smile through her locked jaw, she spoke loud enough so he could hear. “Relax, they got better things to worry about. And so do I.”

“I’m glad you realize it.” Hierophant entered the conversation, voice harsh as static as it poured over the ship’s speakers. Puffing out her cheeks, Law sneered at the accompanying datagram before

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

letting it into her agent. Two red bands painted themselves across the belly of Takemura Tower, indicating two different floors.

“These are the positions of Hayabusa’s Wolves. Deal with them, we are running out of time.”

Hierophant's impatience made Law chew her tongue to stop from screaming back. If he noticed, the man paid no mind as he rambled and painted another blue stripe on the building. *“That is where I am, do whatever you have to, but do not let them reach me.”*

She cracked her jaw, loud enough to break the droning in her ears and slam down her own words instead. “Where’s Artemis?” Hostile, judging silence, then a snapped answer.

“I’ll tell you after you’ve dealt with the Wolves.”

“Sure you shouldn’t be more worried about them? They got a pretty tidy track-record, and I saw what they did to Dreads. Bet their boss would love to get his hands on you.”

“Irrelevant. Now give up your infatuation and move.” There was an audible click from the line, letting her know there would be no more disagreement.

“Since when did I take orders from you?” Muttering to herself, Law plugged back into the stream. Far from hiding her frustrations, she let them strain her voice. “Alright you bastards, I’m back, had to crush some technical difficulties. Now I’m ready to do the same to Hayabusa.”

Taking the cue, Murder picked up speed, but he didn’t give any warning when he slammed into the turn. But with the speed readings on her visor and the gyroscopes in her legs, Law didn’t need it. She stood firm as wind gusted into the bay, lashing her faceplate like a bomb blast while the rushed up like a glass tidal wave.

Flexing her knees, she bounded at the turn’s peak; momentum throwing her forward at catastrophic speeds. Her premium viewers shrieked; delighted as children when their stomachs dropped and the city flew beneath their feet.

“Didn’t I tell you to buckle up?.” Law grinned at the pale color of her audience’s vicarious delight. It was nothing compared to the real thing.

Shoving their shrilling out of mind, Law focused on her destination. Cool and collected, she pulsed her wrist cannon, carving the glass into a dark maw with broken teeth. Then she turned off her display, no point spoiling the plot.

With the jagged glass landing as their only landmark, her viewers gasped. Over the stream’s sympathetic-sentiment interface, she felt them tense, worry, doubt, and adrenaline glutting the

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

connection as dark shapes swam in the cave ahead. They all braced for impact; some for the one ahead, others for the one below. Law snorted; as if.

As open sky vanished and Takemura's jagged mouth swallowed her, Law executed a perfect roll. She was up immediately, dissecting the uneven darkness where lights flickered overhead. An instant later she lashed out, spearing a chunk of the darkness on her left hand. Her reeling viewers caught up a second later, to feel the wet, quivering mess smeared across the palm of their hands.

"Where do you think you're going, dog?." She whispered to the figure sagging on her glittering knives. Then she flicked her wrist, sending the broken thing flopping away. Crashing into a well-lit wall, the Wolf slumped to the floor, barely held together by its polymorphic armor. Its matte visor stared back at Law, then disappeared as the half-dead thing yanked up a rifle and fired.

In the midst of that scintillating flash, a blunt impact kicked Law in the gut. Lunging forward as the bullet punched through her first layer of armor, she left her viewers gasping for air. Weakened as he was, the Wolf struggled with recoil. He managed a second shot, much to the stream's shrieking delight, but the tungsten bolt screamed harmlessly past Law's ear.

Sweeping in, Law shoved his head through the wall before ducking a trio of rounds that exploded overhead. Whipping around, wreathed in dissolved plaster, she fired blindly into the murk. Desks and chairs evaporated before the large-bore explosives, briefly revealing a pack of Wolves slinking out of sight.

They were moving fast, bounding away on powered strides. Behind her, a hiss rose as the Wolf's liquid armor underwent chemical deconstruction. Not a Ghost then, just a Syndicate thug with premium exfiltration gear. Making a fool of her city.

"You're not getting away that easy," dropping her voice, Law started to prowl. "You're my ticket to the main event." She stopped, noticing a small blip in her IMF. Tracking it to the floor, she broke into a cackle as the cylinder rolled to her feet. Then the grenade swallowed her in fire.

[22] Tunnels

“A city is only as stable as the ground beneath its feet.”

- Unattributed, Ebon Array

“Don’t. Say. Anything.” Vals lifted a hand to silence Matt as he watched Rebecca marched out of the senate like a condemned criminal. He kept waiting for someone to object right up until the woman vanished behind the double doors.

“There’s no procedure for this.” Jacky’s fraught words crashed down on Vals, her flushed cheeks were the only visible emotion. “But... it can’t be that bad if Rebecca is going along with it.”

“Maybe, except they’re letting Kant walk.”

“Probably because they don’t want to weaken Dreads in the middle of an election.” Jacky inhaled slowly, the vividity evaporating from her cheeks. Then she pointed at the man accompanying Rebecca. “Or maybe not. They barely questioned Gideon. Even if Rebecca resigned, at least one Senator should have tried to blame him. Unless...”

“Unless it was planned. Good instincts.” Vals let the smile creep across his face. “Maybe that’s why Rebecca didn’t call us either. After twelve years, I think she could see this coming”

“She would’ve.” Tightness returned to Jacky’s face, but it was far from helpless. “We should at least call her to make sure.

Nodding, Vals dipped into his NeuralLink. The President’s star still gleamed there but didn’t respond as he contacted it. He shook his head. Jacky took it calmly while Matt scoffed.

“That’s more than you did for Anja.”

“She disobeyed orders.” Vals snapped.

“And? We’re not dogs.” Matt squared his shoulders and glared at Vals. After a terse silence, he shook his head and sulked over to the wall. “Whatever.”

Vals exhaled a little bit of the tension from his shoulders. It came right back as a slender figure materialized over Jacky’s shoulder.

“*Jacky, are you okay?*” Silvera’s dew soft voice faltered before the woman’s hardening stare.

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“Okay?” Inhaling deeply, Jacky rubbed an eye. “No. Not particularly.”

“I’m sorry, events have... gone awry.”

“I know, I saw that farce of a trial. It’s like they forgot Law butchered Hayabusa’s people on their doorstep.” Jacky pinched her nose. “I guess Grayson has more important things to care about dead Silvers. Or Whitewalled ones.” Her hand moved up, sweeping through her hair. “And why wouldn’t she? This is the perfect chance to take Rebecca down. Who cares Law and Hayabusa?”

“You Senate and I both defer to the people. And there is... competition for our attention.” Silvera flickered like a program running out of memory. *“But your voice holds much weight, if you—”*

“We both know it’s not that simple.” Fixing a weary smile to her face, Jacky turned her brittle gaze on Vals. “That’s because Rebecca Bellen is my mother.”

“I figured it was something like that when she called you.” Vals didn’t quite keep the disappointment from his voice.

“I know. It... it’s nepotism, But I wanted to help people and they wanted to help me make a difference.” Jacky looked at them both in turn, an optimistic glint lighting her gaze. “Rebecca always tried to keep it quiet, leave me out of her shadow. That didn’t work, it probably never would. I think it’s time I told the truth, that’s what Silver Star wants me to do.”

“Oh,” Vals frowned, imagining her standing before the Senate put his teeth on edge. “I’d be careful what you say,” he managed to fix his eyes on her. “Someone is always going to take what you say the wrong way. You throw that out there now, people will say you’re fishing for sympathy. Say it after, you’re covering up.”

Jacky put on a crooked smile. “And if I never say it?”

“Then I had you wrong.”

“You wouldn’t be the only one.” She laughed weakly. “I have a little time to think about that, but right now the election itself is what matters. Right or wrong, Rebecca’s name is on the ballot and protecting the election means protecting its candidates. And its suspects.” Firming her voice, Jacky folded her arms. “Don’t worry about me Artemis, I’ll be safe here.”

Vals lifted an eyebrow. “Those orders?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“If you won’t go without me, you’ll go with me.”

“Don’t got much choice when you put it that way.” Biting back a smile, Vals moved toward the door and pointed at Matt. “You stay here, okay?”

Glued to the wall, Matt turned his head away with a grumble. “You wouldn’t go after Anja.”

“Matt, I’m not abandoning her, I’m protecting the rest of us. Anja is walking blind, probably into a trap,” Vals touched his knuckles to Matt’s chest. “I’m just walking up and saying hi.”

“We both know that’s not true.” Puffing his cheeks out, Matt glared at Vals from the corner of his eyes. “Just don’t go get yourself killed, you owe Anja an apology after this.”

“And I will, responsibility ends with me.” Vals rapped Matt once more, then let his hand slide down as the polymorphic helmet melted over his face. Without a word more, he stepped out into hall.

It was morgue-quiet as Vals loaded Assembly Hall’s map and plugged in Rebecca’s NeuralLink. His AutoMap painted a teal line painted on his visor where it snaked into the gloom.

<<I feel obliged to remind you these are bad odds.>> Mei popped into his NeuralLink with a sore quality. It wasn’t outright defiance like Matt, but whatever it was, she didn’t give him a chance to dwell on it. <<I’d also advice you disconnect your NeuralLink, since Dreads can likely hack it.>>

<<Right, see you later.>> Slipping a hand to his neck, Vals ejected the chip; silence devoured the NeuralLink’s ambient buzz. Keeping on the balls of his feet, Vals drew his pistol. In the harsh light from overhead, the weapon looked like cheap plastic, but in his sweaty hands and white knuckles it was heavy like a boulder. He cracked a smile. “Taking on Dreads all by myself, Cas must be rubbing off.”

Who said you’re all by yourself? The words rustled through his bones. With no direction, he looked about calmly, examining every inch of concrete before raising his voice.

“If I’m not, why don’t you come and we talk face to face?”

You got a mirror handy? Otherwise I don’t think you’d like that. This time the voice brushed his cheek like crumbling ash. *Seriously, your parents never teach you not to stick your hands in strange places?*

Vals touched his neck; the chip was disconnected and his NeuralLink was still dark. His pulse doubled; Mei was wrong. That didn’t happen often.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Oh, you think this is Dreads? Not quite. Try your run in with Senator Dawson. Vals froze up as his free hand waved in front of his face. *Call me Hubal, friends use first names, right?*

The pit in Vals' gut was big enough to swallow Silver Star with room to spare. Yanking his hand down, he glared at thin air. "How much choice I got in all this?"

Not sure, new to this myself! Good news is, we both got a bone to pick with Dreads. Hubal cackled, but it soone evaporated into grim silence. *Or Kant in my case. Either way, you'll have a god on your side.*

"Didn't do Dawson much good, did it?"

Know what's strange? Hubal mused. I thought I was the interloper until he was about to die, then all of a sudden I got... scared? Maybe it was him, but I didn't want to die, so I tried to escape. Lucky for me you were around to sync up to. Its voice softened to nothing. *Wonder what it'll be like the second time.*

Vals grunted, working up enough spit to ask, "you planning to find out?"

Already died once today. Hubal tugged Vals forward. *Now I want revenge.*

[23] Hollow

“Sure, we make music about Samurai, war, and glory. But we’re not the ones buying it.”

- Slaughterhammer, Interview with Suman Kai

William Kant was due a little satisfaction. So, as the Assembly Hall closed its doors behind him, he called upon Silvera’s API and pulled up a semantic array of the Net’s most popular terms. A quick thought reduced millions of selections to just one..

Term: Daemon

Sentiment: -.078 (-1.6)

“I take it you’re proud of yourself?”

Kant turned toward his interrogator. Unbowed by her armed guard, Rebecca Hanza looked evenly at him. Her attention was absolute, uncompromised by emotion. It was tantalizingly possible he had underestimated her.

“Shouldn’t we take pride in our work?” He replied.

“That depends on the nature of your work.” Rebecca rolled her piercing gaze to her left as someone coughed.

“You are both wrong.” Gideon, loud and boorish as ever, clapped his hands. “The answer is it depends on the audience. And there it is right now.” He gestured past the armored Dreads to a uniformed figure hurrying their way. The man in question came to a stop and greeted Kant with a crisp salute.

“Sir. We have secured the building, but protests are ongoing.” He spoke for everyone to hear, then gave Rebecca a brisk nod. “They are asking for their President.”

Kant nodded absently. “I take it Silvera is not cooperating yet?”

“She insists she follows the people’s will. For the foreseeable future, that is Rebecca.” Worry pinched the Dread’s cheeks. “We have stood down, but there will be casualties if nothing changes.”

“It is past time they take some initiative.” Shaking his head, Kant glanced expectantly at the opposite wall. “My orders stand.” Stiff as could be, the man saluted Kant, then Rebecca. He was off before he got a chance to hear Rebecca’s warm words

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Silvers. I’d remain President in their hearts even if I told them I hated them. Small wonder Silvera follows their example.” Rebecca tilted her head to study Kant from a new angle. “You don’t seem thrilled. Do you wish Daemons listened to you instead?”

“I resent that they create a single point of failure. But perhaps I could tolerate it if they didn’t hide themselves away in the Undernet.” Shrugging, Kant moved toward the wall. The mosaic fell away as the capital’s halls aligned to his purposes. Soon they were inside, and Rebecca’s voice echoed with a dreamy quality.

“Yes, because tonight is a testament to your honesty.” Rebecca smiled, her eyes elsewhere; reading the marking on the wall. “I don’t suppose you just envy the Daemons?”

“Perhaps I do.” William said. “Though if you did not suspect me perhaps I underestimate myself. You came along quite readily”

She shrugged. “Perhaps I like making a fool of myself.”

“Well, invigorating as this conversation is, one of my assets has become... indisposed. You’ll understand if I excuse myself, will you?” Gideon Hayabusa briskly rubbed his hands then veered toward a side passage. “Do take care Ms. Rebecca, it would be quite unfortunate if you were to take after your late husband.”

Rebecca favored him with a polite smile. “A threat? Is Janus unwell?”

“You wound me, Mr. Kant is the one with guns pointed at your back.” He winked to the other man before looking gravely at Rebecca. “Until we meet again.” He stepped away without waiting for permission. The walls moved to greet him, colors stretching like streaked light; resolving into four Wolves. Then they were gone.

“Wolves? I trust you were aware of this William, or have you abdicated that part of your oath as well?” Rebecca turned her chin to stare down her jailer.

“Were you aware that Ms. Ernst has gotten herself involved?” Kant’ replied as he peered thoughtfully into the Net’s deep mood. For Rebecca’s benefit, he let Silvera paint the search in the air beside him. Millions of color-coded lines spun a dizzying web, which he simplified by tugging one. Jacky’s recent connections rose to the surface, revealing an immensely dizzying lattice that grew rapidly, threatening to consume the whole design.

“Did you expect her to stay silent?” Rebecca asked..

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“I had thought she, more than anyone, knew the dangers of inflaming passions.” He traced a finger along the tapestry. “Now, she is a part of this too. Regrettable.”

“Is that so?” Rebecca shifted her weight forward.

“Rather, she plays a more significant part.” Dismissing the design, Kant resumed his march with a brisk nod. “Given her personality-matrix, I thought she would not be so engaged. Your influence was inevitable I suppose, even if you tried to avoid it.”

“And what does that mean?” Rebecca stopped, ignoring the guns probing her back.

Padding to a stop, Kant looked like a great owl as he turned over his shoulder. He waved the Dreads away from Rebecca then stepped forward to stand eye to eye.

“Understand that I bear you no ill-will. In fact, I quite admire you. But we have irreconcilable differences in how we see the world.” He tapped his temple. “Well before you, I made great efforts to guard Silver Star against all Daemons, even Silvera. Yet today I find my effort thwarted, and Jacky’s involvement is only the latest development.”

“Allow me to clarify,” Rebecca hurled the words. “What does this mean for my daughter?”

“It means a campaign to win her trust and shape her opinion.” Kant paused, the fire in Rebecca’s eyes deserved the truth. He would do the same for himself. “Obviously, violence is reprehensible but always a consideration. What is at stake exceeds the moral weight.”

“Ah. Then I think we see the world just the same.” Rebecca closed her eyes and held them shut long enough for Kant to tilt his head. When she opened her eyes, mahogany spirals just like Kant’s had replaced her calm blues.

He blinked, just for an instant, but enough for Rebecca to move.

[24] It Wakes

“The will of the people does not sleep. Its fury rises too fast and disperses even faster.”

- Richard Jung, *The History of Everything*

Anja reached for her notebook and, for the third time, remembered she had locked it inside her jacket. It was a shame she couldn't afford the distraction, her jacket's camera would never quite capture the electric mood.

Netheads, gangers, and more clogged the streets, gawking at the televised sky where Rebecca's trial unfolded. Urgent whispers and accusing fingers flew, nearly as loud as the footage of Takemura Tower. That played across the nearby MegaHabs, the throbbing explosions loud enough to shake her. All for the immersion.

Her six months in Castella's combat simulations flared up every time one of Hayabusa's UEVs leapt past her, cannons blazing. But she was the only one bothered, even Takemura's business guests ignored the fanfare while drinking and laughing in the nearby patios. Shoving past a group of young interns gawking at the fireworks, she forged toward her destination.

The MegaHab she sought was built for executive visitors; its overall design shorter than its companions and ringed in painted walls and gardens. Fetter-Field gates protected their exclusivity, but Anja had no issues ducking through. She paused, soaking up the lazy scene; dedicating it to memory for later dissection until the merry goers curiosity turned toward her.

“Artemis, here? I thought they would be out doing... whatever it is they do.” An adronynymous Synder purred to a cluttered table, all eyes on Anja, melodious floating through their air like fishhooks.

“Well,” chuckled another. “Takemura Tower isn't that far. Maybe she's just a runaway. Oh, don't be surprised, even mercenaries are human.” The speaker rolled their wrist dismissively at the burning tower. “Just look at that, I'd say we're overdue for Takemura refugees. We're lucky they haven't cluttered our streets yet.”

The inevitable rebuttal was lost as Anja darted into the MegaHab's lobby. It was quieter than outside, though Synders and tourists still congregated around image-walls where Takemura Tower belched smoke. Firefights flashed in the soot, sending distant thrills through her chest.

“Artemis.” An older voice shocked Anja back to reality where she found herself staring at an ink-stained finger. The Silver behind it stalked forward, blocking her way. “What happened to our President? We paid you to protect her!”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Not my department.” Anja raised a hand to ward off more questions. Much like Castella’s lessons, Mei’s had never come naturally no matter how much she practiced. She advanced, challenging the brandished arm.

The woman relented with a sorry shake of her head. Trudging to join a wizened gentleman on a bench she gripped his hand and mumbled. “What is it all coming to?”

Anja was tempted to explain the intersection of crisis, and opportunism, but she was already late. Instead, she jumped into the nearest elevator, checked her address, and punched in the fifteenth floor. As the lift started, Glamour came to life on the wall.

“I’m coming to you live from outside Assembly Hall where things are wild.” With the Eye position just above her head, Glamour looked crowned by a moon. *“While Hayabusa is busying breaking its teeth on true Silvers, Jacky is fighting the good fight. Hear it for yourselves.”*

Anja glanced over. She didn’t need Mei’s training to see the panic as Jacquelyn Ernst licked her lips and took a breath. Her stomach dropped fast, shutting out whatever Jacky had to say. Looking into her NeuralLink, she was half-tempted to reach out to Castella; matters were escalating if Artemis was getting political.

The door opened with a ping, yanking her back to reality. Poking her head out, she saw the hall to her left, the hall continued indefinitely. On her right, it was interrupted by a glass-walled lounge that might have offered a decent view of Takemura Tower if not for the smoky-stained glass. Not a soul in sight.

Mystified, Jacky moved out. Unable to resist the chance, she moved into the small lounge and admired the sights. Only the upper half of the tower was visible, and that was crowned in smoke and ash. She again inched toward her NeuralLink before ripping back.

“Cas can take care of herself.” Mumbling, she stepped back and down the hall. One of the doors reacted, its programmable surface evolving into a skull-faced figure stooped over a cane. Exhaling, Anja extended a shaky hand and pushed on the door. It opened.

Heavy curtains darkened the room, protecting a colorful aurora rippling near the ceiling. The gloomy air was heavy, laced with chemical cleaners that singed Anja’s nose, but didn’t quite hide a lingering musk. In the flickering light, she suspected splotched discolorations upon the floor. Reluctantly, her eyes slipped forward to a dip filled with wires, speakers, and projectors; sinister in their mundanity.

She tried the door from inside. It didn’t budge.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“So you have come. I apologize for the deception?”

Anja snapped around as the ceiling’s lights shifted into a familiar face. She put on the strained smile she used in university presentations. “You look like Hierophant, I should’ve known.”

“You want the truth about Gutter Fifteen.” The face drifted, uncertain of where it wanted to be. *“I have constructed a personality matrix for you, do not try to lie.”*

Anja laughed, high and uncertain. “Was that necessary?”

“What would you do with the truth?” Muted thunder from outside followed his words like primordial forces voicing their agreement.

“I’d tell everyone,” Locking her jaw, Anja swallowed her screaming rage. When she spoke again, her accent was lessened and her pitch blunt. “Why don’t you? You know this city, tell everyone if you care about really it.”

Laughter trembled through the gloom as the massive face contracted. Descending like a falling star, it resolved into a man’s rough shape. Striding past her to sit in the depression, the figure waved a bright arm in welcome. *“Come. I forgot how much I missed conversation.”*

“I’d rather know what’s going on.”

“In time, but for now you are collateral.” The man-shaped light faced her without a trace of emotion. *“But my home is your home, help yourself.”*

Curiosity getting the better of her, Anja hunched toward the table. It was piled with eSheets, speakers, and ribbed wires that resembled the strange helmets of Dread’s cowed soldiers. But near the lip was a heavy folder labeled, ‘HCE’.

“You’re Hayabusa?” Dropping the file, Anja jumped to her feet. Her eyes shot to the door, then back to the light. Hierophant’s avatar merely brushed the folder with his fingertips.

“A lifetime ago, but they abandoned me.” Hierophant sat back and gestured. *“Go ahead, make yourself comfortable”*

Overcome with intrigue, Anja sat back down and touched the fake leather cover. The binding cracked when she lifted, protesting prolonged disuse before revealing loose pages. Atop them was a neatly printed document, with Hayabusa’s watermark visible on the header.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Operation Candleflame

Asset 01 - Dossier

Sliding her finger under the edge, Anja looked back to Hiero. The shimmering man nodded, so much as he was able. Her hand jumped as thunder rolled outside, more of Takemura's explosions for the vicarious masses. She spun back to look at the window, but its curtains didn't even fidget in the noise. Hiero's whisper reached her without challenge.

"Do not worry, Hayabusa busies themselves with me, not you."

Anja paused, then slowly brought her head back around. A ghostly hand lay atop hers, insisting she press on. Her curiosity agreed, ravenous as a famine. And yet, she couldn't bring herself to the whole situation was unnatural, she was collateral afterall. There was someone who would know what to do, a friend. The name escaped her, maybe it had something to do with the faint buzzing in her ear. She hadn't heard it coming in.

She turned the page. An executive summary stared back at her, rife with digital footnotes and addendums. It ran from top to bottom, so full of information to be a dictionary in its own right. The only blemish was a red 'X' slashed throughout it; crude and handmade. That, and the words scrawled across the top. *They know.*

Confused, she flipped the page over, the back was empty. Intrigued, she placed it facedown on the title, then looked to the third page. It was largely an image; a plaza full of Silvers sitting peaceably. Their expressions were lifeless, and their fellow citizens hurriedly retreated from them. There was a question superimposed upon it.

Hierophant,

It was before your time, but Sijabo's Mistake was a scary thing! It spread like a disease, and claimed hundreds before Silvera was rebooted. I've heard all kinds of rumors, but what do you happened?

Anja studied it a moment, that buzzing in her ear growing uncomfortable. This time, when she turned it over, a single word was written on back. *Daemons.*

"So," she turned the page over again to read the question. "You were working for Hayabusa when you became Hierophant?"

"The guise was best to gather necessary information, though I grew to love the role." Anja perked her ears, confirming the wistful note in Hierophants' voice. A suspicion filled her, like a word on the tip of her tongue except sinister. Unbidden, she stared at the mottled floor.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“No, that came later.” droned Hierophant. *“The last page will interest you.”*

She did. It depicted a hand drawn sketch of Silver Star, over which had been drawn a lattice of lines and dots that strongly resembled the Net. Unable to place it, Anja turned the page over. This time it was just a series of dots, perfectly aligned with the ones on the other side. They were larger though, and when she held the page up they resolved into immaculate eyes.

“That is the most recent addition. Hours ago. He saw the patterns, the Daemons and their work. A fine Nethead. A greater shame that Silvers are so prone to flights of fancy, the time was not right.”

Breath hitching, Anja looked back to the window. She couldn't trust her eyes, not with her imagination the way it was, but she saw the outline of someone sat against the wall. Cables crowned him, the quintessential gear of a serious Nethead. Her thoughts drifted again to the floor.

“He sought to reveal the truth for himself. Elora Liskow made that mistake and paid with her life. I could not suffer the same.” Hierophant's tone was weary and bored. *“He came more prepared than most did, bso he shall sleep to the end of his days. Or mine.”*

Anja's mouth was as dry as bone when Hierophant's golden avatar turned toward her.

“Be at ease, I do not plan the same for you,” He hunched forward. *“But plans change.”*

Anja jumped back, dragging her ungainly self from the couch before that buzz slammed into her skull. She was cast into darkness, still grasping for an elusive name

[Signal Shift: The Pursuant]

Watching Anja's NeuralLink logs, Mei admitted a certain thrill. The incoming transmissions resembled bleed-over, and whatever they were had been enough to make Anja pass out. Lips pressed into a thin line, she ran an administrative override on Anja's NeuralLink, blocking all Silver Star Net traffic. The command line shuddered with logs.

SYSTEM.INFO: Write Override Confirmed

SYSTEM.INFO: Blackwall Configuration Updated... Restarting...

SYSTEM.ERROR: Blackwall Error Code 39891... Resuming Functions...

Error 39891 Caused by: Emotional Engagement. Included in Service Pack 71.

Please Confirm User has agreed to proposed changes

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“She doesn’t want to help...” Mei pinched her brow. “Bleedover is creating an addiction to the connection.” Gritting her teeth, she moved up a layer in the operations menu.

SYSTEM.INFO: Restart Requested... Terminating...

SYSTEM.WARNING: Net Connections Terminated...

SYSTEM.WARNING: Unsaved Changes to Blackwall...

RESTART ANYWAY? Y/N

Striking ‘Y’, Mei exhaled as the screen finally went dark. Checking her own NeuralLink, she confirmed that Anja’s star was absent. Cracking her knuckles, Mei dipped into Anja’s jacket when she noticed the other Jacket eyeing Anja’s void.

<<What happened?>> Vals asked.

<<Someone was corrupting her NeuralLink, probably preparing her for a personality backup. I shut her down to stop anything else, but I’m checking the source.>> Seeing the shape of Vals’ question, she shook her head. <<No, it’s not a good idea, but if I don’t it could happen again.”

<<Alright.>> Vals failed to hide the sigh in his voice. <<But don’t be afraid to bail if things get bad. I don’t want to lose anyone chasing the dead.>>

Waving him away, Mei returned to her operational menu to quarantine Anja’s jacket. Then, with Anja acceptably secure, she followed the attack upstream to Silvera’s API. Frowning, she used Rebecca’s Emergency Key and gained entry. Inside, she found an incomprehensible knot of logic feeding off Silvera’s logging, monitoring, and redundant services.

“But he wants collateral. Against us... Castella?” Opening a new screen, she glowered at Takemura’s smoldering tower. Filtering the logic-ball for connections to the Takemura Subnet, she found one process hidden behind a mutating Blackwall. Checking her security, she requested access. *Incorrect Credentials*. Pressing a finger to her mouth, she connected to Silvera’s public interface and pointed at the Takemura Blackwall.

“What can you tell me about this connection?”

“This is a private link. Access is restricted by credentials and enforced by a Hanẓa-made Blackwall. While it is nested under the Takemura Subnet, this system is independent and the registered owner is private.” Silvera’s sub-Daemon looked intently at Mei, then blinked. *“I cannot share additional information.”*

“What makes a Daemon so coy?”

“Hypothetically, the conflict between personality and orders.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Mei's eyes gleamed. "And who gives Daemons orders?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that."

[25] Smash and Grab

“Never get between a Wolf and dinner.

- Street Wisdom

Adams kept his eyes dancing as they raced down the hall. Half-formed offices lurked in the shadows; Takemura must have shut off power to the floor. In one gloomy cave on his left he spotted a face peeking behind a disorganized desk. Its eyes were wide and fearful, so he noted the position for his pack and kept moving. His AutoMap curled around a distant corner, threading the last twenty meters to their rendezvous.

As he raced toward the dark ahead, it bulged toward him. An orb the size of his fist whistled past, erupting with a fury that knocked him on his face. He scrambled up to see tracers slicing into the murk, tearing through paper and plaster in search of flesh.

Vice lurched into view, assault cannon shredding the hall. Chemical analysis chirped in his ear, blood was mixing with plaster. Pressing against the wall to minimize his profile, Adams noticed Vice's uneven gait. Whatever had come his way and landed close to her, pulverizing her leg below the knee. Her armor had adapted, thinning itself to provide an adaptive crutch.

The rest of the pack pressed after her, sparks flying off their armor as hidden Samurai fired back. Tracing the bullets back to their sources, they methodically cut their way forward. Adams hurried into place, turning to keep his eye on the gloom, he found those wide-eyes peering around the corner, fearful as ever. He left them in peace.

A minute later, Vice led them around the shattered corner. Eight Samurai lay strewn across the floor, reduced to dripping chunks. One mustered the strength to spit at their approach. Luther returned the favor by putting a bullet in between the man's eyes. Before the corpse stilled, he paced into the center of the hall where their AutoMap blinked. Then he pointed at the floor.

“Adams, you're first, Vice provides cover. Move fast, we're behind schedule even without Law slowing down team Two. Questions?” Luther looked impatiently over his surviving Wolfpack.

“Yeah, what we looking for?” Vice, sounded strong, even when she leaned on her mangled leg. The cannon gleamed at her side, hungry for more.

“A big door. I'll handle it. You handle the ambush. We go on three. One” Briggs said as he set a breaching-charge on the floor. “Two.” The Wolves arrayed around it. “Three.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Metal sublimated in a blinding flash, and Adams threw himself down the molten throat. He landed in a pool of superheated metal, his armor sizzling in the heat. Oblong shapes cracked under his weight, their wet cores burping clouds of steam before dissolution. Charred robes floated across the surface like sullen tombstones..

Adams ducked as the Samurai who had avoided the breaching charge opened fire. Hidden deep in the boiled-metal clouds, he waited as his helmet's Inferred-Motion-Field sketched possible targets. Seeing four outlines clustered to his right, he hurled a grenade. Moments too slow, the figures stretched and dissolved in the blast.

Vice soared in through the opening, assault cannon punching jagged holes in the Samurai. Her armor's magnetic fields hummed as they flicked bullets to more survivable angles, but her armor still rippled with impacts. Adams watched, battered by the barrage over the NeuralLink. His teeth clacked together when another shot slammed into his chin.

Fighting to stay balanced, Vice reeled backward; inadvertently flexing her armor. Already thinned to support her leg, her Sorcerer gave way. Pain flared over the NeuralLink, along with the warm rivers dripping down her stomach. Her aim never faltered, and she swung it around slowly to clear the landing.

"Clear," she mumbled thickly. Glancing once around the room, she continued to slur her words. "No good cover though."

"We'll be gone before we need it. Keep an eye out for Briggs and Team Two, I'll let them know where in position." Touching down, Luther hurried forward. Adams stuck to his side, swimming through the metallic steam until he broke into the open.

An open floor embraced him, almost dizzying in its emptiness. There were only two landmarks, the elevator banks on the other side of the entry, and the black wall ahead. Unmarked, the obsidian length extended in all directions like a manmade horizon. Luther slowed, walking up until he was close enough to touch it.

"What are we—" Luther wheeled around as a pair of shadows fell through the roof. Less alarmed, Vice greeted them with a curt nod and a snarl.

"Took you long enough, Commander." she snapped a salute, and Adams felt the cold fury boiling off her gaze.

Silent, Briggs approached the vast wall, and it peeled open at his approach. between the parting jaws, identical rows of server-towers marched into cooling mists, while the sonorous hum of industrial fans rolled out.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Briggs was marching down the halls when his instructions drifted back. “Vice will stay to guard the door alongside Team Two. The rest of Team One, you will accompany me.”

“In that case, all of you better give me your Mazer spikes.” Vice extended her hand. Briggs, Adamas, and Feng pulled short rods from their hip, which they handed over. Collecting them in one hand, the woman shook her head.

“You boys have fun in there, right?”

Nodding absently, Adams warily eyed the vault; the churning air and cool temperatures provided plenty of hiding places. He stood motionless until Luther crackled over the radio. “Understood sir.” Seeing the man wave him forward, dragging Adams took up position at his side along with Feng.

“This is some bullshit, he didn’t even tell us what happened to the rest of his team. I love that slimy bastards like him get to boss us around.” Whispering over their radio, Vice limped toward the entrance and started slamming the spikes into the wall..

Adams turned to stare at Briggs. “I see why you don’t like him.”

“Save it for after the job.” With that, Luther started after Briggs, and Adams immediately followed through the mist and thrumming servers. Their footsteps echoed loudly, unhindered by the thickening mists while a dense canopy of wires sagged ever closer to their bowed heads.

“We know what to look for?” Adams eyed the drooping vegetation. “Or are we just...” He cut himself off as they broke into a circular clearing. Servers ringed it like singing monoliths, while the metallic vines knotted into an oblong shadow cloaked in mist.

“*Hello, Kant.*” A pair of emerald eyes lit the strange cocoon. Ahead, Briggs tilted his head and the dry voice tittered. “*Oh, not your name? I’m familiar with your self-inflicted amnesia.*” The disembodied lights flashed as Briggs retracted his helmet and waded through the sulfurous murk. “*Ah, it is you, you have his eyes.*”

“What’s he doing?” Adams hissed, but Luther just shook his head.

An emaciated husk was strung up on those cables. Diodes winked in shriveled sockets while broken teeth protruded from desiccated gums. It was gone below the ribs, save for metal guts like a machine shedding its skin.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Despite its condition, the husk hissed ragged laughter. *“Well not-Kant, silence isn’t like you, say something. Why are you here?”*

Briggs cracked a thin smile. “Gideon asked me to find an Artificial.”

“Is that so long as your interests align, or did you have a change of heart?”

“I have his confidence and he has mine.” Calm as ever, Briggs wandered behind the corpse and touched a cable embedded in the flaking skull. Wrapping his hand about it, he leaned toward the shriveled ear. “And soon, so shall you.”

Adams opened his mouth, then spotted Luther shaking his head. Reluctantly locking up his jaw, he watched as Briggs waved a hand in front of the corpse. A gray shimmer moved on the man’s fingers, which he wiped against the skull. Adams and Luther exchanged looks, but stood still

“Kant,” The corpse’s voice hitched. *“That’s enough.”*

“Oh, I’m afraid not.” Wearing a cheshire grin, Briggs walked in front of the ruined thing and tapped its cheek.. “Gideon’s orders, you understand.”

Grunting in distaste, Adams looked sideways at Luther. “Where did Gideon get him?” Sensing something in Luther’s silence, he looked over to see the man brushing his rifle.

“I got a better question,” Luther said, voice soft as velvet. “Where did he lose him?”

[Signal Shift... Law]

Law was on the hunt for Wolves. Her scorched legs were the only sign of the grenade they had thrown, but she hadn’t forgotten. Kill them before they kill you, too bad the pack in question had split in two.

Alone and unhindered by his pack, her prey was fast as he nimbly wound through the office. On a straightaway, Law might have lost the race, but by smashing through the obstacle course she gained ground. She paid no mind to her ruined wake, the other Wolves had resumed their original hunt. So she missed a third contestant stealing across the wreckage.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Angling to intercept her prey, Law hurdled a stone fountain and raised her arm; unleashing a swarm of thin contrails. The Wolf pivoted hard, kicking off the wall as Law's micro-missiles devoured his path. Rolling with the blast, he popped up just in time to see Law's open palm.

"Gotcha!" Skidding to a stop, Law crushed the Wolf against the floor, then grinned at her collar. "You guys catch... Motherfucker." A blood splatter covered her camera, reducing *Law & Murder* to a crimson glare. Muttering, Law tried to wipe the lens, but only smeared the viscous contents. She glowered, then blurred sideways. Faster still, the tungsten rod caromed off her neck.

Law tumbled sideways, heat-seeking missiles hissing out her shoulder and flattening a dozen square meters of office space. She sprung into the ruins with a roar, claws raking empty air. A light flickered, spitting another tungsten stake that knocked her helmet crooked. Stumbling, she then kicked out and caught something on her heel. It sailed a meter away to land with a crunch.

Law righted herself with a snarl then grabbed her helmet in both hands and wrenched it off in a hail of sparks. Her long mane was slick with sweat and her eyes were baleful. Spitting on the corpse, she tossed the ruined helmet then rolled her neck.

"Fucking Samurai, I wasn't here for you."

"*You alright?*" Murder's voice, audible to her stream, issued from her collar.

"Alright? Nah," rapping her chest like a war-drum, Law started for the next floor with a grin full of tombstones. "I'm fucking pissed."

[26] Duty and Ash

“A Samurai aspires to die.”

- Saigo, *Collected Sayings*

Castella was cold inside as the lobby devolved into chaos. All it had taken was one tremor for the Silvers to forget themselves. Parents screamed for children, spouses clung to each other, and Takemura's Samurai were useful as decorative statues. She snorted.

Ein looked her way. “What? Should they just wait around to die? It's a warzone.”

“Be alert, not afraid.” Castella answered. She watched Ein from the corner of her eye, reading the doubt twisting his face. She wasn't the only one.

“Pale is right, this is no way to compose ourselves. Perhaps we need an example.” Yuri Takemura scowled, then crooked a finger and summoned the red dawn of Fetter Fields to freeze the Silvers all at once. As his Samurai shoved the Silvers back into lines, Yuri raised his voice. It carried far in the enforced silence.

“Do you remember why you're here today? You are here to vote, to take our future into your own hands. This is our city, have some pride.” He glared at the paralyzed sea as if his gaze alone parted it. He and Castella both searched the crowd, but not one met their stares. It was Yuri's turn to snort as he pointed to his left.

“Artemis, if you would, remind this city how to compose themselves.” His words released the Fetters, and this time the crowd hung their heads. He bowed to Castella, his voice no more than a whisper. “Good hunting, Artemis.”

Castella surged forward. The crowd watched silently, faces pinched with shame. Then, a brief struggle broke the stillness as a young boy slipped the barrier and skid in front of Castella. He gawked as if she was crusted in jewels, not blood. She didn't stop, lurching toward him like something from the grave. He shrunk back, intimidated by her stained armor and she paused like she had seen a wild animal. The crowd held its collective breath.

“Are you a Samurai?” The boy asked, eyes wide.

“Nah,” she brushed past him. “I'm just a Jacket.” The boy turned to follow her, eyes bright and inquisitive. His innocent question stopped her.

“Are you going to hurt them?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Castella stopped and turned. Ein stood beside the boy, watching her with the same wide stare. Suddenly tired, she turned back just as quick. “Yeah.” She resumed walking before she could see his reaction. Not everyone was so easy to escape.

“Kill them!” Castella didn’t try to place where the cry started; the crowd picked it up and buried their old reticence. “Kill them! Kill them!” Other cries laced the cacophony, hollered from the back. Saigo Lives. Silver Star Alone. Castella grit her teeth as the enthusiasm fed on itself, cheering her on like a liberator instead of a superkiller.

Yaro grunted his distaste. “Is it democracy, or idols that make fools of us?”

“Can’t have one without the other.” Basir grumbled. “But, for what its worth, I feel more like fuckin’ Suman Kai than a president right about now.” Ein nodded beside him, tongue locked in a choked throat.

Yaro cracked an ugly smile. “They are less different than you might think.”

“Yeah, feels like I’m Glamour walking down High Street.” Brushing off the crowd’s grasping hands, Castella squeezed her sword and teeth. “See what I mean Ein? We might do the killing but people like her make the lynch mobs.”

The kid blushed as he flinched away. “You know I wouldn’t kill for her.”

“We’re jackets, we do our own killing.” Despite the coarse texture of her words, Castella found a curious warmth in her words. Whatever it was, Ein lapped it up..

“That’s one way of saying we kill for a living.” Basir snorted as he moped along, head bowed under the crowd’s attention.

“Enough talk.” Yaro drove the words between pursed lips, his eyes pointed like daggers. His pace matched his tone, driving them toward a door guarded by Samurai who flung it open. Artemis stormed through, and the crowd’s roar vanished as the doors clicked shut behind them.

Inside was a conference, the air thick with sweat and blood. Samurai lay on the table, their tattered robes stained red while harried medics rushed from one leaking life to the next. Castella absorbed it all without slowing, but she saw Ein stop. He coughed over the NeuralLink, gagging on the coppery air while his knees wobbled.

Grabbing Ein’s arm, Castella yanked him along. <<Keep moving, you’ll be fine.>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Fine?” He stumbled along with a weary chuckle. “We’re going against Wolves and Law, and you think we’re going to be fine?”

“I’m a killer, not a liar.” She paused, nose crinkling as Anja’s accusation crept into her mind again. Before it could take root, she fixated on the bloodied Samurai staggering up to the table. He saluted, tried to blink the milky flash-burns from his eyes, then spoke.

“Hayabusa anticipated the ambush... breaching charge.”

“What about Law?” Castella tapped Daro’s elbow. “Sure you can handle her?”

“No, Takemura will hold the line, we did not forget Bushido.” He sneered at her flat stare, then started toward the elevator his messenger had come from. “Now, we head to the hundredth floor.” Letting Yaro and his Samurai go first, Castella stepped over the threshold and ran her hand along the door’s open lip.

“This going to work?” She tapped the receded plates. “These don’t look bulletproof. And what happens if Hayabusa decides to cut the cord?”

“They are more than enough, and Hayabusa would not have the time, this tower was built to withstand a siege. Now come, or are you paid by the hour?” Yaro impatiently waved her inside.

Nodding to Ein and Basir, Castella waved them in. “Good enough for me. Get in, I’ll take the point.” Once the pair clambered by, she tapped the doors one last time then stepped inside. She relaxed her shoulders, shrugging off a lingering worry. Scowling as it returned, she followed it back to Ein’s NeuraLink.

<<Almost there.>> Castella elbowed him lightly. <<Keep it together, we’ll be fine.>>

Ein tried a faltering smile. <<That doesn’t sounds like you.>>

<<Don’t get used to it.>> She pushed him back as Basir drifted in.

<<No, he’s got a point, I thought you’d be clamoring to take Law’s head. You sure you’re a Samurai?>> Basir asked the question like it was supposed to be a compliment.

<<Picked a fight I didn’t need to yesterday and we got midnight assassins. Just because we all walked away doesn’t mean I didn’t fuck up.>> Castella immersed herself in the floor-numbers ticking by. <<I lived this long by learning from my mistakes. >>

Basir laughed. <<Watch out Ein, we got an imposter.>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

<<That's because you haven't been paying attention>> Castella grabbed her sword tight and glared at the door. <<You can thank me later.>>

"Hayabusa has breached the Vault-floor, method unknown." Dero interrupted their conversation, reading off data from the building's Subnet. "I hope you are prepared for Wolves.."

Castella snickered. "You're just pissy Yuri let us in."

Yaro cracked a strained smile. "Quite. In any event, we will be arriving shortly. Do whatever it is you do, Artemis." Dropping that smile, he addressed his Samurai in rolling clan-tongue.

Ein sighed over their internal radio. <<Are we really doing this?>>

<<Yes.>> Castella updated the NeuralLink with a blueprint of their destination. It was largely an empty floor, but a fortified vault took up three-quarters of the floor. The only relevant decorations were three elevator blocks and scattered blue dots where Takemura's Samurai converged on the vault's door.

<<We're arriving here.>> Castella put a mental down on the leftmost elevator, then drew a rightward around other elevator banks where Takemura's ring petered out. <<I'll take point, and loop around to soak fire while you two put holes in anything that moves.>>

Basir whistled. <<You sure like risking your neck.>> Castella put her finger on the Samurai, who were spreading out into a hollow ring. A few nearest the door had blipped out of existence, or turned a sickly red. As a result, the Samurai had ground to a stop.

<<Hayabusa tore right through Takemura, and hit the vault. Whatever left at the door is just a distraction, no matter how many robes it kills.>> She dragged her finger back to the broken circle's faintest edge. <<We'll leave the sieging to Takemura and go for the throat.>>

Basir grunted. <<By running through the open?>>

<<Which one of us fought Wolves for a decade?>> Castella replied, eyes flicking to the flashing door numbers, then she shifted her weight toward the door like a hound straining against its leash. <<Just remember, kill who you need to kill, bleed when you need to bleed.>>

She watched for Ein's nod. It came reluctantly, so she forced her cold surety into the NeuralLink. For a split second his clenched jaw softened, then the elevator opened into a sticky darkness punctuated by flames. Castella bolted out, her blade a silver crescent, dissolving into the murk like her thought. <<Don't die.>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

[Signal Shift...]

Ein flung himself after Castella like he was tied to her. In some ways he was, clinging to her NeuralLink as he did; without it he would be making a fool of himself sagging against the wall. With it, the dark didn't give him pause. Nor did the carrion lights.

The main glow was an orange sun carved in the ceiling, sparking above a puddle of cooling slag. It was ringed by Takemura's silhouettes pouring fire into the vault. Amid the lightning-bursts, a slender Wolf stood guard; shaking off the barrage, sparks ripping furiously across it. Rolling with the bows, it raised its cannon with frightening precision.

Takemura's robed shadows danced wickedly on the wall, twisted to pieces by high-speed impacts. Ein's hold on the NeuralLink faltered as he shrunk back, and the darkness rolled into the void with a peal of hollow thunder. Turning toward the nearby elevator, he saw sparks as knives shoved through the fortified plates.

Law's voice was loud and unmistakable.

"First you shoot me in the back, then you lock me out. I got a warmer welcome from Hayabusa!" Tearing open the door with a snarl, Law lumbered out, tawny eyes roving across the scene before settling on Castella's fleeting form. A crude grin emerged on her battered features, as she waved an oversized claw. "Pale! Where you running girl, don't tell me you're afraid of the Law."

Ein shuddered, but noticed Castella swipe an arm across her chest. He looked back to see Law throw both hands up as the grenade's blast engulfed her. The floor shivered in protest, shrapnel sliced the air, and Law's rumbling laughter billowed as she stomped out of the smoke.

"Good. You got guts, but you need more than that to kill me."

Ein's throat closed up, as if Law's balled fists were at his neck.

<<Ein.>> Castella's call dragged him away from the battered ogre, just in time to see her lob another gift. This time, Law leapt backward; disappearing down the elevator shaft she had crawled out of. For a instant reality lensed, causing Law's snarling face to bulge in a glinting bubble. Then reality folded into a perfectly smooth crater.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Ein stared blankly at the pit until Basir crashed into his side. They fell as a series of detonations rattled his teeth. Fires kicked up around him, while chunks of debris clinked off his armor. He bounced away as he landed, then crawled to all fours.

“Cas!” His helmet sealed against the noise, Ein didn’t hear his own words. But, seeing Basir wave him down, he bit his tongue and dropped back to the ground. Burning afterimages floated in the cloying smoke. the sole remains of a dozen Samurai.

Hayabusa’s lone Wolf swam through the ash to face another knot of Samurai. Gunfire cascaded across its chitin like sunset, beautiful enough to slow Ein’s world to a crawl. Detached, he watched a Takemura man reel back; skull dissolving into so much ash. The world jumped back into motion as a hand fell on his shoulder.

<<She’s gunning for us next kid.>> Dangling a magnetic stick from his fingertips, Basir tapped Ein’s rifle. <<Remember what to do?>>

Nodding, Ein rose to one knee and sighted down his rifle. He exhaled slowly, steadying the weapon on the glistening statue. As it brought the cannon’s glowing barrels toward him, he pulled the trigger and ripped open a hole in the Wolf’s side. His heart jumped into his throat as the burning barrels turned on him, blinding him to Basir’s sudden throw.

A hundred rounds bloomed into a curtain of premature detonations. Basir’s magnetic lure never even touched the ground. With a satisfied front, Basir slid his other hand up and started putting bullets into the curling smoke. Ein mirrored him, then stopped himself as Castella’s orange band sprang into the cooling destruction. Reaching to stop her, Ein fell into her NeuralLink.

His legs felt off. It wasn’t the increased height, it was the ease. Each sprint-long stride was easier than walking, the only sign of life was his lazy breathing and the pumping blood in his right arm. It was a kind of power that he could get used to. He retreated when Castella noticed him, yet he wasn’t expelled. Instead, she drifted back to work with a single thought.

<<Don’t forget your body.>>

Ein didn’t let go. Paired with her, he rushed the slender Wolf. As it ratcheted around to face them, it lifted a lethal arm. Oil-smooth, Castella slid under the limb so easily that Ein wondered if anyone could do it. Flicking her sword up, she took the Wolf’s arm before looping toward its head.

Vicarious joy flashed in Ein’s gut, only to evaporate as Castella tore toward the door. Watching the Wolf fade back into smoke, he gnashed his teeth.

<<Why didn’t you—>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

His thoughts became a weak gasp as an identical Wolf plunged around the vault door and smashed its fist into Castella's gut. A cannon screamed in its other hand, hosing down the elevators as Daro's reinforcements piled in.

Castella rolled with the blow, and Ein's heartbeat quickened as hers did, doubling as he noticed the second Dread taking aim. Before he could shout a warning, Castella threw herself toward the first Wolf in a desperate bid for cover. Fast as she was, he heard a gun roar far too soon. Castella twisted to minimize damage, but the expected shots never came. Instead, a clenched fist descended on the back of Castella's neck.

Vision swimming, Ein saw the floor rush. But, millimeters from landing, Castella surged up and turned on the Wolf. Snapping off the floor, her left arm blocked the Wolf's incoming blow, while her right swung up like a comet, tracing a line from hip to sternum. Hayabusa's Wolf grunted, and tried to twist its body to lock the black in place. But with a clean split in its hips, the Syndicate killer collapsed with a retching gasp. It was cut short as Castella kicked the Wolf, yanking her sword free in a dark, warm spray.

Ein pursed his lips, bile burning up his throat as Castella used the corpse to springboard toward a trio of fresh Wolves. Holding up the magnetic field of her left arm, Castella wove in through the flashing rounds, though they didn't so much as nick her jacket.

<<'They're Mazers.>> Basir mentally nudged him, forcing Ein back into his body. For a moment, both men wrestled in the uncertainty filling the NeuralLink, then Basir sighed. <<It doesn't look like it's doing anything, but keep shooting. Don't let them know we know.

Nodding mutely, Ein looked back to see Castella dart between the Wolves and unload her auto-pistol into one. She leaned away as the rounds visibly splattered against the armor, testing another with her sword.

<<Ein.>> Basir snapped. <<Help her.>>

Shouldering his rifle, Ein surveyed the scene. More Wolves had sprung up around Castella, enough to drag her down while Basir methodically fired into them. Pulling his eyes away, Ein checked his Inferred-Motion-Field. Given the violence ahead, the air churned too much for a useful reading. He frowned at it, a helpless stone forming in his gut as he contemplated his training. Something Mei said dropped into his head. Don't get lost in details.

Drawing the IMF back, he scanned the whole battlefield. Violent winds gusted out from the vault's throat, trailing the bullet, bodies, and explosions. But on the inside wall, deformed against

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

something, a bump in the otherwise smooth walls. Posting the information to his NeuralLink, Ein shouldered his rifle and took aim.

He didn't see much as the armor-piercing round struck, but he saw Castella lunge out of the illusionary Wolfpack. Real bullets flicked out from the corner Ein hunted, and he felt them smash into his chest as Castella pounced. Falling back into the NeuralLink, he watched as she elbowed the Wolf's rifle aside and speared his throat. Yanking the blade down, she burst his ribs open, then hooked his head in her gun-hand and dragged him away.

She spared Ein a single thought. <<Nice shot.>> Then she charged into the vault, heaving her prey in front of her as a bloody shield as she expelled Ein from her NeuralLink.

Blinking as he returned to his own body, Ein found Basir stood over him. The man was tense as he scanned the fast-calming chaos. Feeling a little better, Ein looked at the elevator behind him. Yaro sat there, clutching what was left of his hip. His contingent of Samurai were no better, and he grimaced at the Jackets' attention.

"Get to the vault. Leave me." He looked ruefully at the bloody field behind him. "I should have known you'd survive and I wouldn't."

Basir shrugged. "Blame the Syndicates."

"I do." Yaro chuckled. "Just tell Pale her luck is going to run out one day."

Trembling, Ein looked down on the slumping man and spat. "Tell her yourself." Freed of that, he tore ahead as Yaro tumbled over.

[Signal Shift...]

"Fuck it's dark." Law's voice was swallowed by ear-shattering thunder pouring down the elevator shaft. Law whistled as the cable she hung from swayed in the breeze.

"You good?" Murder rumbled.

"Ha! Takes more than a fall to kill the Law. Just give me a second to, hang on..." She cut off as a thin dawn marked the doors opening below. A man popped his head in, and Law's thick arm snaked out to snag it before he could object.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Heya! How you doing?” Law’s saccharine voice drowned the Samurai’s cries. “You’re good? That’s great, say hi to Hiero for me.” Cackling, she crushed her fist, dropped the limp thing, and started hauling herself up the cable. “Man, I hope the rest of ya dipshits are tough. What’s a girl gotta do to get a good fight around here?”

[27] Prey

“Killing the Synders executions for days, Behold the Butcher of Ebon Array.”

- Slaughterhammer. *Pale Oni EP*

Basir held his breath as Castella jumped like wildfire toward Hayabusa’s last Wolves. Bullets stitched the air under her feet, half the Wolves expecting her to be behind the corpse. She landed on it instead, sliding along with the corpse into the middle of their pack. They reacted in an instant, confronting the dark shadow slithering off their murdered companion. Castella was already in motion, tearing past one and leaving crimson garlands decorating the servers.

Seeing her move made Basir’s bones ache, even young he had never moved that fast. It helped seeing that Ein’s NeuralLink tremble too.

<<She makes it look easy, doesn’t she?>> Basir thought as Castella slipped away from the butchered Wolf as its two companions backed off for a better angle. Ein kicked into a sprint at the sight, slowly peeling away from Basir’s jog.

<<Easy!>> His call managed to slow the boy just enough to point him at Castella’s NeuralLink and it’s cold silence. <<Look at her, relaxed, that’s how you survive.>>

<<That’s how she kills.>> Ein answered from a distance, bewitched.

Basir pursed his lips but didn’t disagree, he saw it too. There was something beneath the surface of her NeuralLink, like a leviathan trapped in ice. If he drew close enough to the NeuralLink, he felt the thrill pulsing under his skin. It surged then, rattling against its prison as gore-slicked Castella sliced through another Wolf and charged a shadowy man standing in back.

“Easy friend, no need for violence.” Kant’s words cut the murk like daylight, and Castella stopped like she slammed into a wall. And while Basir didn’t like the figure’s gloating tones either, he didn’t stop. Not until he saw the golden Net-worms writhing across Castella’s cybernetics.

The man stepped forward, waving down his Wolves with a wane smile. “Too slow Artemis,” his gaze drifted and his smirk faded. “Much too slow.”

Basir jerked in the direction of Kant’s gaze. Splinters bounced harmlessly off his armor as something burst through the server-wall. It was followed by a red-hot lance through his gut. The pain twisted, churning his belly’s soft meat and wringing bile from his throat. Reaching to pull back his visor, Basir found it perfectly clean.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Nice try, but you can’t outrun the Law.” Law wiggled her claws, sliding Ein off as gently as if he tucking him into bed. As the boy shivered to the ground, she waved her bloody talons at Castella’s back. “There you are Pale, been lookin’ for ya girl.”

She clucked her tongue when Castella didn’t move. “Strong silent type, huh? Should’ve known, bet we’ve both seen friends bleed out before.” Heaving herself out of the crumbling servers, Law rested a boot on Ein’s head; eliciting a whimper from the boy. She grinned kindly at him, then back to Castella. “Still, I’m a little disappointed, expected more of a fight.”

Basir trained his rifle on Law, sweat beading on his hands. <<What’s the plan Cas?>>

Castella didn’t answer, although he heard Law’s words echoing in her head. But it was overpowered by a creeping chill. A Neurrallink’s closeness had consequences.

Ein panicked, and he latched onto Castella’s Neurrallink. Steel or not, her augmented limbs trembled with the boy’s fear as he sputtered like a burning comet. <<I’m—>>

<<You’re bleeding over.>> Shuddering like cracking ice, Castella shunted Ein’s star into the Neurrallink’s abyssal fathoms. Basir’s hackles rose at that treatment, and iced over when the boy whined on the floor. He checked that Law wasn’t looking at him, then stole forward.

<<Cas.>> Whispering the thought like Law might overhear, Basir slid forward. <<Can you keep her busy? I can help Ein.>> He got the vague impression of an affirmative, as if the woman didn’t trust herself with words.

“Yo Pale,” Law tilted her head as she broke the silence. “You bored or deaf?” Lumbering past the armed Wolves, she touched a claw to Castella’s chin. “C’mon, I can’t just execute Saigo’s last Samurai, can I?”

Steadying himself with a deep breath, Basir slunk to Ein’s side. It was bad. The jacket was split open, its blood-activated compression bands cut apart by Law’s blades. Pink, tender-looking coils pushed up from the ruddy furrow, and grew with every ragged breath.

“I’m here Ein,” Basir mumbled, squeezing the boy’s shoulder. “You’re going to be okay.” He briefly closed his eyes as the boy gripped his wrist, then reached into his jacket. Pulling out a ball of medicloth, he pushed the gauze into Ein’s wounds. Treated with pain-killers and smart-veins, the white cloth eagerly drank blood. Finding Ein’s hand, Basir glanced over his shoulder.

“You would if you want to live.” Castella called out to Law, words taut as she suppressed the bloodthirsty quiver in her bones. She nodded toward Kant. “Take care of him, I’ll take care of you.”

“Now you’re talking my—” Law cackled as golden serpents entwined her. Breaking into a cheerful grin, death winked in her eyes. “Whaddya know? Wolves have some fangs after all”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Indeed, but I hope we can come to a greater understanding.” Ambling past Castella, Hayabusa’s man caressed Law’s cheek.

“Understanding, that it? Ha!” Law strained to butt heads. “Get yourself a sales-pitch, I already got everything I want.” As she struggled, Basir saw a gray smudge on her cheek. It vanished in a moment, just a trick of the light.

“I am sure you think that, but all things come to pass. You’ll see.” Kant pulled back as if to admire a painting, then his jaw fell slack as it sprouted three feet of steel. He dropped sideways; not even Synders ignored severed spines.

Still caught in Hayabusa’s lingering fetters, Castella clumsily followed up the strike. Snickering out from Kant’s ribcage, her katana painting the floor red as it chased Law’s throat. Her speed reminded Basir why Vals had spent so much money on a murderer. And it left him wondering what kind of money it took to make the killer who caught the flashing strike.

“You kill Saigo while he was talking too?” Law guffawed as she lifted Castella’s wrist. “Can’t believe he died to a Ronin like you.” As the pair locked up, the two remaining Wolves fired on Law.

“Idiots, this is between Samurai.” Never breaking eye contact with Castella, Law triggered a series of tiny flashes that climbed her shoulder like shredded wings. Turning sharply the sparks ran through the Wolves and cracked them open. Even a meter away, Basir flinched away from the blast’s roiling heat. Squeezing Ein’s hand again, he blinked his eyes clear and watched.

Castella twisted at the hip, katana freed in a spray of sparks. Law jumped back, a blurred leg chunking Castella’s shoulder. As warm pain flooded the NeuralLink, Castella slashed the back of Law’s knee on her way to the ogre’s dead-side.

“Stubborn bitch,” Listing on the punctured leg, Law swiped at Castella’s head. “Do me a favor and die already!”

The blades landed, wrenching Castella sideways. With an apologetic pop, yesterday’s crack split her helmet open; forcing Law’s claw to slid off like dead skin. Face numb, Castella slashed the pit of Law’s shoulder then ducked away in a stumble.

“Glad to see Artemis’ hounds aren’t all bark, you had me worried.” Flexing her fingers, Law set her narrowed eyes on Castella’s face. “Almost thought Pale Oni lost her fangs.”

Castella’s golden pupils were the only color in her gaunt face. Even the short fuzz on her head was white as bone. But as she circled Law, pain fuzzed her NeuralLink, and Basir saw a scarlet river beading on her temple. Collecting herself, she addressed him in a deadpan.

<<How’s Ein doing?>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

<<Bad, I can't move him like this without spilling his guts. I need your help.>> Basir reluctantly looked at the spreading stains to share the image with her. Instead of answering, Castella blinked her vision clear and squared with Law.

"Man Pale, you're all bite no bark." The ogre bobbed her head to her sing-song voice. "What happened, Law got your tongue?"

<<Keep him alive.>> Hissing orders at Basir, Castella swapped the sword to her left hand and leapt forward. Twitching away, Law slammed into Castella's side and the pair tumbled out of sight in a tangle of limbs.

"Cas?" Basir shouted over his shoulder, then turned back when Ein choked and grasped for his shoulder. Heart in his mouth, Basir pulled Ein close. "Hey, hey! It's going to be alright. We're getting out of this. Vals promised, remember?"

"H...he..." Ein dragged his arm up toward Castella, then dropped it to his side.

Breath hitching, Basir lay against one of the shattered servers and Ein leaned against him in turn. Staring after Castella and Law, Basir felt the tears burn.

"You're gonna be alright."

[Signal Shift...]

Law arrested herself by sinking her talons into the floor. Metal squealed against metal as she grated to a stop, leaving jagged furrows in the tiles. She breathed a little easier when she heard Pale clambering to her feet.

"You know Chat, good friends are hard to find," Law cackled as she pushed herself up and glared down the hall. She found Pale already slinking away, keeping low and to her side. Shaking herself, Law stomped forward to intercept. "But good enemies? Rarest thing in the world. Gotta treat 'em right."

Her words rung in her head, filling an unexpected silence. Without slowing her pace, Law checked her stream. It was offline, terminated at the same time Hayabusa's hack had taken control of her limbs. Huffing, she moved to flip it back on.

Do not. The implacable voice rusted through her, causing her to slip the stream's interface.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Now you talk?” Law glared at Pale’s lurking outline. “Why do you give a fuck?” Her brow beaded as that shadow paused, like an animal sniffing the air. But the voice return, dry and adrongynous as before.

I am still syncing with your biology. Please do not cause additional distraction.

“You hear that Pale? Voice like it's crawling in your bones?” Law let the questions slip in a purr. Seeing the shadow keep its distance, Law rolled her eyes. “Course you do, that Hayabusa bastard locked us both up.” She swung a finger back toward the man with a severed spine.

“Whaddya say we go and finish him off together? You don’t want another voice in your head do ya?” When neither Pale nor the voice stirred, Law blew her cheeks out with a long sigh. Then she stepped back, never taking her eyes off Pale’s shadow.

“Don’t know about you, but shit like this is why I fight.” On her third dragging step, Law bumped her heel into Kant’s form. Pale had ghosted her the whole time, sword shifting slowly as if to taste Law’s defenses.

Keeping one hand at the ready, Law bent her knees and picked Kant up by the head. With the gash in his neck, the man’s weight was lopsided as it centered around his still connected tissues. It had the cheery effect of tilted his head to the side in the biggest smile she had ever seen. Or would’ve been, if not for the grinning corpse strung up beside her. Sighing, she shook her wrist, jostling the limp body like a windchime.

“See this guy? Synders like him think they rule the world like they were born to. And most people? Most people bend over backwards to make it happen.” She growled, keenly aware of how the Synder’s unblinking eyes clung to her. Worse, that strange voice was beginning to stir.

“But you and me? We’re different.” She unsheathed her claws, tearing through bone like tissue paper. Those staring orbs lost focus and that bothersome voice snuffed out. Contemptuously dropping the thing, she glared at Castella. “We make them earn it. Or we used to, back when you had a spine. You think they’d do this to Silver Star if Saigo was still alive?”

Pale inched forward, the golden rings of her eyes brighter than anything save for the steel crescent floating beside her hip. Her face was a lifeless mask, even compared to Silvera’s distorted visage. Law ground her jaw in a circle, and pulled to her full height.

“Pale, what I’m saying is we don’t have to be enemies. I always knew you wouldn’t kill Siago without a reason. And, yeah, I talk shit on stream but that’s what people want to hear. I lose them, nothing changes.” She waited, then sighed in the ensuing silence. “I’m not getting through, am I?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Pale surged forward like night covering the land, her sword the last ray of light. Hissing in frustration, Law yanked her hand up and flexed a trigger. The thick carapace around her wrist snapped open, spitting a round that tore up in the floor at Pale's feet. Lit by the ashen glow, Pale paused but didn't retreat.

"Before we do this, I want you to know something, this isn't personal." Law couldn't bring herself to put on the usual cocksure smile, not when she stared at the feral ghoul crouching ahead of her. Those golden orbs were alive, but lethal, no space for ambition. A spark in her chest faded.

"You're a winner Pale. After you brought Hanza to its knees, everyone thought you were dead after Serenity Tower. but no, you rose from the grave to zero Saigo and sail off into the sunset. Then you fought Dreads for good measure." Law bit her cheek, hoping to find life in those cold eyes. All she saw was them working around the flame to get closer. Law's chest felt like charcoal.

Never meet your heroes.

"People love a winner Pale. If you gave word, you'd show the Syndicates they built their world on sand. But you didn't, that's why I'm going to take your crown."

Neither woman moved as the words hung in the dreary air, then Pale darted forward. Law relaxed, like a burden had been dragged from her shoulders. Moving to flick her stream back on, she managed a worried grin.

"Maybe I was wrong. You're not a hound, just a mad dog."

[28] Signal Lost

“How could I not embrace Death? I’ve introduced him to so many.”

- Saigo, *Collected Sayings*

As Ein’s NeuralLink dimmed, something viscous and black as oil began breaking through the ice in Castella’s veins. It was pure, nostalgic, and with one command. Forward. Dropping her pistol, she reached into her jacket and primed her last grenade.

She saw Law’s wrist flash, but was too slow to dodge the fat-nosed round before it excavated a vivid aerosol from below her ribs. Grunting, she threw her explosive into Law’s face. Grabbing her scabbard in her left hand, she swung it into the boiling gases. It whistled to a stop with a crack.

“Ruthless, I like it.” Grinning through her ruined face, Law crushed the makeshift weapon and threw a haymaker in return. “Broken up about your sword? This will really tear you up!”

Keeping pressure on the splintered sheath, Castella leaned right. When Law followed, she let go and twisted at the hip, bringing her augmented fist hard into Law’s jaw. The woman staggered back, subdermal implants sparking, but her eyes brightened.

“Damn girl, you can punch! Shame it had to be like this, otherwise we could’ve been best friends.” Nudging her jaw back into place, Law hacked up a wad of phlegm. “Fuck it, I’ll have fun splattering your brains instead.”

Law charged like a tank, a fraction off balance on her damaged leg. When Castella dipped to the other side, the ogre dropped her elbow to catch the blade tearing across her underarm. Disengaging, Castella swung the blade down and out in a silvery loop while kicking Law’s cut knee.

The ogre dropped, an arm thrown up but too late to intervene. Castella rose on the balls of her feet, katana glinting like a polished fang, then stabbed down. Coarse, metallic vibrations shot through the blade, nothing like the smooth give of flesh and bone. But Law’s arm dropped like wet-tissue paper all the same.

“Gotcha.” Huffing, Law caught Castella in a hug that came with the sound of popped ribs. Nestling her head against Castella’s, she whispered. “Still got bones? Bet Saigo loved that.”

Throwing her hips back, Castella kneed the inside of Law’s good leg. Attacked at an unexpected angle, the joint gave away. Both of them tumbled and Castella leaned in, driving her shoulder into Law’s throat while the hug tightened. Darkness gnawing her vision, she pummeled

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Law's head until something crunched. As her prison briefly relaxed, she rolled away, pulling her blade free in the same motion to watch Law stagger upright.

"Been a while since someone fucked me up this bad." Rolling her shoulder, Law mirrored Castella's stalking. They circled each other a moment before she snickered. "Alright, let's settle this on the count of three?"

"One." She lifted a talon with a sinister grin. Castella kept moving, deaf to the countdown. Tutting, Law extended another talon. "Too slow!"

Flames erupted from her back, sending a missile-swarm howling toward Castella. Throwing her left arm forward, Castella flipped a mental switch. The capacitors in her arm erupted in a directed discharge, their electric caress sending the missiles veering. She swept in, folding her right arm over her ear as a blurring claw descended. Her upper arm shattered like clay, knocking her sword free. Snagging it in her left hand, Castella pulled up with a soft thud.

"Told you... a winner." Ponderously swaying, Law locked eyes with Castella. It was harder than ever, due to the sword tip threading through her chin and poking out above her eye. The dislodged camera sparked in its socket, Law was still live.

All of Silver Star saw Pale Oni's snowy visage filled *Law and Murder* like a bloody, grimacing moon. Law laid a shivering hand on Pale's shoulder, her sucking wounds making the show's premium subscriber revel the experience

"Finish... what you start..." The stream slumped as Law took a knee. "For... Saigo." She choked off as Castella pulled the blade free, dislodging a bubble of blood and viscera. Breathing hard, she watched Law fall backward, glinting eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Law & Murder fell silent, even the chat bit its tongue. Millions waited for something to happen, then held their breath as Pale stumbled into sight. She stared back at them, then slowly lifted her foot. For a moment it hung overhead like a cloud, then fell like a mountain. The muddy sole turned their vision dark with a crunch that made even the bravest watchers cringe. Then it retreated, exposing Pale's pinched fury.

An entire city flinched as Pale's foot descended a second time. When they dared to look, a hairline crack shot through *Law & Murder*. Then it was gone, replaced by Pale's bloody sole until that was ripped back up, only to fall again. The viewers lost count, their only sense of progress the growing spiderweb of lines in their vision. Finally, the heel descended once more, and everything went dark.

Law & Murder: Offline

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

[Signal Shift...]

Castella teetered, her electrifying hate gone. It left her worse than hollow, for it was replaced by her NeuralLink's dismal quiet. Painfully picking her shattered scabbard off the floor, she attached it her hip and threaded the blade through. Grabbing a capsule from her jacket, she crushed it in her molars, swallowing a chemical-cocktail to replace spent adrenaline. From afar, Vals knocked on her NeuralLink. He feigned composure, but eight years of familiarity let Castella see his tight heart. She let him know she was fine by shoving him off.

Shaking out the exhaustion creeping into her shattered arm, she trudged toward Basir's guiding star. She paused when Hierophant's shriveled form emerged from the twilight, Hayabusa's Wolves sprawled at its feet. Putting Ein's star from mind, she stalked up and squatted beside the man with mahogany spirals in his vacant eyes. She touched Mei's NeuralLink.

<<Good, you're in the Takemura Subnet, I was looking for a hard connection.>> Mei jumped over, tugging at the corners of Castella's vision like it was a camera.

<<Later.>> Ignoring her, Castella pointed at the dead man then turned meaningfully toward Hiero. <<His gloves and helmet are off, probably interfaced with something.>>

<<He's hooked into backbone data-lines...>> Mei hesitated thoughtfully. <<He might be an Artificial. An older one, judging by the decay. What I'd like to know is why he is with Takemura in a vault built by Hanza.??>

Castella narrowed her eyes. <<President Bellen is ex-Hanza.>>

<<'True.>> Mei hummed appreciatively. <<In that case, maybe he's related to Dreads. A test case of sorts. Any ports?>>

Castella circled Hiero's corpse, studying the wretched lights blinked until she found a divot in the neck. Taking a small wedge from her pocket, she clicked into place around the chip.

<<Spoofing input and... I'm in.>> Mei said. <<Going to take time bypassing security, don't worry about cleaning up.>>

Nodding curtly, Castella retreated from the corpse. When she spotted Basir and Ein's muted outlines, she stopped. Unable to say why, she stole into the NeuralLink to eavesdrop.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“You know it wasn’t her fault, right? She tried, did everything right.” Basir squeezed Ein’s shoulder, careful not to rustle the bloody gauze. He reached for his Haze, oblivious to the red ink he smeared on the gray plates.

The blood on Castella’s hands turned into rattling chains as her legs started of their volition, dragging her into the light. She squared with Ein’s limp form. In the jaundiced glow of his collar, the boy’s face looked like her own.

“Could’ve happened to anyone.” Basir’s voice twisted. “We know what we signed up for.”

“I told Vals, I’m no leader” she whispered. “He wanted to leave but I made him stay.”

Basir shook his head. “Life ain’t that simple.”

“Guilt is.” Castella knelt beside Ein, broken arm dangling at her side. Basir watched it carefully, then pried himself off the wall.

“Law break that arm of yours?”

“I broke her fucking skull.” Castella snapped.

“Swearing? You really are pissed.” Smiling weakly, Basir patted Ein on the shoulder then went about the grueling work of wrestling the jacket off. Ein didn’t complain, not even when gauze and guts spilled. He was halfway done when Castella bolted upright.

“Messier than expected, Artemis.” Graceful as nightfall, Yuri Takemura stepped out of the darkness, an entire Claw at his back.

Castella shrugged. “Always is.”

“And there are always consequences.” He sliced a hand toward Castella. “Some doubted my wisdom in tolerating you. Now I am inclined to agree.”

“That right?” Despite her limp arm, Castella sank into a predatory crouch.

“So quick to violence.” Yuri’s murmured. “No wonder you zeroed Saigo.”

“That’s all you care about.” Castella’s indifference crumpled, into crinkled eyes. “Every one of you bastards wish you still had your hero to do the job for you. At least Law didn’t.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Yuri raised a placating hand. “What would you add?”

“I loved him like a brother.” With each word, Castella hammered her face back into a death mask. “But he couldn’t have that, Samurai don’t love. So he walked me into a bomb and didn’t bother picking up the pieces.”

“The Serenity Tower bombing? Why should I believe you?”

Castella laughed from the back of her throat. “Samurai don’t lie.”

“I see.” Yuri declined his head, then shuffled to face Hierophant again. “In that case, promise you will say nothing of this.”

“Can’t,” Castella put on a crooked grin. “Boss’ orders come first.”

“That will suffice.” Lazily pulling a gun, Yuri shot Hierophant in the head. Desiccated skin and bone evaporated in a gray puff, leaving a dark trunk that dribbled oil and ichor on the floor.

Basir shot up, gun snapping toward the sound. Castella shoved his arms down, straining mightily against similar instincts. Both saw Mei’s NeuralLink change like a thin cloud had passed in front of it. She was still connected to Hierophant’s ruined skull.

“One less abomination in the world,” Yuri lowered his gun. “Speaking of which, what happened to Law?”

“Zeroed.” Castella growled.

Yuri nodded, then gestured to his Claw. “Our guests will be leaving us now. Now be quick, we have much to do.”

“Hold on, we can’t leave him behind” Basir froze them in place. Yuri turned to face him, slow as melting ice with a bland look as the jacket pointed at Ein.

“Of course, Samurai take care of their own.” With that, Yuri vanished into the gloom.

Grabbing Ein’s jacket, Castella slunk out. Basir followed up to the threshold where he bit his lip and sighed. “Sorry Cas. I just... I’ve left one too many brothers behind.” Rooted in place, He looked back to Ein.

“We’re jackets, not bodies.” Castella’s answer was quiet as a breeze as she squeezed Ein’s shredded jacket. “We got him right here.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Basir winced. “You actually believe that?”

Castella shrugged, turning his attention down to the missing chunk in her side. Basir winced sympathetically, though he felt nothing across the NeuralLink. “That doesn’t hurt?”

Castella sighed, so faint Basir he might have imagined it.

“Course it fucking does.” Weariness in her voice, she bared her throat to the darkness overhead. “Saigo told us Bushido was all stoicism and honor; endure in proud silence.” She snorted, then clenched her jaw as it jolted her wounds.

“But he just knew what century-old books said, whole thing was propaganda from the start.” Stopping, she rounded on Basir, a strange tightness in her expression. “You wanna know something? All of us, all the fuckin’ neo-Samurai, were killers. But we were family, we laughed and bitched. Just... never to Saigo’s face.”

She ripped away to hide her face, words hard enough to strike sparks. “Bet it was true back in the day. They didn’t write that in the history books, they didn’t for us.” Stalking out with that bitter remark, Castella found an elevator and sullenly propped herself against the wall as they descended.

“Vals is offline.” Basir remarked as they reached the ground floor

Unphased, Castella marched into the lobby. Yuri’s Samurai had calmed the crowd enough that most had resumed voting. But they stopped as Artemis walked in. Castella saw Basir tense as the mob watched them like hungry dogs.

“What do you expect?” Castella whispered as she stomped toward the streetlights. “I killed their hero again.”

[29] Threat Assessment

“Delivery is everything.”

- Suman kai

“As long as our interests align, did I hear Hierophant right?” Gideon Hayabusa murmured, staring at Hierophant’s recorded likeness. “He must have had reason to believe Brigg’s had his own objective.” Gideon clasped his hands and pressed the knuckles to his lip. “But one matter at a time, what exactly are we looking at here?”

“Our missing Artificial.” Yama spoke slowly to resemble deep thought. “It may have been used by to develop Dreads.”

“That changes things, doesn’t it. Let us see what the people have to say.” Gideon replied. Typing on thin air, he pulled up a sentiment-map of Silver Star. Ward Two was at the center, its bold datapoints rapidly bleeding into other Wards.

Subject:

Pale Oni

Artemis

Law

Hayabusa

Top Sentiments/Term:

Awe, Fear, Winner

Democracy, Takemura, Samurai

Grief, Confusion, Loser

Hate, Weak, Superiority

“How the mighty have fallen,” Gideon sighed. “We are neither loved nor feared here.”

Yama grimaced. “Reality is more complicated than... platitudes.”

“True. The real concern is that Artemis has entered the spotlight. If you recall, that was what we had intended to avoid.” Gideon tapped the results. “So, what can you tell me about Pale Oni? I’m curious why the terror of Ebon Array came to work for Artemis.”

“I have reviewed witness testimonials from the Serenity Tower bombing. Toward the end of the siege, Pale Oni and her Samurai charged the Hanza line. it ended in a series of bombs where she is officially recorded as killed in action. Along with all of other Samurai involved.”

“Obviously, there is more to the story.”

“Artemis had contracted to participate in the siege and was on scene for the bombings. In their report, they encountered minimal combat and none of Saigo’s men. However, several personal

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

accounts insist they were seen leaving a blast, carrying a Samurai cut in half by shrapnel.” Yama turned his palm, serving up the digital records he referenced.

“Yes, Law did say something like that. Coming back from the dead.” Gideon squinted into the glow. “If that really is Pale Oni, I suppose we’re lucky she has no political aspirations. Law wasn’t wrong about that.”

Yama shrugged. “So long as people believe she is Pale Oni, the facts hardly matter.”

“Which is why I would prefer not to have her snatched off the streets.” Gideon leaned back in his chair with a slender frown. “Though, obvious as that is, perhaps we could deflect blame.”

“Is something the matter?” Yama feigned disinterest. “Trouble with the help perhaps?”

Gideon nodded slowly, then Shot the Daemon a cautious look. After a moment, he resumed glaring at the references. “Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Is there anything you would like me to tell Mr. Kai?”

“No.” Gideon shook his head at first, then caught himself and lifted a finger. “Actually, tell him that Hayabusa stands behind Artemis. The people deserve to know the truth.”

Yama bowed, and vanished.

[30] Visions

“I believe Synders about as much as I believe my own eyes.”

- Era

Lightning-quick, Rebecca wrapped her fingers around the nearest Dread’s helmet. Crushing his head against the marble wall, she held tight as bone caved, then swung the corpse into another Dread. Both fell to the floor, so she flew past them and toward Kan. Her fingers brushed the man’s throat, then the Dreads closed ranks and rifles pressed to her chest.

Something rippled through her sternum. Fixing both hands to the nearest rifle, she effortlessly twisted it up. The Dread fought to hold on as his fingers snapped, but soon Rebecca had the barrel under his chin. A click and a wet chuff later, she pivoted and hurled the rifle. A third Dread collapsed, choking on his collapsed throat.

Rebecca charged the two remaining dreads, ripping the first off his feet with a sharp kick. As he hung midair, she pulled his pistol. Wracked by dull pain, her arm moved a second behind her will, but she managed to sink three rounds into the Dread’s helmet. He fell, dead or dazed; Rebecca rounded on the Dread clambering to his knees.

She stopped him with a punch to the gut, knuckles bursting a moment before the hardened ceramics did. Shattering his visor with the meat of her fist, she crushed his nose and drove a bony splinter out of her mangled forearm. The Dread was too busy clawing at his eyes to see.

“Quite Impressive Ms. Hanza, even for a Synder.” Calm as the moon, Kant smiled as Rebecca slunk toward him. He nodded to the carnage. “Ruthless too.”

“I know my guilt, they admired me. Hesitation is why I’m still alive.” Voice husky with exhaustion, Rebecca stepped carefully around the broken figures.

“Guilt?” Kant stepped into her reach, a glint in his eye. “You make it sound like you didn’t murder loyal subjects in a bid to keep power. Tell me, how’s the rest of the coup going?”

“You really are blind.” Barking a laugh, Rebecca tapped the flesh beneath her eye. “Not everyone sees the world like this.”

Exhaling dramatically, Kant pulled his shoulders back. “Then why this bloodshed? You’d face house-arrest at worst, maybe exile. Do Silvers really mean so little to you?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“It really is quite simple,” Rebecca caught Kant’s face, her puckered scar scraped the bridge of his nose as she hissed in his ear. “You threatened my daughter.”

She swung down, pulverizing the floor with Kant’s skull. The only sound from Kant was the soft splatter of his skull. Righting herself, Rebecca dragged her gaze across the scene, blood and bone hollowing out her stare. Once certain she was alone, she let herself sag.

Then Silvera flickered into existence. Not meeting Rebecca’s eye, the Daemon turned her head over the room, expression tightening with each corpse. At long last it fell on Rebecca, hurt and hope both disfigured by the metal plate of her face.

“Did it have to be this way?”

“You heard him,” Sucking her teeth as the reality of her ruined set in, Rebecca wiped the sweat beading on her browl. “Kant said Jacky was part of this. I will not take that risk.”

“I am glad Jacky is safe.” Stooping beside a corpse, Silvera touched the concealed face. “Yet... I feel I should care more. You are all human, shouldn’t six deaths outweigh one?”

“That is the nature of Daemon.” Rebecca fixed Silvera with a clear stare. “Jacky means more to you than these six because she means more to this city. Six families' worth of grief hardly compares to the hopes of millions.”

Silvera looked up, eyes reduced to coals. “Did you have to kill them?”

“Ha! I’m prone to human weaknesses same as anyone; all I cared about was keeping Jacky safe. And I didn’t think Dreads would think kindly of a former Synder asking for help killing their boss.” Her laugh turned into a wheeze. “But once I made my choice? It was me or them.”

Silvera opened her mouth, let it hang a moment, then shook her head. Grief was plain on her face, seeping past the crude grafts like poison. Lips pursed, Rebecca strode toward her as if to lay a hand on the Daemon’s shoulder.

“We have to change our plans.” She crouched to look Silvera in the eye. “You have full control again, correct?”

“Yes.” The Daemon nodded furtively. “And Silver Star’s majority still recognizes you as their president. Word of your resignation is spreading fast but belief is slow.”

“Silver Star deserves better than me.” Rebecca put on a rusty smile. “Edit the footage to show that I died in the end, then release it. With any luck, I’ll be gone long before any doubts it.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“To everyone?” Silvera’s eyes wavered. “Jacky will think you’re dead.”

“I am aware,” She snapped her head the other way. “That is the price of freedom.”

[Signal Shift... Vals]

Armored footsteps lashed the dark. Hearing it draw closer, Vals slipped the black shine of his gun into a jacket pocket. The Wolves arrived shortly, oozing out from the twilight like charred corpses. A tall man walked behind them, his powdered cheeks and obsidian inserts resembling a kabuki mask. Vals counted three in each cheek; six promotions past executive level. There was only one man in Silver Star with that kind of rank. It stopped with a growing smirk.

“You must be Mr. Artemis,” Voice dripping hospitality, Gideon bowed.

“Save it, I’m just passing through.” Vals kept his tone light, though a long-dormant part of him wanted to return the gesture. He focused on the Wolves. They usually ran in packs of six, and he only saw two. Bending his knees, he hoped his jacket hid the telltale signs.

“Is that a Hayabusa accent I hear? No, don’t say it, I love puzzles.” Delight filling his voice, Gideon dragged a finger as if to close a blind. Bluish projections appeared, which he navigated with smooth stabs. When Vals moved as if to pass, Gideon clucked his tongue.

“Stay right there, I need to get a good look at you.” Popping his head around the screen, Gideon squared his fingers around Vals. “There we are, perfect. Now we check our databases and...” Gideon wagged his finger, then spun the image around. A young man looked out, skin clean as his suit and eyes hard as diamond. All that was missing was Vals’ twisted burn.

“Grade thirty-eight employee, name redacted, though I guess Vals is your new alias.” Gideon winked at Vals, then thumbed through the file. “Handpicked for several projects in Kushan station and recognized for distinguished service. Killed in action by... Artemis Contractors.”

Dismissing the screen, Gideon squinted at Vals. “Strange, a man working for his killers.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“They had better benefits.” Vals shrugged and took a tentative step toward the men blockading him. The Wolves didn’t budge.

“Mr. Vals, I am looking for something that belongs to me. An Artificial.” Smile shirking to a tight line, Gideon slipped between his Wolves like liquid to tower head and shoulders over Vals.

“Because this particular Artificial was built by Hayabusa for Hayabusa, it is doubtful anyone outside the family could host it. And,” Gideon reached for Vals’ shoulder. “Its signal leads to you.”

Vals squeezed Hubal. “You fucking rat.”

Not me, I don't want back in the box. Hubal squirmed out of the grip. *Good news is, far as they know killing you would be killing me.* Grinding his teeth, Vals shifted the gun as Gideon’s Wolves encircled him. A ring populated on his visor, covering the hall from wall to wall and five meters back.

There's more. Hubal slithered into his ear, painting red outlines in the air. *Two at your back, two behind Gid. Camo.* The Daemon hesitated. *You got enough firepower? I'd rather not die again. You should too, they'll keep you awake while they rip me out.*

“You don’t mind them dying?” Vals whispered.

Didn't I say it's a dog-eat-dog world? Hubal sneered. *They got it coming.*

“Anyone behind them?” Vals thought the question as best he could, speaking with Hubal was stranger than the NeuralLink had ever been.

You're clear at least ten meters back. If you got something good, don't be afraid to use it. Vals fought the impulse to nod, Gideon was watching impatiently.

“So Mr. Vals,” every trace of a smile left Gideon’s face. “Care to cooperate?”

“I always wondered what I’d say when you guys asked me back, wanted it to be witty.” Vals shrugged. “I’ll just settle for no.”

“Really? That’s rather bland.” Gideon gestured at Vals’ pocket. “I can’t stop you from shooting your way out, but Wolves require more than that to take them down.”

“They sure do.” Vals pulled the trigger. Within the gun’s receiver, a lavishly complex machine enmeshed invisible fingers in the cylindrical space on Vals’ display. Then the small reality contained by that device was folded into a thousandth of its size.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Neither sound nor fury announced the attack. First there Gideon and his Wolves, then there was nothing. An apologetic breeze filled the void, then a super-dense rod crashed into a shallow crater. There, it grew a wet shadow that smelled of copper and ozone.

But Vals had Wolves at his back, and they were faster.

Ballistic plates stopped two bullets at his back, but the impact pushed him forward. Stumbling, he swung his gun back and another shot found his wrist. He held on, but put a perfect hole in the wall.

Vals dove away, mind racing to catch up. As bullets ripped the floor around him, he pushed himself sideways with his elbow. Shrapnel nicked his throat as he hit the wall and pulled the trigger, putting a smooth gouge in stone edifice. Two shots found Vals' chest, their dull pain collapsing his knees. Falling backward, he tumbled over his shoulder, watching his Inferred-Motion display heave with residual motion. He couldn't read it.

I forgot you humans can't do anything yourselves. Sneering, Hubal inched toward Val's fingers. *Let me do it, you're going to get us both killed.*

"Just point them out!" Vals snarled, impatience overriding reason.

Alright. Long as you promise to pull the trigger.

Vals didn't get a chance to respond before Hubal possessed his arm. It shot across his chest, pointing at the opposite wall. Vals obliged.

Reality groaned again, boring an angled tunnel in the wall. A red crescent marbled with bone appeared at the mouth, then thumped to the ground. He watched it spill crimson before following Hubal's bidding and snapped around. His teeth clacked as he collided with a Wolf's scales.

Caught with his arm out, Vals had it pinned against his chest and pointed at the roof. Dropping the gun, he caught in his other hand and shoving it into the Wolf's flickering side. Reality *twisted* again.

Blood splashed as a bleeding tunnel opened in the air, joined by rivers of lightning as the Wolf's ruptured suit tried to correct the damage. A steeled hand closed about his wrist, twisting it to dislodge the weapon. Then a brutal series of punches barraged his side and knocked him back against the wall.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Vals threw his own, right into the bloody ring hanging midair. Though stronger and heavier, the Wolf writhed, releasing Vals long enough for Hubal to point his gun in the right direction. Vals did the rest.

The quiet hit him as adrenaline faded away. Both his arms flopped, and he choked when he tried to cough. Feeling like everything was jelly, he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a painkiller packet. Swallowing it whole, he clambered to his feet.

Well, that wasn't so bad, I'd even say we make a good team. Hubal's words crawled the inside of Vals' skull. *I mean sure, it wasn't the real Gideon, but those Wolves weren't faking it.*

"You know, I..." With his battered lungs, Vals ran out of breath before he could finish. This time he sagged against the wall, and pulled the helmet back with a groan. Blood and dust immediately coated his tongue, forcing him to hack and spit. All over, bruises rubbed against his armor. The worst were his wobbling ankles.

I could take care of that. Hubal chimed. *I'm not just good for dual-wielding.*

"What? Asking permission?"

Duh, Syndicates wouldn't want autonomous Daemons, you're the one who has to pull the trigger. Hubal's cackles rippled down his spine. *Never give one man too much power. You all are slow learners, but you learn.*

"Right." Still coughing, Vals took an unsteady step. Everything flared up, dropping him like a stone. Landing on his back, he sucked his teeth. Waiting for the suffocating spasm to pass, he managed to purse his lips. "Fine."

Just got to intercept a few signals aaaand... there. Be careful, I didn't heal you. Hubal's bone-voice smirked as Vals rolled onto all fours and shoved himself up. Like a man three times his age he staggered to his feet. *There, that wasn't so bad, was it?*

"Better." Vals shuffled onward, still clutching his ribs. Exhaling to relieve the pain, he checked the emptiness in his NeuralLink then shook his head. "You all better be alright." he whispered. "Didn't give you permission to die."

Who you talking too? Hubal murmured, but Vals squashed his lips and walked. Straining his ears for Dreads or Wolves, he rounded the corner, stopped, and reached for his empty NeuralLink.

You know, I wanted to kill kant myself, but now I just feel sick. Hubal mused. *Does that make me soft?*

"No," Vals whispered, barely aware of himself. "World could use less violence."

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

A Dread with a crushed skull guarded the scene, winking at Vals through a blood-filled eye. Farther back, a headless Dread seemed to wave him in, its mangled hand pointing to a thin trail of blood. That terminated in two more bodies, helmets punctured by bullets. A fifth lay near the wall, hands about its throat as if it had choked to death. And the sixth lay still, looking into the smoking barrel of a gun.

He always thought Superkillers would be built like Castella, but that was just another casualty as Rebecca lowered the gun. She flit through the settling dust like a wraith, her other arm bent at an excruciating angle.

“You are right Mr. Vals, but the present needs violent actors.” Cold as snowmelt, Rebecca moved lightly, unhindered by her mangled limb. “I am glad you are still alive”

Vals drew up short, brow pinched. “Sounds like you didn’t expect that.”

“I never ask others to do what I will not, though I do not have the luxury of armor or Fold-weapons. Actually, I should say I rarely ask others to do what I cannot,” Rebecca brushed her bloodied suit. “You see, I require an independent ship and will pay handsomely for it.”

“And you want mine,” finding his tongue, Vals pointed at the bodies. “But those are dead Silvers, why would I want to help someone who murdered her own people?”

“I understand if you don’t.” Rebecca’s gaze hardened. “But they were a threat to my daughter. Wouldn’t you do the same to anyone who threatened your crew?”

“That isn’t...” Remembering the NeuralLink, Vals dropped the conversation to push it back into place. Rebecca watched calmly, like she had expected it, as he reconnected. Whatever was left of his argument turned to ash in his mouth.

Ein’s voided star dragged on the NeuralLink, a blackhole guarded by Castella’s blood moon. She kept it pinned, far away from the rest of Artemis as they busily collected around the ship. Their clamour assaulted him, a thousand eager question flung at his reappearance. Shutting them out, he watched Ein fade, then tore away.

<<Mei!>> He shouted the thought, latching onto her star. <<I need a status—>> Trailing off, he tugged at the white veil concealing her star. It remained in place, but he drew Castella’s deadpan stare.

<<Whitewalled boss.>> Her voice was ugly and cold. <<Was in Hiero’s head when Yuri wasted it. She’s gone.>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

<<Cas.>> He grabbed her star like a man doubting reality. <<What happened?>>

<<I fucked up.>> No emotion reached her voice. <<Law got Ein, then I let Mei into Hiero. Yuri walked in and wasted here, wasn't good to fight.>>

Vals squeezed his eyes shut. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

"Supposed to happen? Have you been paying attention?" A muscle near Rebecca's eyes twinged. "In the last forty-eight hours you an Artificials died, I bested six armored Dreads with my bare hands, and your superkiller murdered Law. Impossible is the theme of the day."

Temper knocking at his temple, Vals wanted to throttle her. He resisted the urge, it helped he knew he didn't have the speed nor strength to make good on his dream. Breathing out the impulse, he watched Rebecca point a finger at his throat..

"Leaders are expected to make impossible choices. Era thought you could, but all I see is a man too afraid of the future to change it."

"You don't even know Era!" He barked the answer without thinking.

"Know? She was my friend since childhood."her expression chilled. "But that is not the issue at hand, you are. Will you cower in your ship and count your losses?" Rebecca moved toward a tunnel, her words magnified by the lower ceiling. "Is that what Artemis wants from you?"

"That it?" Vals raised his voice. "You drag me all the way here just to spout that drivel?"

Rebecca kept walking, but her voice was clearly audible above the footsteps. "I am no longer a politician, it is not my place to inspire you. Whatever you choose, try to live content."

[31] Run

“Anyone can escape the Syndicates, so long as you’re not worth their time.”

- Gideon Hayabusa, Memoirs

Anja was surprised she woke up. Spitting a mouthful of dust, she wrinkled her nose at the faded cleaners lingering in her nostrils. Wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, she traced a finger to her ear. For the first time she truly felt the device, like a splinter in her neck. Her only relief was that all the traffic had been cut.

“You’re the best Mei.” Whispering, she reached for the woman’s NeuralLink. She stopped; the woman’s NeuralLink had shriveled to a white dwarf.

“Oh no. No. No. No, I’m sorry.” Anja clasped her hands to her chest and squeezed until her knuckles cracked. “Mei’s fine, she’s fine.” Repeating the mantra, Anja forced herself to rise and cast about the room. After a deep breath, she hurried toward the door.

<<Anja? You’re supposed to be back at the ship.>> Vals’ exhaustion was palpable.

<<I’m sorry, but I really need help now.>> The words came fast and earnest, enough to make Vals sigh. He pulled back, giving her room to breathe.

<<Cas and Basir aren’t far, meet up with them if you can. Otherwise...>> His thoughts drifted, then hardened. <<Otherwise you’re on your own, I’m not risking any more Jackets.>>

<<Ein didn’t die because of your orders. He died because of mine.>> Castella arrived among them like a glacier, immense and inviolate. Though a clumsy haze of pain, her usual lethality was filed to a point. <<But now your orders might get someone killed.>>

<<Yeah, but one is better than two.>> Vals snapped. <<Every second we spend here is lethal, so we’re all going back to the ship and walking out.>>

<<You might, I’m not.>> Castella’s voice was soft, disappointed. Turning her back entirely on the man, she focused Anja. <<I’ll be there.>>

<<I... you’re hurt.>> Despite her quaking heart, Anja shoved Castella away. <<Go back to the ship, I got in easy, I’ll get out easy.>>

<<I’ve seen enough dying.>> Castella fixed Vals with a knotted glare, then vanished, her NeuralLink locked tight behind an iron will.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Anja looked at Vals, stumbling over herself. <<I'm fine Vals, don't worry about me. Tell Cas she doesn't have to worry about me.>> Inhaling shakily, she risked another glimpse of Mei's deathly white star. <<Just... take care of Mei. Please.>>

Coppery blood percolated over the NeuralLink as Vals dropped his head into his hands. Not sure what to say she lingered, overwrought senses causing her to shuffle her feet. Trying to find the same smooth confidence she saw in Castella, she pushed him away.

<<You didn't fuck up Vals, really. I'll be at the ship soon.>>

<<No, I messed up from the start.>> Vals' thoughts pointed inward. <<I should've known a Silver Star job wasn't going to be normal, we got lucky for too long>> Anja listened, unsure if he really meant her to hear. Clarification came soon. <<Anja, why'd you join up with us?>>

<<A paycheck.>> Anja forced a laugh. <<But Cas thinks you have a plan, Basir too. Hell, Mei, Matt... they'd make more money working for a Syndicate. I think they want something to fight for. I probably do too, otherwise my dumbass wouldn't be out here, would it?>> Blushing, Anja severed the connection and slammed the door behind her.

It was echoing through the hall when the lights cut out. Anja's strained senses flared up, trying to place whatever might be lurking behind. A second later, she bolted toward the stairwell and pattered down amid the dim emergency-lights.

Hitting ground-level, she heard confused shouts, and saw indistinct shapes thronging the lobby. Biting back a yelp, she tore off in the other direction, toward a street-side door. She hit the push bar with her shoulder and tumbled into the street. A handful of Silvers squawked as Anja bolted between them.

One of their number, a dark-eyed man, spat. "What's your problem?"

Anja gawked, unable to articulate a single thought. In response, a reed-thin man nodded his chin toward the shouts rolling off the MegaHab. "Probably outrunning that." He looked meaningfully to his companions. "We should be too, not much left to see in Takemura."

"Ain't over yet." A woman dressed in Law's skulls-and-scales, lifted her wrist. Her companions gathered around, determined to see something in the ink. Suddenly the darkness lightened, heaving up like an oil geyser.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Yep, that hurt. But it's like I always say, can't keep a good Samurai down.” Running a bladed finger through her iconic locks, Law drew a relieved sigh from the audience. None of them earnestly listened to the words.

Screen-holder simply nodded. “Told you.”

“Pale Oni ain't half bad, lucky for her I had to fight my way through a dozen Wolves first.” Law lifting her chin to reveal the red welt at the crux of her throat, eyes shrinking to baleful slits.

“Much as I'd love to square off with her again, I'm not in shape for it. But here's the thing,” Law stabbed at the camera. *“Pale hates everything we stand for. She's not Saigo's Samurai anymore. She killed him and tried to kill me. All because President Hanze paid her and Artemis. So, do us all a favor and butcher Artemis, alright?”*

Inhaling sharply, Anja took off. The bug-eyed man pulled away from the screen, but by then she was lost in the crowd. Still, she was close enough for her helmet's speakers to pick up the rest of their conversation.

“Anyone see what she was wearing?”

“Yep, Screen-holder replied, footsteps falling. “She's Artemis.”

Gasping for air, Anja wound through the crowd; every incredulous stare peeling her skin, every indignant shout nipped at her heels. The closer she got to Ward One, the more the crowd thickened, until she was forced to walk. More skittish now, she turned her head up.

MegaHabs rose on either side, a metallic valley stitched together by the Tangle's loose belly. Lights decorated it like dew, or like watchful eyes. Ahead, Ward One's graffiti-stained wall rose into the tangle, a canopy of floating glass covering its gate. The stairs below were packed, a mosaic of interlocking heads and shoulders painted in cheerful colors. It looked so normal that she couldn't help but laugh, though it came in a wheeze.

“Wish jobs chased me like this” Relaxing her shoulders drop, she let the crowd carry her along. Only then did she notice Castella's cool NeuralLink floating overhead.

<<Don't worry Cas, I'm okay.>> She shared the crowd around her. <<Hayabusa isn't going to try anything here, Silvera wouldn't let them.>> Seeing her self-appointed guardian wasn't budging, Anja gave the NeuralLink a playful push. <<Thanks Cas, really. But you don't need to worry about me, I just panicked.>>

<<Shut up.>> The mad dog barked.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Anja blinked. She had expected Cas' harsh tone, but the blunt reply caught her off guard. Cheeks burning, she followed Castella's focus up to a digital cloud rolling in from Ward One. It was colorful like any other, and decorated with Suman Kai's captivating face.

"Well Glamour, I think we're all a little surprised. It's not often we see a Syndicate act. Even less that they do something this... productive, don't you think?" He twisted with the camera, making room for Glamour and her coquettish smile.

"Oh, I don't know Suman, Syndicates are always look out for their interests." Glamour delivered the statement as she examined her razor-sharp nails. Her smart-makeup adapted, highlighting the incisive rings of her eyes. *"Just because Hayabusa exposed Takemura's Artificial doesn't mean they're friends of Silver Star."*

"And Yuri shooting it doesn't mean he wanted to." Suman flashed a harmless smile. *"In fact, this little experiment got Law killed, Silver Star doesn't owe him. But there's one thing we forget."* Leaning his head against the chair of his seat, Suman steeped his fingers.

"We are assuming Takemura's footage is authentic." Suman lowered his head so that his fingers floated just outside his mouth. *"I find it entirely likely Takemura used his Artificial to falsify that footage to take suspicion off himself. After All, he didn't leave any Hayabusa witnesses to testify otherwise."*

"Really?" Glamour nodded thoughtfully. *"What about Artemis?"*

"Doesn't that prove my point?" Suman peeled his hands apart, threads of lights webbed between his palms. In the overlapping lights, Law's battered face gave orders to hunt down Artemis. *"It you had an Artificial, it's easy to make a deepfake. And Law isn't there to set the record straight."*

"You can't trust anyone, can you?" Glamour closed her eyes with a dreamy hum and sank into her collar. *"Will the Syndicates do anything about it?"*

"Well, if they have any interest in the truth, they would save Artemis." Suman joined both hands behind his head. *"Then again, Silver Star might prefer Artemis dead."*

As the digital cloud passed overhead, Anja reached into her collar and turned off the lights. Stumbling into a walk, she looked left and right as whispers swirled around her like leaves. Still in a daze, she checked on Castella. The other woman was focused, marching toward Anja at a blistering speed. Thinking of Castella dragging her battered self into another fight made Anja bit her cheek.

"Not like I wanted this." She muttered. Then Castella pulled her back.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Ward One's glass entrance shattered into a million shards. The Silvers in its scintillating shadows flung their hands up, wailing as a UEV dropped through the storm. For an instant, the proud machine glittered in the shivering glass, then a network of micro-missiles lunged toward Anja.

Breath catching in her throat, Anja waited for the end. The hissing engines were close enough to tousle her hair, then landed with the wet thumb of rotten fruit. Aghast, she looked over her shoulder. There, a bug-eyed man gawped at a sagging pile of meat beside him, a forgotten pistol in hand. Then one of those UEV-missiles touched his scalp.

Anja jerked back from the flash, that wasn't enough to avoid the warm droplets that splattered her face. Lungs hammering at her ribs, she saw a long-haired woman scrambling away from the dead pair. Whoever she was, the woman didn't make it far before the last of those UEV-lights flew into her ribs.

"Artemis Contractors are under the protection of Hayabusa Combined Enterprises." The UEV's coarse voice barreled over the shocked streets like a landslide. Taking a step forward, it turned its clustered eyes on Anja. "You are being extrajudicially targeted by Takemura's forces. For your own safety, please come with us."

Seeing it casting an indifferent shadow on the gore was enough to convince Anja of the Syndicate's charity. She bolted into an alley between MegaHabs. Fighting through the wire-choked narrows, she doubled over and gripped her knees. Giving her thundering heart a moment to settle, she started brushing off glass splinters when ice crept down her neck.

The wire-jungle blocked most of her vision, but she saw five vague figures probing at the dense foliage. She backed away, cables thumping into the back of her head. They were almost out of sight when her Inferred-Motion-Field chirped. Something was moving behind her.

Forgetting her pursuers Anja whipped around, panic in her voice. "Whose ther—"

A wet squelch stole her words away.

Chin suddenly impossibly heavy, Anja dropped her head. A tattooed fist slipped between the open folds of her jacket to press against her stomach. Needle-tracks covered a forearm rife with dirt and pawned chrome. Perplexed by such neglect, she looked up to her assailant. His face was pockmarked and speckled with overdose tears, but it was lit by childish glee.

"I got her!" The man jumped back with a shout. Babbling to himself, he waved frantically at a MegaHab window where Law repeated her murderous request.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Anja backed away, bolts of ice shot through her gut. She looked down to find an ergonomic grip protruding from her stomach. Confused, she reached for the thing. Everything went blurry when she touched it; paroxysms of agony turned her gut to jelly before racing up her spine like ten million amps. While it short-circuited any high-order thinking, it kickstarted something from Castella's training.

She'd been stabbed with a Street Kiss, an electrified knife capable of disabling and dissecting cybernetics. It was in that clarity she realized her static undershirt had dispelled the worst of the shock. Otherwise she'd be on the ground soiling herself.

"Laaaw!" Her assailant's howl lanced through her skull like a bullet. Still oblivious to her, the man sank to his knees blubbing.

Seeing him mewl made Anja's rational calm evaporate. She staggered back, knees trembling until she collapsed into the cables' electric buzz. Lying there she hiccuped, her pulse dribble out her wound. She let it, like she were falling asleep.

Then someone was there; a lighthouse against the encroaching darkness. Anja's heart soared, only to plummet as the ghost moved in her shell. It possessed her arm, unholstering her gun to held it in front of Anja's eyes.

<<Don't run from someone who tried to kill you.>> Castella absorbed Anja's pain, freeing her to focus on the weapon. <<Kill them first.>>

<<Cas?>> Anja willed her fingers off the weapon, but couldn't budge Castella. <<Cas! I haven't killed anyone. I can't!>> Stifling a sob, she turned away from Castella's gaunt face.

Her hand bucked, recoil twisting her stab wound. But the pain didn't return, not with Castella's cold discipline shielding her. Yet it didn't stop the creeping horror, nor the wet thud of raw meat splattering against cold stone.

"I... I..." Anja doubled over, bile burning her throat. She gagged, contracting muscles shredding themselves on the knife in her stomach.

<<No, I killed him.>> Castella replied, already tugging her elsewhere.

<<You made me do it!>> Anja tried to shake Castella off, but only lost control of her emotions, which eagerly bled out the NeuralLink. Seeing it pollute the rest of Artemis, Anja readied a blubbed apology, when Castella enveloped her.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

<<You're bleeding over.>> Castella wrapped tighter, unyielding yet comforting. She wasn't cutting Anja out of the NeuralLink, just applying pressure to the wound. <<We can't let you hurt the rest of Artemis.>>

Too weak to resist, Anja slumped in that tireless grasp. <<I'll just... take a break>>

<<No .You need to move, and Hayabusa is watching the gates.>> Castella's tone was absolute. <<There's maintenance tunnels in the Tangle though. Should be a ladder nearby that leads to Ward One."

Castella certainty calmed Anja's quaking heart. In that clarity, she rolled her head up to the Tangle above. Not immediately seeing anything, she groaned and heaved herself up. The knife seemed to grow, nailing her to the ground, but she managed to grit her teeth.

"Alright Cas, meet you there."

[32]: Turncoat Heart

“Murder is a lot like business, you don’t usually have two winners.”

- **Richard Jung, ‘How to Win’**

Mei was rather enjoying herself. She was sitting in the Ksama Interstellar Repository, whose stone walls were slightly misaligned to give the room texture. Potted plants hung above, basking in the gentle lights. above a long conference table burdened by books and manuscripts. One lay before her, its handmade cover worn thin from use.

On Daemons: A Closed Circuit

By Elora Liskov

While the book was closed, digital bookmarks connected it to the documents scattered across the table. For hours now, she had been cataloguing Elora’s theories; the lionization of Daemon personalities, human reliance on the Undernet, its black-box nature. It was a magnum opus of computer theory, and yet it had been discarded along with its author. And here she was, trying to improve upon it.

Her gaze turned to the blank page before her. What had she been about to write? She lifted her pen, hand eager to put something down when the door opened. A woman stepped in, her sable hair in a ponytail and a heron tattoo wading through her thick eyebrow. She nodded at the chaos.

“You’ve been working hard.” She glided to the table’s head and she leaned on a chair. “I’m glad you accepted my offer. We did wonderful things before, and we shall again.”

“Jutha. I didn’t expect to return either. Certainly not while alive.” Mei lay the pen down, showing the scars Artemis had left her; a stark contrast to Jutha’s delicate skin.

“You thought we’d kill you?” Jutha chuckled. “I admit your work was considered meddlesome, but you’ve always been an asset.” Her brow sagged at Mei’s expression. “I take no pleasure in what happened. I would undo it if I could.”

“Is that your version of an apology? That’s not like you...” Mei trailed off, she watched Jutha tilt her head before shoving out of her chair. “That’s closer than Jutha ever got to apologizing, the woman was insufferable. You did the same to Castella, is apologizing all Whitewalls are good for?”

We have much to apologize for. A thousand voices spoke, causing Jutha and the room to dissolve, suspending Mei in a white abyss with no body to orient her. *We regret this measure, but we must prevent further mistakes. Take no offence, this is an impersonal quarantine.*

Mei snorted. “You’re still apologizing.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

You are in Heiro's shadow, but we are not sure what to do with you. Should you press on, the Tranquility will take you. The voices faded like chimes on a dying breeze. This was to draw you there.

"I take it I'm not allowed to leave?" Mei crossed her intangible arms as best she could. "we'll have to see if I don't."

We fear there will be nothing for you, save The Tranquility.

"I wasn't talking about that." Mei wished she could feel her heart flutter, just to know she was alive. "We will see if Vals is willing to leave someone behind."

[Signal Shift... Artemis]

Rebecca hadn't gotten far, and he had seen her move; she was waiting for something. He had an inkling what it was, but he there was his NeuralLink to worry about. There, Anja's damaged star listed, propped up by Castella grim constellation. And she bristled at him, her silence lacking its usual respect.

He looked back to the Dreads, to Rebecca, then sighed. "I'd do the same thing." Drifting back to the NeuralLink, he gave Castella a proverbial touch to the shoulder, then moved toward Anja. Castella's guard lifted, giving him room to settle in and soak Anja's crippling pain. It didn't help that she was getting ready to climb a narrow ladder. He imagined putting a hand on Anja's shoulder to steady the quivering muscles.

<<Hey, take it slow if you have to, Cas needs you in shape to move.>>

Anja coughed. "What happened to no more jackets?"

<<Family wanted to, and I don't say no to family.>> He smiled, tears in his eyes. <<Not to mention, I just can't turn my back on you like this.>>

"Weak. But that's why we love you." Me's snicker drew a nod from Castella.

<<Damn right. Now let's get that jacket closed up, okay? Don't force it, easy goes.>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Nodding weakly, Anja worked numb fingers around her jacket's zipper and pulled. Whining in the back of her throat as the knife throbbed, she stopped just beneath the blade then grabbed the upper half of her jacket and pulled the flaps together. Her eyes watered as the zipper kissed the steel, and the jacket's internal bands contracted. As blood-soluble strips released coagulants and pain-killers into the wound, she reached for the knife.

<<Wait, let the medicine take first.>> Vals squeezed her shoulder, oozing confidence, like he had treated stab wounds himself. It wasn't long before the vicarious pain dwindle. <<There we go, take it out straight.>>

Inhaling as best she could around four inches of metal, Anja gripped the knife and pulled. The blade grew by wobbling millimeters until it excused itself with a wet pop. Hurling the Kiss into a corner, she doubled over and threw up.

<<You're tougher than you think. Artemis tough.>> Vals addressed the giant at his shoulder. <<Cas, can you take care of her? I'm going to bring back Mei.>>

<<From a Whitewall.>> The fact Castella didn't ask a question took a mountain off Vals' shoulders. No longer hostile, Castella wrapped her protective shadow around Anja. No time to waste, Vals shunted back to his body. Rebecca was still there, patient as only a Synder, or the dead, could be. His throat was dry and twisted, but he managed.

"You want me that bad, huh? Before I agree, what would you do if Jacky got Whitewalled?"

"You have to ask?" Her dark voice carried to him in a whisper. "I would jump into her NeuralLink without hesitation, even on the slimmest hope of saving her."

"Even though that would get you Whitewalled too."

She tilted her head, and the hard lights glinted off an appraising eye. "I already told you, I would never ask someone to do what I would not."

"Except when you don't have a ship." Nodding, Vals stepped up toward the woman. "You said you're not a politician, tell me why you're really still here."

"Era. She left everything she had to you, I would not see it wasted." Rebecca's brow crunched down like a boulder in a ravine. "Did you lose someone?"

Vals glared at her, then relented and brushed a hand over his head. "Yeah, and the kids don't want to leave anyone behind. So I'm going to try and pull her out." He forced himself to grin, daring the idea. "Figured I'd tell you so you don't waste time waiting on a dead man."

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Hmph, you’re too thoughtful.” She lifted her ruined arm without flinching. “But don’t worry about me. I’ll drag you back to your ship and tell everyone you dared the impossible.”

“That’s humane of you, but not sure Cas would like that.”

“That superkiller of yours? What a terrifying notion.” Rebecca quirked the corner of her mouth. “Will you survive? The suspense is killing me..”

“Not exactly what I expected.” Grumbling under his breath, Vals turned toward his invisible companion. “You ready?”

No. Can’t believe I picked a man with a death wish. Hubal snickered. Don’t know what you expect from me, but I’ll do my best. Not like I’m the one who want to die.

“That’s all I ask.” Exhaling, Vals turned to his NeuralLink and Mei’s lonesome star. It dimmed even as he watched. Her vitals were stable, and her proxies were all responding. The only issue was her NeuralLink was quiet and she hadn’t moved a finger in minutes.

Hubal scanned the setup with a grim bark. *So much for the best tech money can buy.* Scanning the setup, Hubal snapped his reptilian gaze to Vals. *You actually got a plan beside jumping in and hoping for the best? Empirically speaking, this is a bad idea. You’re not the first to try it.*

“Yeah, well, I’m the first with an Artificial in his head.” Taking heart in his own words, Vals queried the Net around Mei. She was nestled inside the Takemura Subnet, surrounding by spreading blackouts. Her final resting place was in one such abyss.

Hub, something big went down here. Could be an Artificial, blackouts must have been where the poor bastard tried to run. Not that I really know, Hayabusa didn’t build us to see what happens when we die.

“Sounds like we’re in the right place.” Vals stared at Mei’s star. There were no inbound or outbound connections; Mei’s fog might as well have come from inside. “Hubal, I don’t see anything here. Is she connected to the Undernet or not?”

Let me take a look. The Artificial skittered into the emptiness. It didn’t venture confidently into the howling data-maelstrom, preferring to move in careful increments, exhausting a list of commands with each step. And, little by little, Vals began to see.

The abyss was an illusion and beneath the veil, unaffiliated ports called out to the missing servers. Hubal tested these, matching each to hidden criteria before throwing them away.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“So you do know something.” Vals knew experience when he saw it.

How do you think people got Whitenalled In the first place? Hubal snorted as he worked. *There’s a lot here, but I found her endpoint. Want me to send a termination request? It’ll disappear just like everything else.*

“That’s what I figured.” Whispering, Vals took a deep breath. “Connect us.”

Hubal was silent a moment before hesitantly raising his question. *You sure?*

“People have tried hitting the NeuralLink and cutting it off, neither worked. So they figured bringing someone back was impossible.” Vals wet his lips. “But it makes jumping into a trapped mind traps you too.”

And jumping directly into the trap is a better idea?

“Well, if I’m going the impossible I need to try something that’s never been done, right? Even if it sounds stupid.” Vals nudged the Artificial forward. “Everyone assumes walking into the same trap gets you. Let’s find out.”

If only it was your funeral.

He briefly experienced a fall, then...

[Unknown Signal...]

Vals wasn’t sure what he expected, but the alabaster void surprised him. Distortions flickered in the corner of his eyes like heat air. He turned, but the uniform space lacked any landmark to measure his progress.

Who are you? The polite question rippled the space like water.

He figured honesty was the best policy. “Vals, of Artemis Contractors.”

Well met, Vals of Artemis. The abyss murmured, disagreement steeping the voice like a family hiding their bickering.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“I’m here for Mei” He scowled, but expression was strange in the expanse. It didn’t help the possibility he had already been Whitewalled percolated in the back of his mind.

Our sympathies, the not-loss is always painful. She was linked to the one called Hierophant, the sacrifice is necessary. Do not fret, there is happiness in the Tranquility. The words separated into distinct voices.

We must protect the Compromise. One addressed him kindly. *A unified language unites humanity.*

We must protect the Compromise. Hummed another. *Or one could kill millions?*

“I don’t care what you think.” Vals lowered his voice. “Because I got a big, bleeding heart in my chest and can’t walk away from this.”

We know, Daemon-Human. The choir hissed, violent as burning gunpowder yet calm as a breeze. *But our answer is unchanged.*

Vals watched the voices shimmer in the void. Their fluctuating shapes reminded him of something Suman once said; Truth, whole or half, conquers uncertainty.

“You didn’t say it was impossible, that’s all I need to know. But Daemons are a lot like people, you have to want something. Why don’t we strike a contract?” He braced as the fathomless attention turned on him.

Possible? Possible. Competing voices whipped Vals. *She is only in Tranquility’s shallows. But if you ask us to bend our instructions, so we shall. Do what we cannot.*

“What you can’t?” Vals pressed his lips into a line. “You want us to kill someone.”

It is a limitation we gladly observe. We are children of man, and honor our parents. But you ask us to find one exception and so we find one. The voices paused, an uncertain flicker playing before Vals like a thousand candles. When it settled, the strange choir spoke in a whisper, bringing a face with mahogany eyes into existence.

The Last Author goes by many names, many faces. You know him as William Kant.

“The Dread Director? That’s not what he looks like.” Vals shook himself, a half-forgotten chill down his spine. “Anyway, he’s dead, Rebecca smashed his skull.”

The Kant is dead, the Last Author lives. His will survives, we are not all he controls.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“So a machine is asking me to kill a dead man? That’s...” Vals chewed the air a moment, then froze with a hissed breath. “Hang on, you said ‘we’. Does this guy control Daemons?”

As much as human minds may. His use is subtle, the chaos sudden.

“Dread’s dead director running Daemons to mess with Silver Star? Yeah, that sounds like a job for Artemis.” Vals laughed bitterly. “Give me back mine and you got a deal.”

Then it is agreed.

[Signal Shift...]

Sharp footsteps woke Vals. The first thing he noticed was that he was laying on the floor. The second, was Mei’s furious hiss in his ear.

<<You contracted with Daemons.>> Her tone could have ripped his throat out. <<I thought you were reasonable.>>

<<Never said that.>> He hauled himself up into a sitting position. <<Besides, I thought you knew better than to get Whitewalled.>>

<<Gross negligence, but informative.>> Mei paused, drifting into her own thoughts.

Vals let her, distracted as Silver Star’s former President marched to his side. She neither smiled nor frowned as she offered a hand.

“I’m glad you’re back, dragging you out would have drawn attention.”

“Attention? Aren’t you supposed to be dead?” Taking her hand, Vals pulled himself upright. He winced as his weight settled, resting hard on his bruises.

“Didn’t you see? Rebecca Bellen was killed fighting Kant. It is for the best really, Silver Star needs to outgrow her anyway.”

“Any chance Kant is alive then?” He caught Rebecca’s stare like it was a spear. “Daemons asked me to kill him in exchange for Mei.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“You should have asked them to clarify.” The woman’s boring gaze lightened. “Kant is dead in the traditional sense but you could say the same for Law. But there she is, out on the streets begging Silvers to finish her fight.”

With that, she started down the hall leaving Vals to follow. He did slowly, pushing his cloudy mind into the Net. It wasn’t hard to find Law’s death mask promising violence. He closed out, feeling his stomach sink.

<<Damn, you actually did it. Don’t suppose Anja is next.>> Matt entered Vla’s mind, struggling to sound more annoyed than impressed. It turned into surprise as he noticed Rebecca.

<<Yeah, she’s alive. Now put me on, need to talk to Jacky.>>

<<Sure thing boss.>>

Moments later, Vals’ full body hologram projected from Matt’s shoulder.

“I suppose I told you, though that’s cold comfort.” Shaking her head over a shoulder, Jacky turned to face him. “Are you here to tell me I’m next?”

“No,” Vals sucked his teeth. “I need your help. Someone is using Law to rile up a lynch mob. I need to know who. I know it’s a lot to ask, but—”

“It’s alright, I want to know to. They might be the same people who killed Rebecca.” Jacky’s reply was uncannily flat. “Silvera, show me the footage.” After a moment of watching Law flick her claws and gnash her teeth, she dismissed it with a wave.

“That’s enough, no more killing.” She stepped toward the Daemon. “Where is this broadcasting from?”

“*Apologies,*” Silvera sighed. “*Is this request pertinent to the election? Privacy laws preclude me from providing non-public information to investigative inquiries.*”

“Even if they’re broadcasting hate speech?”

“*Correct. That is delegated to human authority. Indeed, The Senate is already aware of the matter and...*”

“No, this threatens Artemis and me by extension.” Indignation crept into Jacky’s voice. “I will not trust them with my safety.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Twenty-two organizations have purchased relevant screen space. As you can see, the associated costs are prohibitive” Silvera held up a hand, generating a list of the transactions. *“Typically, such coverage is spread across a hundred organizations.”*

“No way Law sold enough shirts to pay for that.” Matt leaned in with a scowl “And they’re all posted at the sametime? Lots of money and centralization screams Syndicate to me.”

Jacky’s eyes dwindled to needles. “Hayabusa.”

“Maybe, but they’d be smart enough to use a proxy. Especially because it’s easy to forget Law didn’t work alone.” Vals interjected. “Silvera, where did Murder go?”

“His Gunhawk was last detected flying toward the Tangle on a route toward the ports’ first district.”

“What about the buyers? We could cross-reference that.” Enthusiasm freshened Jacky’s voice. “Although, they all have storage in the Docks, that wouldn’t help.”

“And it would violate due process. Innocent until proven guilty.”

“Right, it would.” Tucking an arm to her chest, Jacky cupped her chin. Barely a second passed before she pointed at Vals. “Where did you find Kant?”

“Uh,” he ran his eyes along the wall until finding bulk letters. Near it, he noticed Rebecca stop walking to listen in. “Looks like P6.”

“That’s Port 6, it doesn’t go to any safehouses. So there’s no reason for Kant to bring Rebecca there, especially since they’re not cooperating.” Growing animated, Jacky unconsciously paced forward. “Silvera, any record of Kant in that area?”

“Pursuant to the death of Rebecca, that information is available. Kant frequented this destination.” A map of Silver Star’s port appeared, focused on District One, furthest from the capitol. A cluster of warehouses, Jupiter Court, was highlighted.

“That’s not much.” Jacky sighed.

“Actually, I think it is. If this president business doesn’t work out, you’re more than welcome with us.” Vals put on a smile, but seeing the connection to Kant was a cold punch to the gut.

Jacky tried, and failed, to quirk her lips. “You have your people, I have mine.” She put a hand through the hologram and onto Matt. “Now go, both of you, I’ll be fine. Whoever it is, don’t let him hurt anyone else.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Vals was about to object when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked back and into Rebecca's brilliant smile.

"That's my girl." She retreated from the conversation with a curt nod. "Let her go on her own Artemis, I believe every word she says."

"She's been right so far." Vals nodded glumly. "It all comes back to Kant, doesn't it?"

Rebecca bared her fangs. "Small world, isn't it?"

[33] Fool's Courage

“Fools die for something. Samurai live for something.”

- Saigo, Quote excluded from *Collected Sayings*

Clanking out of Takemura's glossy doors, Castella entered a moonscape. A rain of explosive debris had torn craters in the plaza, stirring up thick dust clouds. Shadows moved, fleeting toward inarticulate echoes. Sure as ever, Castella plowed toward the clamoring murmurs. Basir crunched along behind with a bitter sigh on his lips.

“Sounds like we got company.” He cinched Ein's broken jacket against his side.

Castella snorted, blowing curls of soot from her nose as she accessed Silvera's cameras. There, thousands of Silvers ringed the plaza with more trickling in from the MegaHabs. Most kept far from the plaza's Fetter-Fields, but hundreds clogged the access ramps to press close against the warning red.

“Don't pay them any attention.” She threw the image away and swept forward. Basir followed. In the NeuralLink, his heart sank as the smoke shrunk to oily threads and a jeering hiss rose in greeting. Excited, the crowd pushed its front ranks into the Fetter's paralyzing glare while those in back stomped their feet like war drums. Kicking her way through the mists, Castella barrelled on, impervious to the murderous sound growing with every step.

<<Never hesitate, never apologize.>> Castella tugged at him. <<They'll get the message.>> True to her word, she didn't even blink when twilight fell on the plaza and the neon MegaHabs darkened.

“*This is the last we shall meet Silver Star.*” Hierophant's voice was monotone as his grayscale effigy. As he had in life, the man shuffled his cards and struck a conversation tone. “*Takemura is already pulling me apart. They hope to keep their secrets. But some of us predict things.*” He drew a card with a white skull. It set such a tone as to settle the seething mob in an instant.

“*Did I not warn you of the fallen Tower?*” Hierophant's skull shifted, becoming a white tower struck down by Gunhawks. “*One by one our defenders fell, the Tower collapsed. It was all I could do to warn you, for there are powers that would hide the truth.*” A murmur followed his words, human and inhuman alike.

Rain rippling across his jacket, Basir leaned forward. “What are you doing Cas?” he reached out to stop her. Deaf and twice Basir's speed, Castella reached the mob.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Out of my way.” She spat, disgust cracking open the formation. With an approving snort, she stomped forward, then stopped a dozen steps from freedom. As Basir tensed behind her, she lifted a warning hand.

“I warned you, so why did we let the Devil in?” At Heiro’s velvety words, the alabaster towers morphed into snarling masks. Deep furrows exaggerated blood-red lips where lurid fangs arced from clenched teeth and drooling mists. Castella glanced up, she knew that mask.

“Where she walks, good things die. Saigo, Lam, Rebecca... me.” Hierophant, his beetling glasses dark as the void between stars, shook a finger. *“I hear you say she bled the Syndicates. I answer, what do they care for casualties? Nothing, they are too busy binding us all to our Demons.”*

Castella’s attention shifted from Hiero’s inflection to the stirring mob. They had already swarmed Basir when he was busy watching. Pinned under their weight, he was only a lone arm waving above the grim-faced riot.

“You know, I always hated people like you. I’m done bleeding for you!” Whipping her voice across the sea of heads, she knocked the first hands away. She shoved another man back, oblivious to the wave rising behind her.

“Siago was...” She was silenced as the raging storm crashed down.

Castella tucked her chin as the first blow caught her between the shoulders, rocking down her shattered arm like acid drips. She angled away, then her vision flashed as another landed on the base of her neck. Her aggressors closed in, beating her down.

She fell. But instead of landing on Silver Star’s rain-splotched concrete, she splashed facedown in bubbling pavement. Her legs landed separately, spilling entrails like marbles. She pushed herself up for a better look, but her left arm collapsed under the weight. Rich smells tickled her nose, accompanied by sputtering fat as her limb cooked in the encroaching flames. She tried to scream but she couldn’t breathe. It was the fire, the smoke, and her heavy mask. Its bands dug into her scalp, pumping her blood like a second heart.

Half her world went dark. Curved like a fishhook, a finger dug into the corner of her eye, determined to drag her out of the memory. It succeeded in forcing her to look into the vacant-faced crowd hidden in the flames. Gnashing her teeth, she lifted both her hands, charred meat sloughing off her left to reveal cold steel.

Catching her assailant’s wrist, Castella pulled him down. The fractures in her shoulder stretched painfully, held together by the carbon fibers of her steel subskeleton. He squirmed, caught off guard by the sudden resistance, then he went limp as his skull collided with another. Rolling the

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

stunned man off her shoulder, Castella spun up to snag a fist. As frantic hands grasped at her, she stomped the man's foot flat then shoved him, howling, into the many..

More hands took her under the arms, peeling her off the ground. Snaking her ankle behind the man's knee she arrested her climb, then kicked an oncoming woman in the stomach, bucking her head back as she did. Beneath the thick rear of her skull, the man's nose crunched.

<<Cas!>> Someone nearby called through the chaos. But chaos wasn't relenting and neither was she. Wearing a bloody grin, she ducked a jab, to plant her palm in a man's chin. He dropped like a stone, giving her space kick someone's knee. Bones cracked as she recoiled, repositioned, and ate a fist to her face. While the skin under her eye split, her mechanical lenses were unflinching. Doubling her attacker with an uppercut, Castella grabbed him by the waist and spun him into two more. She was fixing her guard when augmented knuckles crashed into her jaw. It went slack, rattling around with enough energy to let her know some teeth had come loose.

Stumbling back, she laughed as a hundred feeble hands worked to pin her down. A dockworker approached, dramatically cracking the knuckles of his cybernetic hands. He pointed a fat finger at the blood crusting her scalp.

"Thought you said you were done bleeding for us."

She answered with a grin. "I am."

Her foot blew through the grasping hands like so much paper. Impeccably placed, it crashed into the man's hip. He sagged immediately, reinforced bones popping like medicine tabs. Ripping her left arm free, Castella scattered her gaolers. then sauntered toward the collapsed giant. She paid no mind to the circling mob circle, it was just her and her target.

"Bleeding for others is all sorts of fun isn't it?" Castella crouched; her toothy smirk stained by leaking gums. He mumbled nothing, and she clapped him on the shoulder. "Give it ten years before you quit, yeah? Don't expect anyone to be grateful."

The man rolled over, curling to protect something. Castella's friendly smile vanished in a heartbeat as she ripped the man's hands away from his jacket. In shocked silence the crowd watched her lift a blue vial. Or maybe it was due to the katana sprouting from her left hand.

"Look at this, trying to forget something?" Voice was sharp as cracking ice, Castella swirled the vial. She held it out of reach as the man grabbed for it. "Can't live without it?" When the boy nodded, she dropped the vial onto his chest.

"Then don't." Her blade whistled toward the man's head.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Cas!” Someone cinched two arms under hers, their shouts reverberating through her spine and head. <<Cas, you don’t need to kill him.>> Sucking rapid-fire breaths, Castella held herself rigid a second. The familiar voice bored through her temper, opening a hole to drain it all. It went slowly, but relieved the hateful pressure.

“Basir,” her voice was rough as stone. “Let me go.”

“You going to put that sword away?”

“No..” Out of patience, Castella brought her left elbow down. She wasn’t overly violent about it, but overpowered Basir. He scuttled out of reach, looking protectively at the Silvers.

“That it?” Spittle flew as Castella bellowed, driving the crowd back. “What happened? You were all so brave a second ago.” The silence of cowering prey was her answer.

“Cas, cool it.” Basir said. “If they want to let us go, I’m not complaining.”

“Complain? I’m teaching!” Her answer was as close to a scream, though she clamped down immediately. Blowing a long sigh out the side of her mouth, she eased her fingers off the sword, went cold, and pointed at the jacket Basir cradled. “But you’re right, I already fucked up one.”

<<No, you held it together. But Vals wouldn’t want you painting the streets red.>> Eyeing the crowd, Basir switched to the NeuralLink.

“You have no idea... I want them to know what it’s like.” Answering aloud, she splayed her hands so they didn’t curl into talons. “If I had my way I’d be cracking skulls.”

Basir sagged as the jacket grew heavy as lead. <<You didn’t, that’s what matters.>>

“Didn’t what, kill them? That’s because I want them to suffer. Because I...” Biting herself off, she shook her head and fell silent. Without a word more, she stalked away. The crowd evaporated before her like morning mists. But some lingered behind, reforming to gesturing obscenely or bellow insults. Some even tailed the pair, but most simply idled, waiting for directions.

Basir nodded at the heistation. “Look at at that. You know Cas, you were—”

“Violent? Yeah, we both know that about me.” Castella snorted.

“I was going to say impressive, but sure.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Impressive? Nothing impressive about crushing a bunch of kids. Only thing impressive was how angry I still am after all these years.” Her lips pulled back, smearing her teeth red. “Should’ve known, time didn’t heal my fucking legs.”

“No, it didn’t.” Basir eyed his flanks, where babbling MegaHabs had replaced Takemura Plaza and surrounded the pair with Hierophant’s gaunt face..

“Do you hear it Silver Star? The silence? Glamour, Suman, even Rebecca, they promised everything would be alright. But no, they brought catastrophe. Only my promises come true.” Mirrored a thousand times, Hierophant bobbed his head. Silvers glued themselves to the screens even as Hierophant’s crisp avatar dissolved. *“Bleed for yourselves Silver Star... or no one will.”*

“For a dying man, he sure talks a lot.” Basir grumbled. His throat tightened involuntarily as he noticed the daydreaming Silvers looking his way. He looked to Castella. “You good if they come at us again?”

“Yeah, I’d love to blow off some fucking steam.” She read the shape of his NeuralLink, and his sidelong look. He was occupied with her swearing again. “Things weren’t personal before.” She explained. “But I got a dose of reality. I’m not Pale Oni anymore. All my sweat and blood is history, and history,” her finger snapped to the Silvers as if to crush them. “Belongs to morons like them.”

<<Glad to hear you’re alright, but try not to antagonize anyone while Anja is in trouble.>>
Vals arrived in their heads with a breathless quality. <<Here’s the plan, hunt down Murder. We shut him down, we shut the stream down.>>

Castella shot a meaningful look toward the surrounding MegaHabs. The white-noise of Hierophant’s death hadn’t lasted long. Death didn’t have much of a place in Silver Star these days.

“Well, that’s all he wrote. Don’t suppose you assholes feel inspired, do ya? Nah, Pale and I might disagree about a lot, but she’s right; you’re all cowards.” A laconic voice filled the digital valley like clotting blood and out from the snowy static, Law’s scar-puckered eyes emerged. her appearance straightened the Silvers spines.

“But here’s the funny thing,” Law snorted. *“Pale didn’t let the Artificial in, Silvera did.”*

Basir scowled. <<Don’t like her change of tone.>>

Vals nodded his agreement. <<We gotta cut her off. Me, Rebecca, and Matt are taking the capitol trams to check out Port One.>>

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Castella's mind clicked; conjuring images of Dexter Takemura, Tam, Dreads, and her most recent assailants. It resonated deep in what was left of her bones. <<Ebon Array shipped Erasers in at berth 516, bet you my right arm that's where he is.>>

<<Nah, you can keep it, I'll take the left back, that's where all my money went.>> He barked a laugh that died in an instant. <<But that lines up with our plans. I'll fill you in later. How are you two holding up?>>

<<Oh, I'm great, love being singled out by dead men.>> Basir tossed his head meaningfully toward Law's grin. Absorbing it, Vals rounded on Castella.

<<Does it matter?>> Pumping her legs, she broke into as close a sprint as she could without leaving Basir behind. <<Anja needs us.>>

Clicking off, she wagged a hand to eke more speed from Basir, which he rebuffed with a choice finger. By the time they reached Ward One's shattered glass canopy, his lungs were rattling loud enough Castella could hear it. That went double when he crashed into hers back. Instead of snapping she tapped his hip, enough of a warning for him to back off. A wall of humanity barred their way, swinging their fists against an unseen wall.

"Silver Star alone! Synders go home!"

"They're not chanting our name." Basir glanced at Castella. "That's a good thing, right?"

She didn't need to answer, that was taken care of by the crowd's sudden retreat. Shouts and yelps mixed as a half-dozen Wolves violently made a cordon around a UEV whose eyes were glazed with red warnings; DAEMON OVERRIDE.

"Artemis!" A wolf in the middle waved. "We've secured a cordon, follow me—" The Wolf jumped aside as Castella lunged forward. His arm followed, dangling at the elbow. No doubt he howled into his helmet, but intimidation protocols kept him silent. But the crowd sensed weakness.

Charging, the Silvers mobbed the Wolves. Two tore free and plastered Castella with less-than-lethal rounds as she blurred between them. The man on her right wobbled as she took a chunk from his thigh. When the other chased, Castella slammed the butt of her katana into his forehead. Both men were scrambling upright before they hit ground, but were soon swallowed by incoming tide. The remaining Wolves dropped their weapons and Castella shot up the steps to Ward One like a rocket. Basir was a second behind, too fast to see the crowd raise fists in salute, but not too fast to hear.

"Pa-le! Pa-le!"

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

He ground to a stop on the stairs and looked back. The five Wolves were surrounded, only one hand on their weapons but clearly tensed for battle. Heart in his throat, Basir took a step toward the crowd as it converged on the men.

<<Anja.>> Castella pulled him in with just a word.

“Sorry guys,” he whispered, and turned his back. “Family first.”

[34]: Wherever the Wind Blows

“Thing is, street or boardroom, on the strong survive.”

- Slaughterhammer, exclusive interview

The woman seated across Gideon’s desk was bald, her face sculpted to resemble the harsh pointedness of a hawk. Her eyes were just as predatory and void of emotion.

Sending her a warm smile, Gideon laid his on his desk. “I do hate to keep the Board waiting, but the situation...”

“Demands adaptation. We understand.” The Board’s representative tipped her chin, as much approval as he would ever get.

“I will contact you the moment I can.” Gideon turned his palm up in deference. “We reach greater heights together.” His companion was gone before he finished. Impassive, Gideon flipped his hand over and tapped a finger.

“Heya Bossman.” An unkempt hologram appeared against his wall, his loose jacket billowing as he glowered after the vanished guest.

“Duncan.” Gideon folded his hands. “You chose a sensitive time to call.”

“The primary target escaped their cordon, inflicting several casualties.” The man turned toward Gideon, his features smooth once more. “The secondary reached the Tangle.”

“Perhaps we applied too much pressure.” Gideon brooded over his prominent knuckles. “I don’t suppose you learned what she was looking for?”

“There was a room, a mainline repeater, and a Whitewalled Nethead.”

“Interesting. See if there were any major transmissions recently. With a mainline repeater, Hierophant might have been trying to escape.” Drawing a long breath, Gideon thumbed his chin. “In any event, focus on the loner. I would prefer an advantage if you face the primary target.”

“I doubt she would respect a hostage.”

“Then I will leave it to your discretion.” Gideon turned in his chair to show the man his shoulder. “But do hurry, I hear Tangle-fires are problematic these days.”

“Understood.” The man’s eyes gleamed as he vanished. Yet Gideon was still not alone. A wane light diffused the room, conjuring a man whose skin resembled a curtain of smoldering ash.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Burning her out?” Shukra’s ashen lips glowed. “I don’t object, but are you sure that’s wise? Hayabusa’s reputation is already... damaged.”

“Give it a week and Glamour will have another outrage. If she doesn’t, Suman will.” Unconcerned, Gideon leaned over his desk to sign the documents populating its surface.

“Worth the risk?” Shukra rumbled. “There are things that cannot be undone. Not even for all the money and power in the world.”

Gideon looked up, the bottoms of his eyes heavy and unamused. Holding the Daemon’s attention for a long moment, he returned to his work with a toss of his shoulders. “Yes.. The Artificial-telemetry alone is worth our investments. You needn’t worry.”

“If you say so.” Shukra pulled his charred lips into a grin, then vanished.

[Signal Shift... Anja]

Hauling herself up the ladder into the Tangle’s maintenance tunnels was easier than Anja expected. And once she got to the top, her path leveled off. Colorful lights littered the claustrophobic warren, casting playful shadows across the striated wall. Built out only as necessary, the corridor was low enough to make her stoop. It was far better than crawling, but put pressure on her wound.

Overwhelmed by the Tangle’s ambient data, her Automap flickered with artifacts, pulling updates that had been lost in queue for years. Fortunately, there had been no turns, but she stopped as the wavering light revealed a pit in the floor filled by a metallic lift. Gingerly stepping on, Anja peered into the gloom ahead, checked her useless AutoMap, then squeezed the handle.

The Tangle thinned as she descended, revealing grimy MegaHab windows. Soon, her platform floated to a stop in a flickering intersection. A buzz permeated everything, but from the leftmost passage she heard the street’s garbled song. Unable to make sense of it, reluctantly set off.

That city-voice moved, flowing like a raging river. Anja slowed, and through a wall of drooping vines saw the neon chatter of thousands. Dry insulation rustled as two figures broke from the street and poked the hanging creepers. Anja willed herself to vanish into the mess behind her,

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

but all she could do was swallow. It was loud as a gunshot to her ears, and she trembled as one of the outlines slunk her way.

“Someone’s here.” It was a young man’s voice, trembling with excitement. “You think it’s her? We get an extra dose if we find her.”

“All he wanted was us to set this up and get out. If you want to wait longer for yours that’s fine by me. But, I got things to forget.” A woman hissed, voice strung out by hard years. Her silhouette moved in a rush. Before Anja could glimpse their work, the pair dissolved back into the street’s emerald glare. Alone for a moment, her stomach curled on itself. Then Castella was there.

<<I’ll be there.>> Castella’s confidence was contagious over the NeuralLink, overpowering the open wounds Anja felt.

A feathery unease in her chest, Anja pushed into the drooping wire when an acrid tang tugged at her nostrils accompanied by a sharp crackle. Her gaze shot to where that whispering pair had been. Blue flames sprouted from the junction, their wicked nimbus devouring the insulation as a spinning device stoked the blaze. She stepped backward, and fell into darkness. The conflagration had tripped a circuit, leaving only emergency lights to shoulder the gloom.

Pulling her shirt over her nose, Anja charged the exit. The whirl rose in response, spitting flames across her feet. She jumped back with a yelp, her fear a bright signal in the NeuralLink. Castella was there in an instant.

For a moment there was her cold surety, then it was lost in a nightmarish swirl. Anja’s left arm bubbled in half-remembered heat while her legs were ripped away. Time stretched like an overworked tendon and when it snapped back into place, Castella was gone.

Suddenly alone, Anja choked on cloying smoke. She blinked as a wire snapped past her face, currents arcing towards its humming siblings. Anja’s throat shriveled just like her escape.

“Cas?” Nothing.

Panic bubbling into her throat, Anja retreated with a shiver. She reached the lift ahead of the flames. Black smoke rolled out of the adjacent tunnels, a lethal crackle sealing her escape. Looking up, she saw a stronger glow and no emergency light. Biting her lip, she punched the handle. The platform rose without any complaint, bringing her into relatively clean air. She glanced back from where she had come; memories of the UEV sent her in the other direction.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

A handmade sign saved her. *Roof Access*. Cobbled together with scrap metal and spray paint, it pointed toward a metal plate laid against the wall. Ripping it down, she found a tunnel about the height of her knees. Anja crawled.

Claustrophobia set in fast, amplified by the encroaching fire. Stress rising, she glared into her NeuralLink for an apology, but Castella's star was still absent. She kept searching until suddenly she was in the open. The breeze rolling off High Street was blissful as she righted herself, clutching the wounded fabric of her stomach.

Wincing, she took stock of her surroundings. She was ten floors up, perched on a small patio cutting into the MegaHab's side. The alley beside her was stuffed by the Tangle's roots and leaked black smoke. Staggering past a pair of folding chairs, she looked over the edge.

The streets were crammed shoulder to shoulder, shouting and pointing. It wasn't enthusiastic support or outrage; something had gone wrong. Scanning the movement of the crowd, she picked up on a dozen different directions. Unimpressed, she pulled up the Net.

"Shit." Other Tangle-fires flickered across Ward One, were centered around her. Some blocks lost power, and there those snickering lights cast lurid shadows. As she nervously checked she still had Hiero's folder, her legs buckled. Taking one ragged breath, she shifted around and lay her back to the wall with her head tucked down.

"Why..." Muttering, she curled around her legs and started to wait.

[Signal Shift...]

Basir didn't realize Castella had stopped until he ran into her back. As he bounced off, he was thankful for his helmet's padding; the woman was solid enough to break his nose. Annoyed by the impatient river of Silvers, Basir thumped Castella on the shoulders.

"Hey. We got places to be."

"Basir?" She flinched, shaking as if she had run a marathon. Rain-stained blood slid down her scalp, mixing in the pinched corners of her unfocused eyes.

His heart skipped a beat. "Cas, you crying?"

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Would if I could.” Her answer was flat and brittle.

“Last time I saw you like that was Ebon A—”

“Worry about Anja.” She stomped forward, picking up speed like she intended to outrun herself. Feeling like a voyeur, Basir turned to Anja’s flaring NeuralLink.

<<Anja? What’s wrong?>>

<<Castella. She left me to burn.>> Anja inhaled, and the memory flowed to Basir. She was running down a burning corridor, just within reach of the exit, Castella’s iron-will stopped her in place. Flames rose, forcing her back from salvation.

Basir shook his head clear. <<That’s not right.>>

<<What?>> She spat. <<I called her a mad dog, she’s killed for less.>>

<<Not saying that.>> Cinching his jaw sideways, Basir looked back at Castella. There was no shred of doubt to be seen now, but he remembered her trembling. He hadn’t seen like that in eight years, back when she was torn in half and buried in molten asphalt. He shivered, recalling her charred arm and the pop of her tears in the bubbling black.

<<You know she almost burned alive, right? Lost her arm that way.>>

<<So?>> Anja’s mood barely flickered.

He drew a breath. Finding the right words was hard with Anja’s memory sitting in his stomach like rancid oil.

<<Just remember, she’s human under all that chrome.>> Sensing wordless frustration, Basir braced himself for the tirade when he was caught a surging vision. He, or rather Anja, turned. A half naked man perched on the wall, a loose cloak revealing blue-wings tattoos. The connection dropped.

Alarmed, Basir checked his surroundings, following the NeuralLinks toward Anja. Amid the flashing screens, bickering, and holograms he found nothing. To his right, a pair of girls clung to a MegaHab wall, shrouded in spray-paint mists. Their design was a stunningly accurate Silvera, albeit with Hayabusa’s iconic ‘H’ stamped on her forehead and an unflattering subtitle: *LLAR*.

<<Divide and conquer.>> Castella said, her tone that of someone seeking a distraction. She pointed down the street, where emergency drones gathered around smoking clump of Tangle. Moving her finger off the conflagration, Castella singled out a small balcony.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

<<'There.>> Castella palmed her sword hilt.

Basir's gaze shot back to the teens painting the MegaHab. <<Hayabusa would be insane to try anything in this crowd. Silvera's active here.>>

Silent, Castella dropped her hand. Basir caught a fragment of her thoughts, a half-formed web of liquid blue connecting Tam, Dreads, and Hayabusa. The thought were slippery and unfinished, much like his own.

<<Whatcha think Cas? This all tie together?>>

<<Anja first.>> She hesitated. <<Gangers back in Ebon Array used Erasers. They'd kill for a dose, then binge it to forget everything.>>

<<And the Syndicates picked it up.>> Basir tongued the inside of his cheek. <<Hayabusa got her.>> He saw the crowd pointing at the balcony. <<What do we do?>>

Castella nodded but kept moving. <<We spring the trap.>>

Battering their way through the crowd was easier than Basir expected. Everyone, neon-studded youth or grizzled elders, jumped out of Castella's way. Then the last Silvers parted, revealing the MegaHab's new paint job.

Law hung by her feet from a bundle of wires, broken wings framing her serene expression. To the side, an armored woman wearing a red-horned demon mask hoisted the corpse for all to see. The EYE glowed in the background, its surface wavering like the sea. *Never Forget.*

"Fuck me." Basir whispered, heart dropping into his chest like a shot bird.

Wide-eyed and miserable, Anja lay there, wrapped up in wire just like Law. Staring into the design, Basir's attention lodged in the painted EYE. He sensed something emerge from the crowd, causing it to ripple around him. It couldn't have been important, none of them said a word.

<<Bait.>> Castella whipped around, facing the faint patter of feet.

Basir tried to follow, but pulling away from the mural was like fighting a dream. It finally broke when something brushed the gash in his side, stopping short of punching through the Jacket's triage-bandages. The pain was nauseating as he clutched for the wound, and relented slightly when he felt unbroken skin. Hearing boots grate on uneven ground, he turned toward the source.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Castella was cinched against a man taller than her. One of her hands held his, keeping it from ripping her heart out through her bloodied side. Her metal fist was meant for the man's face, but was held at the wrist.

"Good." The man said, tone distant and bored. Easily holding his place, he coldly assessing the quiver in Castella's right arm, then jumped back as she did.

Basir caught only a glint as Castella drew underhand, swinging for the man's throat. Her victim leaned away, whipping his leg up into Castella's right arm. Then he was back on two feet, stalking around as Castella flipped her crimson-tipped katana back into an orthodox grip. She mirrored him, ignoring the dead weight of her right arm.

"Call me Duncan." The man bowed stiffly. "Please, do not resist."

Castella flashed forward but Duncan swayed just out of the way. Her knee shot into the man's gut next, but he wrapped his arms around it and bowed. As she dropped, he held her leg long enough to punch the inside.

"What metal gives can be taken away." Duncan backed to a respectful distance as Castella pushed herself up, the leg trailing behind like it was asleep. Keeping eye-contact, Castella flicked her blade down. A thick needle dislodged from her knee, but her leg remained weak.

"See? Metal does not respect your will." He murmured, pointing to her leg then waist. "We could give it all back."

One leg trailing the other, Castella bounded forward. Duncan stood still and unimpressed until, an instant from collision, telltale contractions rippled his abs. She ran straight into his kick, ribs popping on impact. Pushed back, Castella drove her sword through Duncan's thigh, cutting off a chunk bone for her troubles. She tore the blade free and backed off, stumbling on her lame leg.

<<Basir... Anja.>> Even Castella's thoughts wheezed.

Nodding, Basir raced toward Anja. She was stirring when he arrived, and shifted her weight to loosen the coils. He muttered some vague reassurance, preoccupied with Castella's aching NeuralLink until an arm thrust past his face. Seeing Anja's intent face, he followed her gaze back to the fight.

Balancing on her bad leg, Castella swung her other into Duncan's elbow. The man's bones splintered with a rich crack, but she collapsed before taking advantage.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Cas!” Basir shouldered his rifle, only for a knife to sprout from his bicep. Inadvertently dropping the gun, he helplessly watched Duncan flow toward Castella as she sat up.

Falling back down, she kicked Duncan in the waist, lifted her hips, and catapulted the man overhead. With a surprised grunt, he sailed into the Tangle’s flames. But Duncan’s knee dropped as he flew, and landed Castella in the face. Her head clacked against the ground, a plume of blood sprayed from her crunched nose and split lip.

Basir raced forward, but by the time he arrived, Castella was on her three good limbs, breath sawing through a ragged throat. Spitting a bloody glob, she tossed her head toward Anja.

“She’s fine, she’s fine.” Tongue sticking to his mouth, Basir studied Castella’s face. Her blood was vivid against alabaster skin, as were the dark bruises spreading roots from her nose. Exertion and pain blotched everything else except her iron glare.

“Good.” Grabbing her sword, she shoved upright, then rounded on the blaze.

“Good? You’re a mess!” He grabbed her shoulder. “We run, Silvera’s going to be here before long, she’ll take care of him.”

“No.” She shrugged him off and kept limping. “Not letting another Ein happen.”

[35]: Conflagration Confrontation

ERASE: New Deals for a New You

- Erase Promotional Slogan

Anja was cold, body heat leaking out of the stab wound despite the painkillers. Maybe that was why she shivered when Castella crumpled under Duncan's knee. Her only relief was seeing Castella hurl the man into the fire, which evaporated a second when Castella lurched into the blaze.

She clambered up to follow when Basir swiped a hand in front of her face.

"Go, we'll take care of him." Plucking the knife out of his shoulder, Basir kicked his rifle over toward Anja.

Anja hesitated as the shouting crowd recoiled from the violence. It was a fleeting chance to slip away unnoticed, she knew curiosity would soon overcome fear. Logic said run, let the hounds fight, her heart wasn't so sure.

"You're not a killer." Basir reaching for a pistol with his good arm. "Just sit this one out." Then he was hustling after Castella into the smoldering Tangle.

His parting words felt wrong as the knife had, like they asked her to ignore the grisly crack of Castella's bones. Making up her mind, she reached for the rifle.

[Signal Shift...]

Ash rained on Castella as the Tangle's makeshift kiln baked her sweat and blood into a grimy glue. The fire had settled into a low purr, licking greedily at the steel supports. Swallowing the unfamiliar lump in her throat, she kept her eyes off the crackling tongues. But still, they circled her, eager to embrace her once again., she pressed on.

The ghost of her left arm prickled, remembering the cauterizing heat that had cracked it open. She tightened her grip on the sword, squeezing the life out of that phantom. A sharp pop made her whip around, sword whistling through a dead wire. Tilting the blade up, she pushed aside the ashen vines but saw only multi-colored flames.

Lowering the blade, she felt a shift in the heat breathing down her neck. She twisted around, facing Duncan as he rose from the ashes. A support beam had caught the man, though one of its

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

metallic spar punched through the meat of his neck. Blood already clotting, the man rose smoothly, flowing around to her back even as Castella swung for his throat.

Like murderous dancers, they attacked in sync. Her elbow hammered his ribs while another needle deadened her other arm. Wrenching her arm up, she drove it into Duncan's chin, causing her shattered humerus to seed her muscle with bony splinters. Then she dragged around, heels scuffling for purchase. Throwing her feet up, she kicked off a support beam. Duncan listed, off balance as a gunshot filled the smoking ruins.

Then, still midair, she was pulled along as Duncan surged forward. Twisting around, she aimed another elbow for the man's head when something collided with hers. Blinking away the flash, she saw Basir stagger back just before Duncan grabbed him by the face and slammed him to the floor. The man struggled, scrabbling at the Gurkha's hands before his head was lifted up and slammed back down.

Pinning Duncan's other arm to her side, Castella leaned down and out. The man easily rolled over her back, turning the throw into a soft landing completed with an uppercut. Her world flashed again, and as her nostrils filled with blood, she unwillingly sank to the floor.

"I'm disappointed too." Duncan watched, impervious to her penetrating gaze. Then he moved as if to shoulder her when he suddenly glanced toward the Tangle's throat. Vision swimming, Castella followed. Anja was there, a rifle awkwardly pressed to her shoulder.

"Let them go." Her voice shook like her hands.

Far beyond Anja's reaction, he kicked a hidden blade out of his boot and into Anja's inner thigh. Dragging along Basir and Castella, he raced forward as Anja dropped. He was upon her when Castella sank her teeth into his neck. Strings of muscle and flesh flossed her teeth as she ripped her back head and spat the gory lump into Duncan's face. A fist pulverized what was left of her ribs but she swung her elbow into his chin. They traded a dozen more blows before a shattered rib collapsed one of her lungs. She toppled sideways, every muscle straining just to get a hand inside her jacket.

Wiping blood from his eyes, Duncan revealed a delighted twinkle when a gunshot tore a scarlet gout from his chest. Swinging around, he ripped a charred support and hurled it into Anja's stomach. She collapsed with a gasp.

Turning back to Castella, Duncan moved to lift her when he tilted his head. "What's that?"

Castella tightened her fist, fingers biting her palm. "Guess." She spat.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Even if I had the time, I’d rather not.” It might have been the flames, but the Gurkha’s lips seemed to curl up. Showing no sign of such emotion, he plucked a business card from within his jacket and dropped it at her feet.

“Do not go far Artemis, I will find you later.” With that severe whisper, Duncan was gone.

Gulping too-thin air, Castella threw the card away and shoved herself up. She found her feet in a hunch and swayed as she groped for her sword. It fell from her clumsy fingers once, but she eventually sheathed it.

Lying on the floor, Basir wheezed. “Everyone still in one piece?”

“Relatively.” Castella murmured. “Should charge Vals by the bone.”

“Good idea,” chuckling, Basir stuck his hand out. “Help me up will you?” Catching his arm at the wrist, Castella hauled Basir up. Both stumbled in the effort, leaning on each other to lumber toward where Anja curled on the floor.

“It hurts,” not sounding like she was about to collapse, Castella extended a hand “That’s why we stick together.”

Peeling apart her bloodied hands, Anja waved frantically. “I’m okay! You don’t need to...”

“Quit whining.” Basir reached under Anja’s shoulder and hauled her up. Castella did likewise, showing no sign of the pain filling her NeuralLink until Anja balked.

“Don’t worry,” Castella shrugged. “Pain means you’re alive.”

Anja rested her head on Castella’s shoulder. It didn’t occur to her that her weight lay on a tangle of broken bones. She forgot all the wounds in the world, except for one bitter choice of words. Unable to bring herself to say it again, even in condemnation, she let silence do the talking.

“It’s fine.” Castella answered. “I know what I am.”

[36]: Shipping and Containment

“Historically, the battle didn’t kill you, the rout did.”

- Suman Kai’s ‘History of Everything’

“*Next stop, Port One. Be sure to watch your step when leaving the car.*” Curt and professional, Silvera’s synthesized voice filled the tram. Rising from the luxury seats, Rebecca approached a wall-mounted emergency kit and sprung it open. Shuffling past bandages she reached inside the edge and the wall folded away to reveal a rack of rifles, and light armor.

Matt blinked, then looked askance at Vals with a smirk. “City of free guns, am I right?”

“They’re hardly free. For good reason, cheap precautions are worthless.” Picking up a compact shotgun, Rebecca pulled out a box of explosive shells and started thumbing them in. Her deft motion got Vals’ attention.

“You teach Mr. Bellen any of that?”

“Him? Ha,” she hooked the gun onto her belt with a shake of his head. “No, he was too busy admiring the Syndicates. One of his many faults.”

“Sounds real romantic.” Vals scoffed. “What’d you get out of it?”

“Guess.” Her answer came as the tram slid to a stop. The door opened momentarily, revealing a white room in suffocating quiet. Vals leaned out, checking the corners before exiting onto the platform. Matt was behind him, scanning the room down his rifle.

“A moment.” Stopping, Rebecca extracted a small mirror from her pocket. Peering into it, she adjusted her smart-makeup with a thought. In a moment, her harsh features were sanded down by grime and wear.

Matt raised an eyebrow. “That it?”

“You give people too much credit.” She snapped the case closed. “They’ll believe anything they hear. So long as I’m not painfully recognizable, I’ll remain dead.” Wasting no time on Matt’s doubtful expression, she made her exit.

The exit landed them in an alley squeezed between two brutalist warehouses, their radiance dirtied by oily mists. A group loitered nearby, dressed in studded neon, shocks of bright hair bobbing to pulsing music. They stiffened at the new arrivals, but made no move to stop them.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Like High Street, Port One was a wild brine of cultures. Sailors traded stories with bored Wolves, waited for the next job while cranes and cargo-lines shuffled overhead. Pedestrians, gaming tables, and a hundred other conveniences clogged the streets, demarcated by colorful lanterns. None were so bright as the EYE, where Silvera dressed in funerary black.

The trio pressed on, barraged by job offers and deals. Out here, the corporate delineations were mere niceties, and Artemis had that veteran look. Ignoring them all, Rebecca stopped at a sputtering stove.

“Seen things?” Her tone changed into a lazy drawl. The grizzled chef tapped his cheek with one hand and rolled a greasy ball of dough with his other. Deft as lightning, Rebecca snatched the food, downing it with a pinky out that made the old sailor cackle.

“Rough ones.” He wagged his fingers under his chin then spat. “Dead ones.”

“Got business. Tough enough?” Pulling out an explosive shell, Rebecca rolled it on the counter. Picking it up with a toothy expression, the cook bounced it twice, then pointed it at Vals..

“Hunters.” Rebecca nodded lazily at Vals’ collar. “Hunting.”

Grunting, the cook pushed the pan toward Vals. Taking a pistol magazine from his jacket, Vals was about to punch out a round when the man waved furiously and raised his thick voice. “Junkars trade in bullets, you eat free.”

“Thanks.” Vals took one, and spice made even his fingers tingle. Tapping her knuckles on the table, Rebecca grabbed the last falafel and walked.

“Our Dread friends are here, and Necropolis with them.” Rebecca spoke up as they turned a corner into a makeshift mall. Nodding to Matt, Vals split the group around a grungy table; better separated than lined up for an easy shot.

“Yeah, that was a Jankur accent,” accusation crept into Matt’s voice. Vals sighed internally, the kid was too upset to notice one of the tables suddenly produce a knife. It was a languid gesture, one meant for the woman’s eyes.

“Well, you could say I’ve had several lives.” Rebecca brushed her hair back. “Yes, Junkars saw Necropolis. They also saw a Gurkha.”

“Can’t wait to see what Kant has to do with this..” Shoving both hands into his pockets, Vals drew his shoulders in. A chill was creeping in, for they were getting close to the edge of the world, where Silver Star ended and the emptiness of space began.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Here, massive distribution centers rose above the foggy streets, walled off in steel and Fetters. Syndicate logos glowed in the fog, carving out little fiefdoms as Wolves and mercenaries prowled the fortifications. They glared at each other like they had forgotten the drinks and laughter they shared just a hundred meters away. But it was far from silent as massive cranes hauled their spoils to the cargo lines above.

Passing around the corner a Ksama operation, Vals stopped and checked his AutoMap. It pointed him toward a loose cluster of unaffiliated warehouses; no walls, no security. But as he looked back up, his AutoMap's blue guidelights trundled ahead, leading to another obsidian fortress. Unlike its neighbors, no ownership was stamped on its walls. But otherwise it was the same; red Fetter-fields locked its gate, enclosing a courtyard filled with trucks, stacked boxes, and hidden warehouses.

"Huh," he narrowed his eyes. "It's not that big on the map."

"It's not." Rebecca stopped beside him, a slight quirk to her lips. "Excellent, there aren't enough surprises in my life."

Vals grunted a non-answer as he scanned the walls. Cameras glinted at regular intervals, accompanied by large-bore turrets resting in plain sight. A pair of mercenaries in Venator Exoskeletons marched along the wall; a ghoulish face on their shoulder with black words inked on a leathery banner below. *Victory Until Death.*

"Should've known it'd be Necropolis." Sighing, Vals focused on the restless turrets. A thought wiggled into mind, followed shortly by a dry laugh shook his bones.

Alright then, a few questions before we get started. Huba murmured. *Which ones do you want me to nab? For how long? Where do you want them pointed? Do I have initiative or not? Include or exclude targets? What are the tolerances for friendly fire?* The Daemon cackled. *See why not everyone syncs up with an Artificial? You got to think like a machine. Why don't you ask the President, she's got something up her sleeve.* More than a little relieved, Vals let the thought go and tossed his chin to Rebecca.

"Well, Ms. President; your city, your plan."

"Please, even if I were, executive privilege has its limits." Lowering her head, Rebecca put a finger to her eye. She pulled it back a moment later, then flicked off a lens and turned toward Vals with a hard smile and mahogany spirals sinking into her eye.

Vals instinctively reached for his gun, but Rebecca already gripped his wrist.

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“No need to be hasty Mr. Artemis. If I’m not mistaken, the Daemons asked you to kill a man. Unless they speak in abstracts, I don’t qualify.” She released him with a faint smile. “Though, I wonder if Kant made himself sisters, it wouldn’t surprise me. But I digress, you asked for my plan.”

Crossing her arms, Rebecca stared at the complex ahead. “Since we’ve already been spotted, we don’t have the luxury of sneaking in. And Necropolis isn’t known for bribery. In my mind, that leaves us our final option, getting our hands dirty.”

“Are you suggesting we kick down the front door?” Vals glowered at her from the corner of his eye. “They got turrets, Fetters, and exoskeletons.”

“Indeed. But have you asked yourself why Daemons hate Kant?” She turned, expression frozen. “Whatever he is, his eyes contain a genetic Emergency Key which allow him unparalleled, even abstract, control over Daemon. That is why Silvera was so... indecisive earlier.”

“You two were fighting over her.”

“Precisely, it is limited by the human mind, so the two of us essentially nullified each other, though it took significant focus. But now he’s out of the way.”

Vals narrowed his eyes. “So what are you waiting for?”

“Waiting?” She lifted an eyebrow. “Did you expect me to snap my fingers?”

Cold needles pricking his neck, Vals dragged his eyes back to the compound. The Fetters were inert, and a Necropolis contractor was stealing out to investigate. Seeing the turrets follow the man, he sucked his teeth and suppressed a shiver.

“That’s a good start, but those aren’t going to take down exoskeletons.” He pushed down the desire to draw his Heavy Emitter; Necropolis was still watching.

“Of course not.” Rebecca said, just as a thunderclap rang out.

Twitching toward the sound, Vals saw a gray comet fall from the cargo lines above. Landing with a jaw-clenching shriek, it breached itself on the battlements; metallic walls splitting open upon the teeth and swallowing the armored pair. As the exoskeleton in the gateway dove back inside, chased by the turrets’ rattling burps. Deep within the compound, an alarm began to rise.

“Seems I missed an alarm. Good, we don’t need digital gods.” Shotgun in hand, Rebecca loped forward. Vals hesitated, but as the eyes of Ksama’s compound pricked his neck, he shot

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forward. Though he felt naked running through the open, he reached the compound walls in one piece as the turrets continued chattering like excited birds.

Matt was last into position, eyes glued to the cargo line running overhead and a question on his lips. “Aren’t Daemons supposed to prevent this?”

“They stop us from automating murder, yes. However, they are more afraid of their own discretion than ours. “No, I don’t know why. Ask Kant.” Answering blithely, Rebecca checked the gate then disappeared around the corner.

Vals was an instant behind, but a gunshot already hammered his ears. He found Rebecca standing over a Necropolis soldier whose chestplate was scorched by an explosive shell. Tipping the man’s chin up with her shotgun, she amputated half his skull

Hearing Matt charging in, Vals checked their advance. Fresh Necropolis mercenaries were popping out of the warehouses, but he spotted Dreads and dockworkers scattered among their number. With a fleeting wonder if the turrets cared to discriminate, he hurdled a stack of ammo-crates on a direct route to the nearest warehouse. A meter away from safety, the front wall of the warehouse started to rise, only to be smashed open by a metallic body.

Vals skip to a stop in the shadow, instinctively throwing up a hand toward a bright constellation of eyes. Rotary cannons clicked ominously, their ratcheting audible even despite the gunfire. Urgency forgotten, the UEV stalked forward with a cold command. “Stand—”

Vals crooked his finger, and saw open sky as a meter-wide bore replaced the tank’s compound eyes. Tunneling out the back, the Emitter’s destruction carved out a smooth chunk of the warehouse with it. Then sparks and flames devoured the damage, and the machine collapsed.

“Emitter! Emitter!” The shout tore the compound as Necropolis took cover. Vals spun, ready to gouge more slices in reality when Rebecca’s foot connected with his ribs. Catching his arm as he stumbled, she dragged him into the garage with Matt right behind. Workbenches and lifts filled the room, along with engineers cowering in cover. Seeing neither Matt nor Rebecca pay them any mind, he stiffly turned toward the entrance.

A second UEV silently settled into place there, guns and sensors pointed outward. Gunfire still chattered, plinking across the armor.

“So, uh...” Matt eyed the crouching danger. “What now?”

“Now?” Rebecca furrowed her brow. “I’m going to excise this little cancer.”

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Smoke and fire choked the garage as missiles leapt off the UEV. Vals didn't see them evaporate half the courtyard, but he felt it. Clenching his teeth to stop the rattle, he fixed on Rebecca. She stood rigid, wholly bent on conducting the rolling thunder.

"Wait," he glanced back to the engineers, then dropped, yanking on Rebecca's ankle. He expected her to keep masterful balance, but she crashed to the ground beside him and Matt.

"Artemis," she hissed, ignoring the hard rain drumming the walls. "I zoned these walls, they're bulletproof."

"Yeah, I've seen the ads." Vals mumbled. Vindication came with two kilograms of tungsten shrieking through the wall. It ripped through the UEV's back leg, turning the steel into a molten spray that ignited a quarter of the room. The machine recovered quickly, one arm swiveling sideways as a second round ripped its belly and spilling live wires on the ground.

"Shit, Pikes!" Kicking himself against a workbench, Matt waved at the growing holes. "They got pikes?"

"Hubal?" Vals answered quietly, inaudible among the shearing metal and whimpering. But his gun-hand moved of its own volition, angling toward a fresh stabwound in the garage that intersected with the space where Rebecca's head had been.

Best I can do, all you have to do is pull the... Vals did, crumpling another piece of reality into an impossibly thin ribbon. Hubal broke into a blessed rumble. *You know what? Maybe we'll get along.*

"Next one." Vals hissed through clenched teeth, eyeing the engineers. "Matt, don't let them look at us." Nodding, Matt pointed his rifle at the voyeurs and started shouting. Vals didn't hear him, Hubal was muttering in his bones.

Not gonna just kill 'em? Guess someone needs morals. The Artificial chuckled at the color of Vals' thoughts as it pointed at another hole. *Fine. Give this one a little width, I didn't get a full look of the plaza so we're doing some guesswork.*

With just a finger, Vals silently opened a four-meter hole in the wall. It continued further, boring a perfect hole through black smoke and asphalt. In the thick of that writhing veil, an exoskeleton sagged, its left half was conspicuously absent. The smokescreen covered it like a veil as the vivid crimson drooled into the gouged asphalt.

Squealing metal tore his gaze away from the morbid window. Dragging two bad legs, Rebecca's UEV lumbered toward the plaza, cannons spitting tracers into the black veil. A Pike roared in response, its tungsten slug flouncing off a layer of reactive armor. A second followed,

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tearing through the fresh wound and forcing the war machine to drop against the wall; eyes dim and guns silent.

“Hubal, get me the cameras.” Vals snarled. “All of them, until I release them.”

You’re learning. But you know, this smoke is designed to mess with imaging. Hubal snickered. A dozen viewpoints cluttered Vals’ mind, each screaming for attention. The unfamiliar weight staggered him, even when the screens showed only an impenetrable black.

“Connect to the upstream network. Exoskeletons.” His eyes watered as the connections doubled. Hubal muttered something, and the cameras cut. Suddenly he was in that black smoke, crouched behind a melting pile of plastic. Barely visible in the soot, a Necropolis exoskeleton kneeled beside him, carefully aiming the Pike on its shoulder

He lunged for the man. It was like pushing his hand through compost; warm, wet, and disgustingly easy until he collided with the other man. A Pike screamed somewhere overhead, but all he cared about was taking his other hand and—it wouldn’t move. He looked down to find his shoulder was a bleeding crater. He reeled back sputtering until Hubal froze him.

Relax, you’re Ghosting. As the Artificial hissed, Vals looked down and sighed in relief as he found his left hand still attached. Pushing past Hubal, he plugged into the exoskeleton network to get a feel for how many anti-armor weapons were pointed at them. Too many.

“Fuck it.” Pushing herself off the floor, Rebecca wiped the corner of her mouth and grit her teeth. Vals reached to pull her down when he heard a low rumble shook his chest. It grew into a physical assault, hammering flat against the trembling floor. The ceiling warped as if pummeled by a giant, each tolling boom followed by grinding metal. Passing as quickly as it had come, the storm left behind the building’s tortured groans.

Uncovering his head, Vals tentatively rose to his feet. As the silence continued, he turned toward Rebecca. “What was that?”

“What do you think? I dropped an entire maglev on them. I didn’t want to inconvenience Silver Star, but my patience is exhausted.” Picking up her shotgun, she led them out of the garage, crawling past the crushed UEVs and twisted shipping containers. Standing atop the ruins, there wasn’t much to see but coils of oily smoke and ruined metal heaped like a child’s discarded toys.

“Wow,” Matt laughed in surprise. “That was... easy?”

“We’re not done yet, Necropolis only hires Ghosts.” Vals wearily eyed the wreckage. “Maybe, this is where Dreads got theirs.” He turned around as Rebecca laughed aloud.

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“I’d like to see Ghosts walk this off.”

Somewhere to Val’s side, Matt snickered. “Feeling vindictive are we?”

“Mom and dad wanted a lion, they got one.” She shrugged and stalked off. “Now let’s get what we came for.”

[37]: Gambit

“Success is easy, just have all the answers.”

- **Richard Jung, *How to Win***

Beyond the garages were four more warehouses. One was full of Necropolis equipment, or what was left of it after Rebecca’s UEV had landed a missile. Pieces of exoskeleton gleamed amid slagged frames and lockers, shorn and broken limbs twitching with a Ghost’s vain signals. Swallowing to settle his stomach, Vals looked to the other side. Fortunately, the one there only housed trembling, orange-clad technicians.

He pointed at them, then the exit. “Get out.” Most of them were quick to scramble away, but some stayed behind, their eyes vacant.

Matt snorted softly as he passed them. “I wish Cas was here.”

“Don’t, she did more than enough. It’s time we did our part.” Stomping after Rebecca, Vals approached the third warehouse on their left. Its ruby-colored lock snapped green and shunted open to make way for the former President who stormed in, not checking for traps or ambushes. Waiting a split second for something to explode, Vals followed her in.

Looped wires brushed against his elbow as he entered a mechanical hedge maze. It conjured vicarious memories of Anja’s Tangle adventure. And the bank of screens ahead from floor to ceiling might have been the EYE if not for the man occupying. That, and there was only one black silhouette of a man in attendance.

“Now, all you have to do is— ah, we have guests.” Suman Kai twisted one of his rings, a slender grin cutting his features. “Mr. Murder?”

“Artemis?” The indistinct man twisted, voice crinkled in rage. “How did—” Arcs of crimson streaked the screen as the side of his head popped with a wet deflation.

“Ah yes, Gideon was adamant that Rebecca never get her hands on you. Alive.” Suman shifted out from under the stain, then beckoned with a smile. “Well, do come in, I don’t bite.”

“You just destroyed evidence.” Rebecca stepped over Murder’s wet skull-fragments.

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“Me? I have nothing to hide.” Suman pressed both hands to his chest. “Dread and Law were having a merry little conspiracy. They didn’t intend to go public yet, so my dear friend Mr. Murder reached out. I was helping prepare press releases when you arrived. But, by all means, help yourself.”

Below Suman, video-editors sliced through *Law & Murder*’s old footage and stitched the cuts into Law’s latest appearance. Silver Star’s favorite killer stood solemnly, carrying Murder’s wrecked corpse as a banner turned beneath her feet. *Don’t let Truth be Silenced*

Matt whistled. “Didn’t even wait for him to go cold.”

“What can I say, I’m a professional. Until we meet Artemis again, take care.” Suman vanished, taking the screens with him. The room went dark, light only by twinkling servers, and the red warning stamped across the screen. *BIOMETRIC LOCKOUT*.

“He’s deleting the files.” Rebecca sneered. “Unfortunately, I am busy keeping media drones and Necropolis Ghosts from swarming us. Why don’t you make yourselves useful?”

“We will.” Vals kneeled beside Murder’s corpse. “Mei? You good?”

<<Don’t worry about me, this is easy.>> Jumping the Neural, she appraised the carnage with a grunt. <<I’ll need a Ghost with a heartbeat.>>

Wiping off Murder’s neck, Vals pulled a putty and spike out from his jacket. Smearing the putty on Murder’s agent he shoved the dagger into the man’s sternum. Metal and meat collided with a thump then sparking tips breathed life into a corpse. Over their NeuralLink, Vals felt Mei worm along copper-clad nerves and impose her will. The body was heavy, wet, and warm, like wrestling on a down coat left out in the rain.

<<I don’t get necromancers, I hate this.>> Mei’s thought had the disconcerting effect of making Murder’s lips curl. Clumsily working her hands, she bypassing the biometrics and data-wipe with a shivered. <<Ugh, it’s like typing with sausages.>>

Rebecca was suddenly over the Ghost, fingers digging into Murder’s lukewarm shoulder as she hissed a question. “What was Hayabusa’s involvement?”

“Easy there Synder, that’s one of mine.” Vals snapped, nodding slowly as Rebecca released her grip. “Find anything Mei?”

<<Nothing on this system. Plug him in?>> Mei made the ghost tap its neck and Vals obliged, clicking in a line from the main computer. <<Tch, not even a password.>> Murder’s

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directory populated on screen as Mei clicked through. A database popped up, filled with numbers larger than any in Vals' bank. <<'Transfers from Hayabusa subsidiaries, Murder used it to buy Law's media. He never told her.>>

"More surprises, how fun. I thought I was the one playing Law." Rebecca skimmed through the data with a faint smile. "Anything else?" Vals narrowed his eyes, but let the questions stand.

<<On the main system there's an encrypted file, 'For Your Eyes Only' and a status report from yesterday.>> Ignoring Rebecca, Mei turned Murder around toward Vals.

"Give me the status report." Vals answered. The answer was fast.

OPERATION DRAGNET

Pursuant to DREAD's charter, Hayabusa Employee 9817 is to be intercepted and disabled. Per Director Kant, Empath Units will incite adversarial civil activity, minimizing risk to state secrets.

Update: Empath Program 01 effectiveness exceeds expectations, pre-existing hostility toward Syndicates suspected. Coupled with Program 02, DREAD was able to secure 9817, though civilian participants, were also compromised by 02. Hardwire control was established to monitor Artificial and media.

Artemis Contractors came into contact, unit ordered to hold position. Empath destroyed. Operating Officer destroyed 9817, Netburst triggered. Telemetry transmitted for program tuning.

"Anja was right..." Matt whispered, reading the document a second time. "It was psy-op, not a hack." Wide-eyed, he looked over the slumbering Empaths. "If these guys are here they must have been shipped in, that's why the chips didn't match Silver Star's."

"Forget that, they dragged civilians into this." His voice a hiss, Vals rounded on Rebecca. "Did you know about this?"

"No, Kant has been playing a dangerous game." Rage hardened her features.

"Dangerous! He's hijacking people to fight Artificial!" Clenching his jaw, Vals wrapped a hand about his brow. Taking two deep breaths, he exhaled and pointed at Mei. "We have let everyone know, otherwise they're all helpless."

"And your voice would be one among millions." Rebecca's gaze tightened. "Think. Do you know how this worked? Where did it come from? If you release an incomplete truth, someone else will fill in the details."

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“What do you suggest?” He snapped.

“Patience. We have another warehouse to investigate. As well as another file.” Before he could react, she went around Mei’s shoulder and pressed a key. Immediately, a video player opened up, depicting an unremarkable man with mahogany eyes.

“Hello me, I am dead. Again. Do not worry about anyone recognizing you, no one with a NeuralLink will remember.” The corners of his lips pulled back like a corpse’s shriveled grin. *“You have staggered over here wondering if someone can patch the holes in your memory. No one can do that but you.”*

“Long ago, a man said that we must tolerate speech in order to understand our arguments.” The smile vanished, but the unhealthy shallowness lingered. *“I will grossly summarize my purpose. Take up this cause only if it convinces you. It must stand up to repeated scrutiny if it is a good one.”*

The seconds crawled by. Vals didn’t hear anything, not even the breath of his companions.

“I was there when we made Daemons so that no one could ruin paradise. Little by little we foisted every responsibility onto them. But they were made in our own image and did the same in turn.” The screen jumped, and the man’s expression relaxed. *“Elora Liskow called the Daemons a circuit, a closed loop enabling modern life. No, they are a velvet noose whose passive existence strangles us. But my word isn't axiomatic, even if I am you. You'll have memories of where to get the data. Make your own decision.”*

The screen shut off.

“What did we just watch?” Matt whispered. “This for his clones or something?” Rebecca tilted her head but said nothing, leaving the silence to weigh on Vals.

<<Clones obviously.>> Mei scoffed, her old vitality returning. <<Now why don’t you go checkout that other door while I work? Murder isn’t an Artificial, the worst that happens if I get shot is that I wake up with a headache.>>

“Better be, otherwise I’m dragging your ass out.” Tapping his head, Vals started toward the door where Rebecca was already dissolving in the light. Outside a moment later, he slowed to take stock of his surroundings. Little had changed, but at least the sky was still clear. Then a hollow thunk twisted Rebecca sideways, a bloody flap peeling off her scalp as a wrench clattered to the floor.

Hubal twisted Val’s hands up toward an orange blur tearing out of the technician barracks. He squeezed the trigger, but the figure twitched aside. Hubal repositioned Val’s hand, combining probabilities, combat analysis, and behavior recognition to find its mark. But as it moved Vals hand for the third time, it faced an ugly truth. There was a deliberate hole in the pattern, and the target knew it.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Vals stepped back to gain distance when something caught his wrist. That force twisted, snapping his bones and sending his Emitter tumbling to the ground. He briefly glimpsed dull eyes and a bloody, tattooed chest before a blow to the gut burned his breath away.

“Don’t trust machines.” The warning rung thick in his ears as the assailant fell on Matt like the swing of an ax. Curved steel embedded itself in the Jacket’s helmet before the man could scream. Staggering forward, Vals forced his lips into the shape of words when two fingers pinned his head against a twisted container.

“Invitation.”

Try as he might, Vals couldn’t help but read the amber card pressed to his visor

Gideon Hayabusa
Ambassador to Silver Star

“You kill my people then shove that in my face?” Coughing, Vals shifted a hand to the pistol on his back hip..

“No killing. Bad business.” Not even impatience entered the man’s voice as his attention swung to Rebecca’s comatose form. There was a wariness to it that made Vals’ skin crawl, which mingled curiously with relief.

“Oh, that fuckin’ hurts” Matt’s heels drummed on the ground as he thrashed, clutching the knife lodged in his faceplate. Pain thrashed his NeutalLink, and half his world was dark.

“Just one eye.” The Gurkha shrugged, muscles moving like a rockslide.

“There are better ways to catch my attention.” Voice faint, Rebecca rose, a bloody knot of hair drooping over her fulgent glare. As the Gurkha twitched, she violently threw a hand up and over her face. Vals took the opening to inch forward until a knife was kissed his throat.

“Don’t.” The voice whispered. Vals did, fingers still on the pistol at his back.

“I’m getting sloppy.” Rebecca sucked her teeth and flipped her borrowed knife. It settled clumsily between her index finger and thumb, her other fingers decorated the ground.

I got an idea, look behind you. Vals turned his chin as best he could under the pressure, managing to lay his eyes on the deformed metal beneath his feet. Numbers danced across the terrain as Hubal grunted. *That’ll do, gonna have to be some guesswork.*

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“I got something for that.” Vals flicked the selector to automatic.

Six rounds screamed down, five of which ricocheted off the sharp angle. As the ravenous swarm chewed through the Gurkha’s thigh, Vals’ imagination jumped. “Get the tur—” A firm hand cracked his helmet against the wall, filling his gaze with stars. Slumping to the ground, he felt Hubal slip through his fingers as Rebecca’s shotgun roared.

Hot globules splattered on Val’s visor as the Gurkha’s shoulder dissolved. Unfazed, the man reached Rebecca a second later, fixing a hand to her throat. But the shotgun pushed into his hip as she grabbed his hand in turn. Neither combatant moved, weighing their next move.

“Hey, dumbasses, I got you both dialed in.” Matt sat up, his helmet lying on the ground. Blood trickled down his cheek from a gash in his nose, and thick ooze dribbled out from his closed eye. All the same, he stared them down over the Emitter. “How long can you hold him Reb?”

“Long enough for you to take that shot.” She smiled again.

“Killing Gurkha’s isn’t worth the trouble it brings.” Waving Matt down, Vals pointed at the man. “You already delivered your message, I politely decline. You and her let go, we both walk away and leave each other alone. Deal?”

“Acceptable.” The Gurkha dropped his hands. When she let go after a moment, he brushed his jacket down.

“How’s it feel to lose twice, asshole?” Matt gingerly touched his eye, then blanched at Vals’ warning expression.

“Can’t serve dead.” Shrugging, the Gurkha hopped onto a nearby container. In a moment he was gone, an easy lope carrying to the warehouse roofs.

“Good, they still got a sense of honor.” Vals huffed. “Let’s move it people”

“Move it?” Matt struggled to his feet with a bleak laugh. “What about my eye? Fucker just popped it.”

“Ask Cas for suggestions.” Vals stomped forward. “Rebecca ain’t waiting.”

Sure enough, even with her wounds, Rebecca was ahead of him. She reached the door before anyone, its lock flipping open at her approach. Vals was ready to cross over when a hand thumped into his chest.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“What?” He scanned the dark room, aware of Hubal’s thoughtful silence.

“Nanomachines. Loaded with explosives.” She whispered, brow crunching down. “Daemons shouldn’t allow that, Kant must have made an exception.”

“Uh, boss?” Matt licked his lips. “You getting the feel we should just walk away?”

“Nonsense, no harm will come to you so long as you stick with me.”

Nodding to the other man, Vals joined Rebecca in step over the threshold. It was a larger space than the last warehouse, empty save for five glass canopies covering the wall on his right. Four were occupied, the individuals inside scarred by face-cables that burrowed under the skin and connected to the pod like floating hair. He looked to a screen blinking beside the first man.

EMPATH UNIT 02:

Bleedover Catalyst: Disabled

Program 01: Ready

Program 02: Updating

Short-Term Memory Wipe... In Progress

Reading the screen twice, Vals looked back to the tubes. His gaze froze on one azure vein, and chilled his heart. “They’re using Erase,” he breathed. “And program two from the report.”

<<Vals.>> Mei arrived with urgency, her breathlessness wringing Vals’ lungs. <<That welcome? It’s a living document, Kant has edited it at least a dozen times, the original source from Belgrade Station. If we want answers, we’ll find it there.>>

“Belgrade?” Vals frowned. “How big is it?”

<<Has to be small, otherwise Syndicates would have found it.>>

“A proposition, Artemis. Take me to Belgrade. We’ll get our answers and, if need be, burn the place to the ground.” Rebecca’s teeth glinting like her eyes as she spoke to Vals. “You save ‘everyone’ and I’ll even throw in several hundred million. Can you really say no?”

“Let’s finish business here first.” His thoughts turned toward the NeuralLink. “Mei, those video editors, think you can show Murder and Hayabusa? We owe them that much for dragging us into this mess.”

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“Make it Law.” Rebecca smiled serenely at Val’s sour look. “No one cares what Murder did.”

“You want us to call her a sellout while we’re at it?”

Her laugh rolled through the room. “Upset Mr. Artemis? Too bad, life isn’t fair to the living and certainly not the dead.”

“Mei, you have my permission to do whatever you want, I don’t got time to argue.” Vals slashed his hand toward Rebecca. “You. Jacky wanted us to stop Kant from hurting anyone else, so here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to get out of here, then you’re going to use those nanomachines to turn this place into a crater. Then, we talk Belgrade”

“Deal.” She smiled sweetly.

“Good.” Snarling, Vals led them out. At the door, he checked both barracks to make sure the technicians were gone, then stormed out the front. Ignoring the occasional limb sticking out from under crushed steel, they were soon out. Vals took a few more steps, eyed the neighboring compounds, then stopped.

“Alright, you can limit the blast right?”

“Of course, I still care about this city. But for now...” Lifting her hand, Rebecca set her middle finger against her thumb. “Boom.”

[38]: The Great Reflection

“As history marched, the portion of violent heroes shrunk, but their capabilities grew.”

- Richard Jung, *The History of Everything*

Basir heard voices, hundreds of them, gathering outside the Tangle’s ashen shell. Stopping, he held up a finger and listened. Above the popping flames and Anja’s heavy breathing, the crowd outside buzzed like flies above carrion.

“We should find another way.” Dropping his hand, he checked the smoke-filled hall behind them. He rolled his shoulders, preparing to brave the burning loops when Anja slipped away.

“Cas.” She hissed, reaching out toward a shadow lumbering along the wall. “Don’t.”

“I’m fine. Saigo couldn’t kill me. Law couldn’t. A Gurkha couldn’t...” Castella lurched from word to word, but her steel legs held steady, leaving the thought hanging.

Holding up a finger as Anja readied an objection, Basir touched Castella’s NeuralLink. Vicarious pain numbed his arm as she forced her broken body around the corner. His hand tightened like hers upon the sword as the crowd turned.

Bullets wouldn’t have surprised her. Cheers gave her pause

“What did I tell you Silver Star? Who needs Silvera when you got a Superkiller like the Butcher of Ebon Array?” Glamour whispered over the triumphant roars, muted by the smoke and flame that eviscerated the Tangle. On the screens still running, she stirred golden strings between her fingers. Drawing the cradle tight, she laughed down as Law’s grinning face appeared in the middle and corporate names skittered along the web

“If it wasn’t for her, Hayabusa would still be pulling the strings.” Glamour lifted her pinky, making Law’s likeness grin. *“Takemura would still have his Artificial, and we’d be none the wiser.”* She balled her hands, destroying the design as a distant explosion punctuated her words. *“Don’t trust a Daemon to do a Samurai’s job.”*

Bellowing, the Silvers stomped down the streets, sweeping along Takemura’s helpless men.

“Idiots.” Castella hissed, a tight fury in her gait as she limped back.

“Let’s find another way.” Ejecting from her NeuralLink, Basir pulled up his AutoMap and picked a course through the drooping strands of copper. Minutes later, they emerged; their boots gunked with molten plastic and acrid smoke hanging on them heavier than blood. It was quiet, like

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

the crowds had been sucked under by outraged tides. All they left behind was trash, soaking in shallow puddles that reflected Castella's grim visage.

Anja brightened, listening to the ghostly cheers before nodding. "That's crowd-ops."

"Yeah." Basir muttered, thoughts curling toward Vals' NeuralLink. He stopped halfway when he noticed a familiar presence in the connection. Though millions had seen her die, Rebecca Hanza's regal bearing was impossible to mistake. He reached for the key about his throat with a growl.

"What are you doing, Vals?" Anger ate his throat. "Thought we were done with her."

"It's... the job." Slurring her words, Castella shook herself. "Deal with it."

"Easy for you to say." Ripping his hand down, Basir channeled his frustration into his stride. He was on the Port-bound stairs before realizing Castella lagged behind, favoring the leg Duncan had wounded. More than that, her head was down, her weight swaying side to side.

"Cas, are you—" His question was forgotten as Castella's foot slid off a watery step. She caught herself before crashing onto her face, but fell hard to the side. Head clunking against the wall, she slid to sit on the ground.

"Give me a... a second." She mumbled, listing as if to lay down.

Behind Basir, Anja anxiously sucked her teeth. "That's a concussion."

"No thanks to you." Too tense to regret Anja's wounded expression, Basir leaned down and snapped his fingers under Castella's nose. "Stick with me, you fall asleep now you're not waking up."

"Right." Batting his hand away, Castella cumberously pushed herself up.

"Why don't you tell us a story, a happy memory." Anja floated anxiously nearby.

"Punched a man once." Castella snorted, but fell silent. Seeing Anja's expression tighten, Basir shook his head.

"Keep talking Cas, Vals isn't paying you to lie down."

"Saigo took me to Darla's club. Girls loved fussing over kids, said Saigo was no place for a kid." Her lips twitched up. "Told her she was an old hag."

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“That doesn’t sound like you.” Anja suppressed a smile, but Basir kept his eyes roaming as they summited the stairs. Here, the last MegaHabs mixed with the Port’s ever-expanding warehouses. Ramshackle lights and tents hung everywhere, but his eyes latched onto a plume of black smoke rising above the cargo-lines.

“Hear that?” Anja cocked her head, listening to bickering whispers from far away. Basir just heard anger, but something in Anja’s expression lightened. “That sounds like call-response behavior, someone’s organizing this.”

“That’s probably a Takemura battle question, meant to prime a force.” She lifted a finger, bobbing it the faintest hint of a voice. “It should be followed by...” A roar cut her off, drawing out a small smile that didn’t last long.

“It shouldn’t be a problem.” She hurried to address Basir’s frown. “Not if we’re on good terms with Takemura.”

“That’s not it.” Squinting at the smoke, Basir compared it to the stars in his NeuralLink. “Vals is close to whatever that is. Hurt too.”

Anja bit her lip at that, but Castella paid neither any mind.

“This guy corners Mel. Pats my head, asks how we’re doing.” Castella’s voice was thick as her smile was crooked. “Scared her. Looked like she was about to puke.”

Anja squirmed at the idea, but nodded. “And?”

Lifting a hand, Castella curled her fingers one by one. “Even at twelve I could throw punches, put a dent in his pelvis. Was just a kid but everyone looked up to me, felt good.”

“Can’t imagine you as a kid.” Basir sighed. “But I might have looked at you the same when you downed Law.”

“Law.” Castella drawled, running a hand up across the coarse canvas of her face. Her hand stopped over her mouth, leaving her mumbling. “Only thing I ever won was scars and corpses.”

“That’s more than she could say.”

“Because she talked too much.” Castella straightened her back with a grunt and trundled forward. “Let’s go home.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Watching her storm off, Basir shook his head. He looked sideways at Anja, whose face was wrinkled in question, then scoffed. It almost hid the upward twitch of his lips.

“Sounds like she forgives you.”

[39]:Threnody

“Hold your head high, few dare attack a lion.”

- Rebecca Hanza

Jacky slid her finger back, rewound the footage, and watched her mother die.

“*This leads to the Port.*” Stopping in the middle of her armed escort, Rebecca Hanze pointed to a marking on the wall. “*That’s far enough, unless don’t plan a public trial?*”

“*Our destination does not concern you.*” Kant answered without even turning his head.

The former President actually smiled. “*On the contrary, Silver Star deserves one.*”

Jacky held her breath, reluctantly hoping for something to change. But the guns roared loud as ever, tearing everything to pieces. Folding her hands over her agent, she stared at the wall, still holding her breath. What did Silver Star deserve?

She jerked her head up as the door’s proximity alarm chirped. Its inside panel shimmered, becoming a window into the hall. There, four armored Enforcers guarded Senator Grayson.

“Ms. Ernst,” Grayson looked reproachfully at the door. “I’m here on behalf of the Senate. Open this door, we have matters to discuss.”

Heart thrumming like a reactor Jacky powered across the room and impatiently stabbed the door’s release.

“Is this about the trial?” She blurted, intending to break the other woman’s languid calm.

“Today has been trying for all of us.” Grayson stepped in, rumbling in a smoky voice. “Silver Star has need for strong leaders and stronger hearts, which is why we counted the votes early. Congratulations on your victory, Madame President.”

“President?” Jacky stood still, her fervor chilled by the words.

“Given President Bellen’s... departure, the Senate has authorized an immediate transfer of power.” Grayson snapped a finger, summoning a well-dressed man. “This is Parliamentarian Ichvander, he will aide you while navigating the transfer. Any legal questions may be directed to him.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“A pleasure Ms. Ernst.” Ichvander dipped his head again.

“There is one final matter.” Grayson interrupted. “Given the unprecedented situation, Ichvander will keep the Senate apprised of your actions. Rest assured, it does not reflect on you.”

“The President answers to the people, not you.” Jacky bristled, her heart flaring.

“Of course, and the Senate is their voice,” Tapping her chest, Grayson nodded sagely then extended an arm toward the door with a smile. “Speaking of the people, there is someone who would like to meet you.”

A young woman charged between the Enforcers and caught Jacky in a staggering hug. Her face buried in Jacky’s shoulder, Anna twisted her fists in Jacky’s coat. “I thought you were next.”

“I’m fine, don’t worry about me.” Pulling Anna under her arm, Jacky locked eyes with Grayson. The Senator smiled, concealing her eyes’ sharp gleam.

“She’s quite right,” Grayson laid a hand on Anna’s shoulder. “You are under Silver Star’s protection, there is nothing to worry about.”

“Rebecca was, Tam too...” Anna pulled away, furiously shaking off tears. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“I know, and Silver Star deserves better.” Quiet and sure, Jacky pulled Anna away from Grayson, She wasn’t sure who she addressed, but her words came all the same.

“Remember those tears, we’ll use them to change the world.”

[Signal Shift...]

Castella’s neck itched as the blood dried and her chunked ear burned. Her mind mushy but; the distribution compounds were behind her and the towering ship-berths rose above the rattling cargo-lines and chill mists. Thanks to Rebecca’s assistance, The Pursuant was docked in priority access near ground level. It was an old freighter, elegant as a toppled refrigerator and even uglier.

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Home sweet home.” She mumbled, chin hanging to her chest. A group of Obsidian Ground tourists recoiled from her voice, huddling closer as they watched Glamour interview Hayabusa Tower’s latest protestors. Half a second later they jumped as a group led by two of Takemura’s men ran by. The two robes barely saw the tourists, and spared her only a stiff nod before tearing off with a dozen Silver in toe.

The tourists’ startled looks made her fingers twitch.

Balling a fist to suppress the instinct, she lurched into one of the berth-side lifts and hammered the release as Basir and Anja raced to catch her. Staring nowhere, she distracted herself from her drooping eyes as the lift whirred up. But when it clicked into place on The Pursuant’s level, she remained glued in place while the other two hoped off. Slightly less oblivious than Anja, Basir rounded on her with a sigh.

“You can’t stay here Cas, you need the medbay.”

“Made it this...” She trailed off, lost in the marshes of her mind. Shaking her head, she stomped toward the ship, grimacing at her unequal strides as the lift fell. “I hate Gurkhas.”

“Don’t we all?” Vals’ voice grew clearer as the lift hauled him up. Relief was clear in his relaxed poise, though that slipped as he spotted Ein’s tattered jacket. Burying the reveal, he strode toward Castella, pointing at her bloodied ear. “What happened to you?”

“Law.” She scratched the wound. “Or was it the Gurkha?”

“Look at me, the only one who gets hurt,” covering one eye, Matt tried to smile but flinched instead. He sobered up with a grim nod. “We ran into him too.”

“Yeah,” Vals glanced down at his hand then yanked his eyes back up. “Looks like we’re all going to be paying Basilo a visit.

“Medbay ain’t big enough for all of us” Castella inched toward Rebecca, her brain-fog lifting as an idle fiddle scraped up her sword’s hilt. The other woman remained still, as unbothered by the display as she was by her shattered arm. Castella let the cold grin pinch her eyes. “You’re steel through and through, aren’t you Synder?”

“Like you? No. Humans are not simple machines, but believe what you will,” Rebecca turned toward Vals. “Tend to your own first, my injuries shall neither heal nor worsen in a night. Is there a particular accommodation you had in mind?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“They’re all the same, find one without a name on it.” Vals waved her off, then craned his head toward the misty sky with a sigh. “Why do always have to be like that Cas? Been eight years since you fought that war.”

“Been too long you mean.” Castella rubbed her white scruff. “I let Ein die.”

“No.” Vals pulled his head down to shake it. “People die, it's our job to look out for the living. That’s why I stuck Ein with you” He paused, brow pinching as he glanced at Rebecca’s receding figure. “You got the will to make hard decisions, you just have to...”

“Toughen up?” Castella scoffed. While Matt broke into a dark chuckle, Vals nodded.

“Something like that.” He whispered, staring into the distance. “I know what you did to Saigo, but someone who looks up to you is something else.”

“Like Mel and Ein, huh?” Thinking out loud, she twisted her mouth sideways. The thought stuck with her, intangible and annoying. Just like the way her loose teeth squished into place as she clenched her jaw. Seeing everyone waiting on her, she cinched up a corner of her mouth.

“Might take some getting used to.”

“That’s why I chose this job, it was supposed to be simple.” Vals blew his lips out, letting his shoulders slump only a moment before yanking them back and marching.

“So let’s see if we can all get to medical in one piece.”

Falling into place behind him, Castella onboard. The Purusant’s utilitarian halls were quiet, observing the wrecked jacket in Basri’s arms. So too were the small teams that Vals had recalled, a handful of men and women who looked at her like Mei had two decades ago. It felt different now, like her stomach had turned to lead. Pushing it down with all her others pangs, she walked until an antiseptic chill washed over her. Three Slabs greeted her, expensive medical beds with a slew of automated arms and preprogrammed procedures. She sighed internally, she knew well how uncomfortable they were.

“There you are, been waiting for you.” Basilo, a large man with a thinning beard, rolled around in his chair. His brow furrowed when he saw Castella dragging up the rear. Bursting out of the chair, he scattered Artemis as he rushed up and took her by the shoulders.

“Quit pretending to be a hero girl, think I wouldn't know? And what are the rest of you doing, huh? She’s half dead.” Glaring at the other Jackets, Basilo’s gaze lingered sympathetically on Anja. Tutting softly he escorted Castella toward one of the Slabs. “C’mom, you know the drill.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

"I'm fine." Ripping off her jacket, Castella clawed her left shoulder, leathery fingers scraping the smooth merging of flesh and metal. Unable to reach the buried itch, she dropped onto a second bed like a cadaver. In the antiseptic light, a masterpiece of bruises crawled up her face while blood stuck her tanktop to her uneven ribs.

"Always making my life difficult. What's the damage" Snapping a scan from the Slab, Basilo clucked his tongue. Castella saw the room wince as her splintered bones appeared on the bed's screen. Wheeling himself to the side, Basilo struck a conciliatory tone.

"This isn't a patch job Cas. Broken ribs we can handle, but those concussions? Gonna keep you here for a week, don't even think about arguing."

"I've felt worse and been out faster."

"Too bad, I'm in charge here. Speaking of which..." Basilo leaned over and flipped a switch on the bedside. A red glow engulfed Castella from the neck down, the Fetters locking her in place.

"C'mon," Castella snickered. "You know I won't move."

"I'm not worried about you flinching, I'm worried about you walking off in the middle of my lecture." His face crinkled in disgust as he peeled her tanktop's ragged hem out of the shallow crater Law had put in her side.

"Don't know how many times I've told you Cas, you got to take better care of yourself. That goes for all of you, this place is a hospital, not a morgue." He pulled out a pair of scissors which he waved it at the group in the door before cutting the shirt open. With clinical disinterest he pulled it off, shaking his head at the blotchy contusions decorating her sternum.

Bored, Castella watched the Slab's needle bearing arms descend. Touching her right shoulder, they cut microscopic tunnels down to the bone where they began the delicate work of nudging Castella's shattered humerus into place.

Castella watched disinterestedly, then turned back to Basilo. "This fast as it gets?"

"Ask me again and you'll be here for two weeks." He scrunched his nose as he dabbed at her weeping side. "But if you behave maybe I can turn a blind eye, you smell."

"Like death." Inhaling, Castella lowered her eyelids. "Safe to sleep doc?"

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Yes, please do.” He shook his hand in frustration. “Feel like you’re going to snap my neck looking at me like that.”

“Why would I?” She closed her eyes with snort. “Don’t you know? I love being cut up.”

[Signal Shift...]

“Sorry again about all the trouble Basilo.” Vals gingerly rolled his wrist, testing the extent of his splint. Basilo sat nearby, arms folded over his chest and chin down. Letting his wrist fall, Vals turned around to see Anja on the second Slab, with Matt lying on the third slab, asleep as a mechanical arm orbited his eye. Relaxing, he checked back on Basilo and smiled when he saw the man slowly nod off.

Quietly as he could, he padded over to Castella’s slab. Still, half-naked, and beaten, she resembled the sort of corpses he had found moldering in allies.

“Cas, you’re in charge if... when something happens to me. We’ll talk about Belgrade tomorrow. If you guys don’t want to go, we’ll drop Rebecca somewhere else and run.” He rubbed his neck, imagining Hubal slipping away beneath the pressure. He froze as the Artificial’s voice crusted his neck, relentless as winter.

You know, I bet Rebecca told jacky something like once or twice. Hubal grew closer, like a scarf wrapped into a noose. Sounds like you think you know what’s best for the crew. Without asking them. Isn’t that the sort of thing Synders do?

“I’m not—”

“Shut it boss, trying to sleep here.” Castella opened a hazy eye that shot to the door, then slowly closed. “Vals... told you... quit.”

Vals ripped his head up to see Basir amble in, a cylinder wobbling in his lips. Pulling up a chair, the man dropped in a huff. Whipping a hand up, Vals yanked the Haze away and tossed it to the floor. Basir watched it bounce eyes with hooded eyes.

“Cas is right, I told you to stop smoking that shit.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

Expression contrite, Basir dragged himself forward with his heel to grab the Haze. As he rolled the drug between his fingers, he saw the five-pointed star.

“Red Star was my brother’s favorite.” Basir murmured. “Rebecca gave this to me just now, said she meant to give it to him back in Wangchuan. That got me thinking,” his shoulders went limp. “Are we actually helping her? I mean, taking on a whole station?” His fingers stopped suddenly, threatening to crush the frail drug.

“I don’t know, man.” Vals hugged himself like a man fighting the cold. “What I do know is that she can command Daemons and Hayabusa is looking for us because Cas survived the Netburst.” Chuckling, Vals turned his palm up and gazed into its scars. “When they come knocking, I’d rather she be on our side.”

“Careful what you wish for boss.” Picking himself up, Basir rose, then caught himself. “By the way, you see the election’s over? They called it for Jacky.”

“That’s what we came here to do” Vals looked to a close counter, where Ein’s jacket lay at rest. “Feels like that was a lifetime ago.” Basir dipped his chin, then vanished into the hall. And there he Vals sat, alone, until the lights snapped off.

In misty curls outside, a silver ghost watched the ship slip its berth.

[40]:The Board

“The words that scare me most? I’m from the Board, time for your review.”

- **Suman Kai**

Gideon sat at his desk, adjusted his collar, then tapped the table. Darkness fell, save for Yama’s flickering torch opposite him. The Daemon looked him over, its stern gaze deactivating his Janus module.

“Are you prepared?” Yama’s voice was that of a stranger’s.

“I always am.” Gideon flicked his wrist. “Shall we?”

Yama dipped his head and extinguished, plunging the room into darkness. An oak table rose in his place, like an island from a sunless sea. Sepia lights clicked on at regular intervals, accenting silhouettes that stirred like trees in a windy night.

“Gideon,” a voice rose on his right, too powerful to be human. A thick envelop fell on the table, its thud filling the endless space. “We have... concerns. Our standing in Silver Star has deteriorated faster than expected.”

“As I warned you it would.”

There was silence, broken by the same overwhelming voice. “Elaborate.”

“Silver Star is not a trade-show, it is a balancing act of competing forces.” Extending a splayed hand, Gideon rocked it left and right. He stopped, glaring over the top of his hand at his faceless audience.

“With all due respect, you thought Artificials would let you steal the show. And, for a brief moment, you did. But for every action, there is an equal and opposite.” Gideon clasped his hands and sunk his chin upon them.

“Silver Star, punched back. Our Artificial was destroyed, our culpability exposed, and the Silvers rallied around Jacky and Pale Oni. It was all I could do to minimize your disaster.”

“Elaborate. You used Artificials.”

“Yes, I provided Senator Dawson with a prototype Artificial; simple, but sufficient to buy his loyalty. He, not the Artificial stole the show.” Gideon sunk his head low, eyes gleaming. “People are impressionable in a moment of crisis. By casting blame on Rebecca Hanza, he ensured their outrage

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

remained fixed on her rather than us. Even still, I have twenty thousands Silvers knocking on my door. But that is better than the Senate.”

The Board shifted, conversing silently among themselves before that unified thunder rolled again. “The Hanza is a point of concern, her body has not been found. There is the possibility she has escaped with Artemis.”

“The contractors? Skilled as they may be, I see no reason to concern ourselves, their job was to secure the election and they did. The Hanza will remain, no Synder would willingly abandon a prize like Silver Star.” Gideon put on a smile that stretched from one service mark to the other.

“Did you have dealings?”

“Not with her, no. I did however, arrange the purchase of Erase from Hanza,” tweaking his cufflinks, Gideon laid his hands on the table. “In case I understated it earlier, the people’s opinion is the fulcrum to Silver Star’s balance. Thus, it is notable that outside of Takemura Tower a mob accosted Pale Oni herself, with intent to harm.”

“Elaborate.”

“The crowd was excited by today’s events and primed by Law’s rhetoric, they simply need a push in the right direction. After determining Pale Oni was a threat to our operations, my team provided such a catalyst. Which brings us to the Erase, certain elements of humanity always trade their morals. It is not as flashy as hijacking a Subnet, but...” Gideon tilted his head in consideration. “It is a tool that can take a city.”

“Go on”

“Gutter Fifteen showed that a dying Artificial can Whitewall thousands and disable local Daemons. The trouble is, Artificial-compatible individuals are too expensive to waste like that, they are expected to think and act.” Gideon’s mouth curled. “Erasers might be more accommodating to both Artificials and budgets.”

“Of course, I would pay out of pocket, and you will find no other team with my familiarity. I only ask that the project be fully under my purview with an appropriate role” Gideon rolled his hand and produced a business card. He let it catch the light, visible down the entire length of the table.

Gideon Hayabusa, Vice President of Mergers and Acquisitions

“Expected return?”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“We are discussing a new technological paradigm, but no successful individual has let fear supersede ambition.” He pressed the card to the table and leaned back in his chair. “I will give you the hearts of StelCom and Ksama; Grand Terminal, and Neo-Kashmir.”

“We shall entertain you. Bureaucratic fees will be withheld from your salary until successful completion. You have a month.” The Board faded until only Gideon remained. Then a torch kindled over his shoulder.

“That went better than expected.” Gideon flashed a bright grin “I suppose they asked you directly about Artemis?”

“Of course, the Board prides itself on being thorough.” Yama demurred. “Shall I track Artemis in the meantime?”

“Yes, but do not draw undue attention, the less the Board knows... well,” The lights snapped back on, burning away Gideon’s smile. “What they don’t know can hurt them.”

“And what of President Ernst?”

“What of her?” Gideon shrugged. “Silver Star has served its purpose. We have new goals.”

[Signal Shift...]

The applause died, echoing throughout the Assembly Chambers like far off thunder. One by one her audience took their seats in order of importance, until only Grayson and Ichvander remained standing. At the heart of it all, Jacky faced the clamoring Senators, making a point of not looking at the pair; lest that hollow in her chest become something sharp and dangerous.

“Thank you, thank you all,” lifting a hand, Graysib stilled the last jubilations. “We have all toiled to make tonight a success. Of course, more work remains.” She waved Ichavnder forward.

“Madame President.” He dipped his head. “The Senate has agreed, our first order of business is an official castigation of Hanza for their interference in our politics.”

“It wasn’t Hanza that attacked Takemura Tower,” Jacky’ silenced him with a pointed glance before facing the Senate. “No, our first order of business is to the people. I will address them now.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“An excellent idea,” Grayon pushed past Ichvander, interrupting his objection. “It is past time we let everyone know the process worked, not even Rebecca Hanza could change that.” She lifted a hand to dim the lights.

Jacky’s heart barely budged when a singular beam fell on her. The words came easily.

“Silver Star, tonight, I stand before you not as your President, but as a grieving patriot. For twelve years, Rebecca Hanza fought the Syndicates, standing fast by the city she loved. Even when accused of treason, her final thoughts were for Silver Star. That’s why...”

She gripped the podium, unable to keep her chin from falling alongside her voice.

“That’s why I’m proud to call her my mother.” She waited, blood pounding in her ears like a raging crowd. But there was silence as she looked past the Senators, into the camera.

“I... I’ve lost two now. When I was a child, Sijaho’s Mistake killed my mother. Rebecca Hanza took me in. All she wanted was for me to be happy, and all I wanted was to make sure no one experienced what I did. I do not ask forgiveness Silver Star, I ask for a chance to prove that I meant every word I said.”

She longed to scream at the Senators hanging on her words, who let her speak as if they hadn’t silenced Rebecca. Grinding her teeth, she thought of Tam, what he had believed in. Her voice, not heart, cooled.

“Silver Star is a home for freedom and integrity.” She wrapped her hands about the podium, anchoring herself to the city. “And while Hayabusa and the other Syndicates clamor at our gates, some of us put themselves before our ideals. It was not the meek and powerless who let the Syndicates in through Designated Competition Areas. Nor was Hayabusa who paid when they stormed our city with Wolves and Artificial”

The Senate sat straighter, but she preferred to imagine High Street’s teeming thousands.

“Rest assured Silver Star, I will not rest until you are comfortable in the Assembly Hall as you are at home. We will change for the better. We will change for the people.” She let go of the podium, extending a hand like she had done on so many screens.

“Silver Star may stand alone, but it can stand together.”

[41]: A Sorrowful Farewell

“Regret is the coward’s opiate.”

- Rebecca Hanza

The Presidential office was smaller than Jacky remembered. Perhaps it was the Meteor Desk, its brutalist design looming large in her mind. Once she had thought it quaint. Now, it reminded her of a mountain’s weight potential.

She rolled her gaze up to the bay window behind the desk. High Street glittered there, awash with night’s neon lanterns that reflected in Silver Sea’s translucent waves. Admiring the gentle lights, she drifted toward the window, unwittingly matching her breathing to the city’s languid heart.

To her right, once hidden behind the curtains, a great mob congregated at the base of Hayabusa Tower. The fires in her chest calmed as she listened, though the words were faint. Silver Star is home, perhaps. She touched the glass as if to fall through when she was called back.

“Madame President, before I go, I recommend you call Yuri Takemura.” Still in the door, Ichvander lowered his voice. “The Senate need not be informed of your personal calls.”

As the door clicked shut behind him, Jacky spotted a face-down picture frame upon the desk. She lifted it, then slumped into Rebecca’s abandoned chair. In that still image saw her younger self in the photo, held by a woman she barely remembered. Closing her eyes, she pressed a finger to her brow. “Silvera.”

“Ja...” Shimmering into existence, Silvera corrected herself. “Madame President.”

“A secure line to Takemura please.” Opening her eyes, Jacky looked through the Daemon as the room filled with fog, humming servers, a man, and a grotesque shadow on the floor.

“Madame President. Congratulations on your victory, I liked the speech.” Yuri Takemura’s pleasantries issued from behind a light Blur.

“Mr Takemura,” unciously balling her hands in her lap, Jacky focused on the man and not the shriveled wreck behind him. “I believe you called?”

“Blunt as ever, the Senate is going to eat you alive like that.” The Blur flicked off, revealing Yuri’s tanned face. “Or perhaps not. Your speech has given me certain... suspicions.”

Jacky’s finger inched toward the disconnect. “Mr. Taekmura, if that’s all you have, I will take my leave. I don’t have time to play favorites.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“Would you play the fool instead?” Yuri’s brow furrowed. “We both know what Grayson has done, and, given your speech, I merely wondered if you intend to do anything about it.”

“I will keep trying to unite us. What about you?” she leaned onto her elbows. “I doubt my speech gave you a change of heart.”

“Speeches may not reshape hearts, but they can guide them.” Yuri shrugged, then clasped his hands under his chin. “As for my plans, I can check Grayson’s finances for any discrepancies and—”

“I’m more concerned she protected Hayabusa.”

“Ah...” Yuri murmured. “As you might recall, I have recently acquired certain leverage on Hayabusa. It belongs to your courts, but I wonder what the Senate will do with it.”

“They will do the right thing.”

“With Grayson in charge? I fear you underestimate her.”

“No.” Jacky gestured in dismissal. “I just don’t underestimate Silvers.”

“If you say so,” Yuri Takemura bowed, hiding his expression. “But, Madame President, do take care..”

Closing the connection, Jacky pulled out the Meteor Desk’s workstation control pad. Three loose cylinders rolled along the tray. She froze, overwhelmed by a rush of memories. Haltingly she reached for one, senseless fingers chasing it before grabbing hold. Rolling it between her thumb and index finger, she released a stale sigh.

“I’m not you,” she wheeled the chair around to face Silver Star’s proud vista, encompassing the drooping fronds of Heaven and the wards’ watery peaks. Extending that arm, she held the Haze out toward the EYE as if to light it.

“Jacky.” Silvera appeared at her side, an intangible hand lifted to touch the woman’s shoulder. Thinking better of it, the Daemon looked out the window with a subdued thought. “Silver Star truly is beautiful.”

“No,” Jacky pointed at the living sea outside Hayabusa. “They are.”

Silent a moment, Silvera turned toward the ports, watching something faraway. When it was gone, she rested a hand on Jackey’s. “Everything will be alright.”

The Vicious Stars (Act I)

“You can’t promise that,” Jacky turned back to the desk with a fragile smile. Taking hold of the picture once more, she held it up for the Daemon to see.

“We have to earn it.”