

DAEMONIZE

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

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

Castella shoved her way through Ward Fifteen’s glitzy feeding trough. Her knee-length jacket thudded along with every step, armor plates and magazines snug in carbon fiber weaves. ARTEMIS, LLC glowed on her jacket’s high collar, painting her helmet orange.

She turned suddenly, changing the neon-drenched rabble for a clutter alley. Sullen locals watched her from damp stoops, scratching needle-tracked flesh. Some stirred lazily as if to block the street, only to settle back in the shadows. While Artemis was just a name, The sword on her hip was trouble.

Untroubled by their hungry eyes she kept burrowing into the city’s veins. Sweeping around a tight corner she stopped. The narrow street descended into a misty lake, cordoned off by holographic red letters.

Warning: Syndicate Activity Ahead

The apartment towers huddled around that glare—crowded her in—their peaks lost clouds of wire. No one in sight, but she had searched everywhere else.

Silent, she pulled a magnetic-pistol from her waist and ejected its magazine. Tucking the green-tipped mag into her jacket, she slotted in a red-tipped sibling. Red meant premium multi-stage bullets with non-magnetic cores. Good at punching holes in magnetic deflection, better at punching holes in budgets, it was a luxury few were willing to buy. Racking a round, she holstered the pistol before double-checking her augments’ diagnostics. Eyes. Legs. Arm. All clear.

Closing the mental menu, she lifted her chin. The towering apartment complex stared back at her, windows flicking on and off like a circuit board. Her gaze drilled into the building until a man in an Artemis Jacket caught up.

“Worried about the new kid?” Basir said, shuffled to a stop and looked at the warning lights like they were about to bite. “C’mon Cas, he’s safe and sound up there.”

She dragged her eyes down to the archway’s fluttering banner. “I know.”

“Should be more worried about us,” Basir glanced sideways at her. “Just our luck this Tam guy goes missing here. I mean, what’s a campaign manager doing this far down, huh?”

“Keep it in here.” Tapping her head, Castella stomped through the holographic warning and into the waist deep water. Basir followed her with a grumble, leaving the broken ribbon to stitch itself together. Step by step, fog smothered the city, until all that remained was its rippling reflection. It was strangely serene until an update polluted her visor.

Automated Message:

*Travel Advisory issued for your area.
Silver Star is not responsible for any related injuries.*

Castella squinted to delete the message as she stalked along the basin wall, sunken debris shifting under foot. When a chortling dam emerged from the fog, she slogged up to the dribbling edge and scouted her surroundings.

The gutter 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 lower walls, covered in the detritus of departed crowds. Soon the rains would come and wash it all into the riverbed and the audience would come again.

Apartment towers huddled about the gutter's banks like thirsty trees, their ad-covered walls vibrant as a neon fall. Those screens united to present a woman whose long hair was pulled over one side. She wore a white robe, over which was fitted a loose vest that was mostly a trim blazer, though it turned into black leather and metal studs over her right shoulder. Her starkest feature was the right half of her mouth, where her lips were cut back to expose metal teeth.

<<There she is. Silver Star's public ego.>> Basir caught up, watching the display while wading the treacherous shallows. <<Weird. You'd think she knew what happened to Tam.>>

Castella simply narrowed her eyes. Daemons weren't human, no matter how much they pretended to be. They were machine intelligences, born from the primordial soup of a trillion connected devices. In personally governing mankind's vast networks, they came to embody their constituents. Silvera, the digital woman onscreen, was Silver Star's zeitgeist down to the studs.

"Attention Ward Fifteen, Citizens for Reform campaign manager Tam Kassar has gone missing." Silvera held up the photo of a young man. Sad wrinkles formed around her eyes, but the metal half of her mouth clenched furiously. "President Bellen has entrusted Artemis Contractors to find him. Please refrain from obstructing their operations."

Castella scoffed quietly, then resumed scouting. It was like looking into a sun. Bullet trains shot between the skyscrapers, trailing streaked advertisements. Holographic leviathans meandered along, fleshing out the dazzling sky that made even trash-filled gutters look like something out of a fairy tale. Her scars flared up, even the ones in her augs.

She vaulted the dam before Basir caught up. Hanging weightless a second, she landed silently on the riverwalk. Then she was up and moving while Basir splashed over the edge. His landing ran up Castella's spine as if she had been the one to jump. She ground her teeth as the NeuralLink slotted in her spine let her feel the lukewarm water glugging down Basir's neck.

He wasn't the only one. All of Artemis was there, a constellation of stars living inside her skull. As Basir shook himself dry with a grunt, Castella touched his star and willed her scowl across the connection along with a thought. <<Keep it in the NeuralLink.>>

<<Well excuse me, not all of us have steel for legs.>> Basir sniped back, jaw working hard to resist his sympathetic scowl. <<What's got you so pissy?>>

Castella lifted a finger toward the gutter wall. There, a corpse slumped atop a rubbish throne, cheeks stained by tears, eyes empty as the needle in its arm. Prowling over, she spotted a blue spark in the man's lap. She squatted beside the body, then dug through trash until she pulled out a medical vial ampule filled with an azure liquid. She didn't need labels to recognize the galaxy's favorite syndicate poison. Her knuckles tightened about the unmarked glass, skin pickling in old flames.

"All that blood, and the syndicates still won." She whispered, closing her fist over the vial.

<<'That's not our man.>> Basir broke her thoughts as he walked up, hands creeping toward his rifle. <<'Tam's what? 'Twenty-something, sociable, and well dressed? This guy is none of that.>>

<<Evidence.>> 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 of the corpse's neck with a crack of bone and foil.

<<Evidence she says. Glad you're the hardass.>> Basir held up the blue vial. <<What's so special about him carrying Erase? Everyone has things they'd like to forget.>>

<<People don't OD on Erase.>> Palming the chip, Castella thumbed the blood off one of StelCom's premium chips. Loaded with automated chemical-balancing, neural acceleration, and other necessities for the working man, it was normally unaffordable. This implanted version often 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. Once 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 register your new device.

Castella ran a penetration script, watching menus flick across the screen followed by marching progress bars. The lock broke, revealing a slew of alerts.

Starts in 1 Hour: Rendezvous

3 Hours Overdue: Eat

2 Weeks Overdue: Taxes

1 Month Overdue: Eviction notice

Eyeing Dexter's corpse, Castella switched to medical notifications.

CRITICAL (Now): Unauthorized Ejection

CRITICAL (70 Minutes): Neural/Heart Activity Arrested

URGENT (70 Minutes): Neural Activity Spike

Castella glanced over the data then pulled up the dead man's schedule. Unemployed, Dexter Takemura spent most days wandering Ward 15, though this morning he had idled thirty minutes in the Ward's local polling station. She scanned the data for hidden links, then uploaded it to Artemis' database. Basir crept over her shoulder, cautiously eyeing the data.

<<He voted? If he's on this stuff, he should barely even remember his own name.>> Basir tensed as he thumbed through the upload. <<And half an hour? Something ain't right.>>

<<'The *job*, Basir.>>

<<Anyone ever tell you, you got a stick up your ass?>> Scrunching his nose, Basir went back to sorting through Dexter's data.

Castella got a step away before she heard stiffen with a hiss. She touched her pistol as Basir sent his chosen filets over. The first result was the picture of a curly-haired youth shaking hands down a line of voters. So was the second. And third.

<<'That's definitely Tam.>> Basir murmured, then glanced to Dexter's corpse. <<So he was scoping out Tam? Then he fell over and died?>> He pulled the rifle off his back. <<Or he's just playing dead. Guy could be a Ghost?>>

<<No.>> Castella answered. <<One of those wouldn't let me pull its agent.>>

<<Anyone ever tell you, you got a stick up your ass? This has syndicate fuckery written all over it. Even with him...>> Basir squinted at the apartment complex before joining her in the shadows. <<Idea. I'll check Dex for Syndicate sends. If there are syndicates here they're definitely... Oh great. *Them*.>>

Castella found it too: a rifle ad promoting the latest in twin-barreled killing machines.

Hayabusa Presents: The Paladin - Keep the dead, dead

<<Hayabusa must have heard me talking about their Ghost. Wonderful, at least they got a sense of humor.>> Basir plucked a Haze cigarette from his jacket. Pulling his helmet back, he revealed brown hair matted with sweat, tawny eyes, and a sagging face. Setting the stick between dry lips he inhaled, lighting the tip. Castella felt the numbing smoke tickle her throat as she stopped.

She shut it and focused on the ad. Verifying the ad's syndicate certificate, she manually activated her Net-overlay. Decades had been wasted debating the best way to visualize the Net's dizzying datascape until reasonable people agreed they'd just let Daemons navigate for them. There were times, however, when a personal touch was required.

Her default visualization was a lattice of sparks and lines overlaid across the apartments, ad-clouds, and pedestrians. Each light represented a Net address, while the lattice was a two-dimensional rendition of their connections. It didn't capture even a sliver of the Net's complexity, but anything more would be dizzying to navigate.

Probing Hayabusa's message, Castella found bright data-lines arching off it back to the syndicate's paid influencers all across the city. Cross referencing those locations with Dexter Takemura's inbound data she tied one match to a nearby cafe.

<<Found them.>> Castella uploaded her find into the NeuralLink.

Basir sighed. <<And we're going to go pay them a visit?>>

<<Yep.>> Castella was slinking forward when the first stale raindrop splattered on her visor. Millions more followed, kicking up knee-high mists. She refused to look up, she needed to focus. But as the dark rivulets rolled off her helmet, a cheery voice reached her ear.

“You Can't See Heaven from Hell” 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 ship. For all their talk of independence, Silver Star could have been any other syndicate metropolis instead of a lonely station adrift in the stars.

Basir's chuckle ripped her out of the reverie. <<We're down here because the President personally asked us to find this Tam kid, and you don't bat an eye. But, a campaign slogan, that's what gets you?>>

Castella effortlessly kept her thoughts flat and lifeless. <<People think it's easy to change the world. Wouldn't expect you to understand.>>

<<Why? Because I think with my head instead of a sword? You know what all that killing got you? People like her.>> He stuck a finger at a digital mural splashed on the gutter's wall.

The centerpiece was a monstrous woman, all scars and chrome. Lank hair hung over half her face, concealing steel teeth fixed in a snarl. From the neck down she was hardware, bulky shoulders covered with black spikes, and long arms sporting longer claws. She stood atop a mountain of fashionable corpses, holding one by the throat, with a pair of scales in her other hand.

Red rivers dribbled from the mound to lend a name: LAW.

<<Isn't she just a model superkiller? At least a syndicate 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 she knew her mood was filling the NeuralLink like a growing storm.

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

She pretended not to hear, but her limbs did. For eight years, she'd 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.

<<What now?>> Basir wearily looked up street-side, where the apartment-screens showed roaring flames. Hundreds of gathering Silvers cheered, reaching toward a bespectacled giant emerging from the blaze. The man shuffled a deck of dog-eared cards, deaf to the adulations.

“Justice!” The man thundered as he drew a card. On its face, a skull chewed a pair of golden scales. “Tonight, let it be the people’s Justice! Let our will shine bright enough to drive the syndicates from our home. Justice for Tam Kassar!”

“Silver Star alone! Silver Star alone!” The shouting spread like wildfire.

<<Already writing him off. Whole damn city is full of wannabe rebels.>> Basir shook his head, a half-formed thought in mind when a third star winked in Neurrallink. Castella followed its light back to the apartment complex, where the new kid on the team peered through a dark window.

<<Guys, uh...>> Worry cracked the young voice. <<I found Tam.>>