

“What did you do?” Whispering, Derek asked StelCom’s burning industrial plant. Considerate as ever, it answered; cracking the oily night with fire.

Standing atop Hanza’s branch office, Derek was some eighty floors above Wangchuan City’s grimy skyline. Like other syndicate offices, Hanza’s tower bordered that concrete sea; another glass monolith trapping millions in those narrow alleys. Except StelCom. Twelve years earlier, StelCom’s board built the city, made possible by generous development grants, and one million inviolable work-contracts. Wearing neon reflections of the budding metropolis, StelCom’s Wangchuan complex rose in a month. Now, shedding its own light, StelComplex-331, died in a torrent of flame.

*Wasn’t supposed to be like this.* Clenching his fist, Derek squeezed the key, *Right? You had a plan.* His brother’s apologetic warmth lingered in its metal teeth, fading, like the ruddy stains in Derek’s uniform. Glass walls behind him opened, exposing a lavish suite. Incense wafted out, joining the perfume of cherry trees swaying above shallow pools. Ms. Rebecca Hanza, Vice-President of Hanza’s pharmaceutical division, stepped smugly into her private garden

“What did I do?” Dressed in a blue suit trimmed with obsidian, Ms. Hanza glided to the balcony rail, “I finalized your deposit.” Watching StelCom’s immolation with an easy smile, she leaned comfortably on the golden rail. “You should be grateful.”

*This doesn’t bother you?* Tracing the key’s teeth, Derek searched for answers, either in steel, or drying blood. Silent, both deferred to the woman who started it all. She was striking, a

masterwork of gene-editing and socio-aesthetics. Severe cheeks framed austere eyes boring into Wangchuan's conflagration. *'Course it doesn't, not someone like her.* No, not when she sported enough bio-engineered muscle to snap a man's back.

"Shouldn't you be upset?" Derek's knuckles popped like the apartments below. "Those are your people too."

"No..." Reaching into her jacket, Ms. Hanza extracted a golden case stamped by Hayabusa's precious initials. Withdrawing a black Haze-stick, she set it between perfect teeth, igniting the tip with a long breath. Derek's thumb started its climb before she spoke, words silky as the delirious smoke tickling her throat. "That?" Gripping the drug between two fingers, she waved it over the fire. "Disposable." One eye cornered him, greedily absorbing the firelight. She took another draw.

"Like your brother."

*Him?* Derek's thumb skipped, losing count as his throat seized. *After what we did?* Screaming muscles endeavored to squeeze blood from the metal.

"Really, I'm surprised you made it this far." Half-finishng her Haze-Stick, Ms. Hanza flicked it away, too bored to watch it spiral into the maze below. "I thought StelCom's Regional Manager would have some refinement. Perhaps some more discretion would have saved your brother."

“Discretion?” Acrimonious laughter stressed Derek’s question. Pointing the key at her, an ugly grimace split his face. “You wanted us to steal kids!”

“The children, yes.” Waving a hand, she dismissed his accusation “That was part of it.”

Derek didn’t hear, losing himself to memory. His suit was white then, like his brother’s face. The gurneys slowed them, but StelComplex-331 should have been quiet at this hour. Except, they found the man with golden eyes. Derek saw his brother doubled over, clutching crimson stains in his side, spreading like the throbbing alarm. Bloody hands pulled away, forcing the key into Derek’s. A dying whisper escaped the man before he collapsed.

*Where?* Derek looked at the key as he did then. *Where did you want me to go?* Amid those comatose charges, he had no answer. For that matter, he didn’t now.

“Why am I here?” Smearing his brother’s blood, Derek mumbled his query. Sighing, his companion selected another dose.

“She wanted to talk.”

The glass parted, summoning Derek’s savior. She was tall, not in stature, but in being; a foot shorter and she would still loom over every soul. Long hair spilled down her back, heedless of StelCom’s ministrations. Her brows pinched, hard lines etched in ageless granite, deeper than her puckered scars. Drumming boots carried her across marble tiles, poised for action.

“Ask her yourself.” Standing, Ms. Hanza straightened her suit, still staring at the horizon. “I suggest you listen well. After all, someone must be held accountable for tonight’s tragedy.” Dropping her second Haze-Stick, Ms. Hanza brushed imperiously past the new arrival.

“So, uh...” Derek felt indecision steal upon him, like it did beside his brother’s corpse. His fist tightened until the key’s teeth bit. *No, she doesn’t know.* Looking up, he faced her quiet stare. It was identical to what she wore in StelCom. “Thanks for the save back there.” His words felt clunky, judged. “What’d you want?”

“The name’s Era, I run Artemis Contractors.” Her voice was controlled like smoldering embers. Seizing Derek’s hand, her grip was strong, stronger than Rebecca’s could ever be. “I’m looking to hire.”

*Leave?* Derek tightened his grip, though Era’s faint smile showed no discomfort. *I didn’t bury him, I just left him there.*

“Gonna take that as a yes.” Clapping him on the shoulder, Era walked away. Blinking, Derek thumbed that blood-stained key.

*It’s over, isn’t it?* Slipping the key into his pocket, Derek followed her. *Nothing for me here. Not anymore.*