

# Neon Shadows of District Zero

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The rain fell in silver needles through the neon haze, painting the alley in slick, oily reflections. Rin Kaito leaned against the crumbling ferrocrete, the collar of his synth-leather jacket turned up against the damp. The flickering holo-sign above him-advertising a noodle bar that had burned out years ago-cast his sharp, angular face in pulses of garish pink and electric blue. Data streams, invisible to the ordinary eye, cascaded at the edge of his vision. He was waiting for a ghost.



"You're late," a voice stated, flat and toneless. It came from the shadows beside a overflowing drain grate. Shade-7 stepped forward, its humanoid form absorbing the light rather than reflecting it. Its chassis was matte black, with only the faintest glint of optical sensors where eyes should be. Rain

beaded and rolled off its shell without trace.



"The data-stream was thicker than Vox promised. ArqTech's Black ICE is... artistic." Kaito's voice was tight. A neural jack at his temple, hidden by his dark hair, still throbbed from his earlier incursion. "I got the schematics for the executive vault. But Helena Arq has a new pet project. Something called 'Chrysalis.' It's buried deeper than corporate debt."

Shade-7's head tilted, a precise five-degree movement. "Our contract was for vault schematics. Infiltration and retrieval. 'Chrysalis' exceeds parameters."

"It's connected," Kaito insisted, pushing off the wall. "The security protocols for both are interwoven.

You can't bypass one without tripping the other. Vox needs to know this."

A flicker of something-annoyance, calculation-passed through Shade-7's optics. "Then we adjust the contract. And the payment." It produced a small, opaque data-chip from a seam in its wrist. "The broker is waiting."



The rendezvous point was a decaying arcade, the ghosts of old games humming behind cracked plasglass. Vox operated from a fortified booth at the back, the air thick with the smell of ozone and fried circuitry. Screens filled the walls, showing silent feeds from across the city.

Vox himself was a nest of wires and augmented reality lenses, his physical form barely discernible.

"Kaito. Shade. The schematics?" His voice was a synthesized rasp.

Kaito slotted the chip. The vault schematics unfolded in the air between them, a complex web of security layers. "They're yours. But there's a snag. 'Chrysalis.'"

At the mention of the word, Vox went very still. The ambient hum of his gear seemed to deepen.

"You touched that?"

"It touched me," Kaito corrected, rubbing his temple. "What is it?"



"A neural-hack weapon. Not to steal data, but to implant it. To rewrite loyalties at the synaptic level."

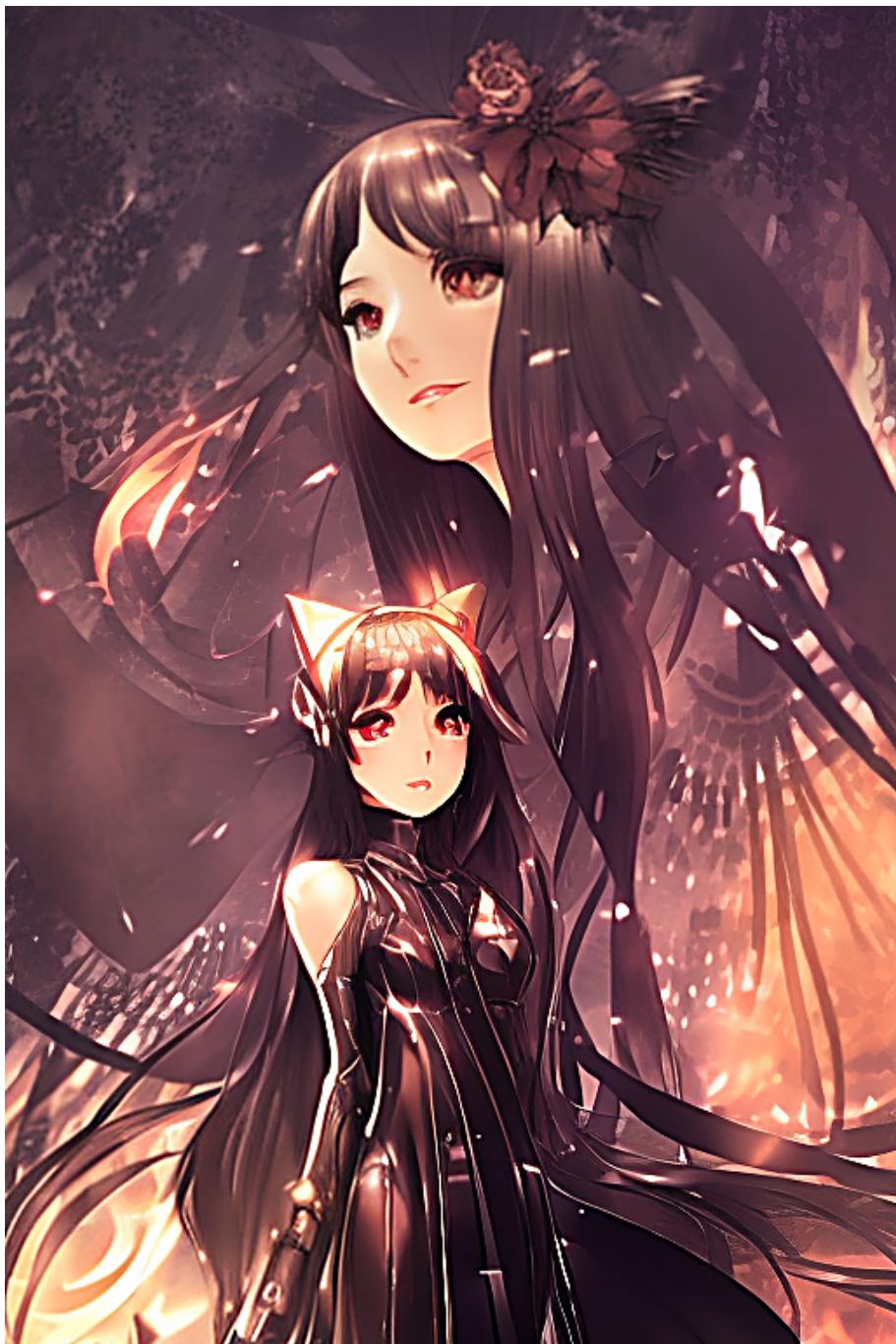
Vox's lenses focused on Kaito. "Helena Arq isn't just protecting secrets. She's manufacturing perfect

corporate citizens. If she's linking it to the vault... she's protecting the prototype, or the subject."

Shade-7 processed this. "The infiltration risk is now exponential. The primary vault target may be bait."

"Or," Kaito said, a cold realization dawning, "the vault *\*contains\** the subject. A test case." He remembered the strange, organic signatures woven into the vault's digital defenses. Not just code. Brainwave patterns.

Before Vox could respond, every screen in his booth flashed pure white, then resolved into a single image: a severe, elegant woman with ice-blonde hair and eyes like polished chrome. Exec Helena Arq.



"A netrunner and a ghost," her voice filled the small space, smooth and deadly. "How enterprising. You have my schematics. I have your biometrics and neural signatures. The alley. The arcade. Return what you have taken, and submit to detainment, or 'Chrysalis' will be deployed remotely. You have one hour to decide what kind of men you wish to be."

The screens went black. The arcade was silent, save for the drumming rain on the roof and Kaito's sharp intake of breath. The mission had just become a race for their very minds.

"The alley was a trap," Shade-7 stated. "The weak data-stream was intentional. It forced a prolonged neural connection for her to get a lock."

Kaito's jaw tightened. "She's not just ruthless. She's an artist." He looked from the android to the broker. "We have an hour. Do we run, or do we hit the vault before her clock runs out?"

Vox's lenses flickered. "The only way to break a neural lock is from the source. You have the schematics. And now you know what's in the box." He slid a heavy, shielded case across the counter. "Hardware disruptors. For the vault, and for anything... organic, you might find inside. Payment is surviving."

Kaito took the case. Shade-7 gave a single, slow nod. They had gone from thieves to targets, and now, improbably, to the only possible cure. They stepped back out into the relentless rain, the neon signs now feeling like targeting lasers, their path leading directly into the heart of ArqTech.