

# ETERNAL LIFE

Blood on the Matrix, part II



NAVY JOE

# Blood

ON THE

# Matrix

PART II: ETERNAL LIFE

NAVY JOE

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*Every living thing is, one day, doomed to die...*

*It's depressing, but it's a fact of life. Nothing is permanent - least of all human beings. Most people don't think about it too much - it's usually irrelevant to ones' day-to-day life anyways. Some people just accept it - after all, if it's inevitable, why worry? The more grim and tortured of us even relish it, viewing death as an escape from the drudgery and madness that comes with being forced to live.*

*Of course, those are far from the only outlooks on the end of ones' life. Many would find 'accepting the inevitable' to be offensively defeatist, and in violation of human nature. The desire to conquer death itself has been something our species has strove for ever since it understood it would die. The pharaohs of Egypt ritually preserved their bodies in order to rule eternally in the hereafter. Countless explorers spent their lives trying to discover the legendary Fountain of Youth. Alchemists have feverishly experimented for thousands of years to find the recipe for the long-sought after Elixir of Life. Even in the near-future, truly massive sums of money are spent on the development of advanced cybernetics and experimental gene-therapies - even bleeding edge nanotechnological augmentations - to try and stave off their demise, if only for a bit longer, squeezing out every last drop of life they can.*

*None of these advanced technologies work - at least not forever. Most people just dismiss the pursuit of immortality as a fantasy and another way that the rich are swindled out of more money than most people see in their lives. It's an easy opinion to have when you can't see The Reaper hovering over your shoulder.*

*Those who are most desperate to live forever are the ones who can see their demise with the naked eye. Those who know their life is about to run out. Those who've been around the block and seen it all and are in the twilight of their lives. They know they're going to die soon and just feverishly refuse to accept it. To give in. To utterly refuse to yield to their nature as mortal beings.*

*In the past, they would have simply have to make do with a variety of quack drugs and treatments and maybe a nice statue or crypt. However, as technology marches ever onwards to heights thought impossible, there exist people who wish to use science as a way to defy the inevitable, feverishly pursuing the possibility that, through advanced technology, they might be able to defy Death itself. At any cost.*

Deep within the bowels of the web, on a private matrix server hidden from prying eyes, the unenlightened, and stupid 13-year olds who would just ruin the whole thing, a small circle of net users anxiously waited under dim orange lamps, barely illuminating a large, semicircular secret shrine. The congregation sat still in rows of creaky, old fashioned wooden pews, every level descending towards the bottom of the shrine where their attentions were all focused. The users' avatars were all fairly simplistic, cartoonish simulacra of men in sinister-looking, long hooded black robes, their faces obscured with a shadow built into the avatar itself - even direct illumination would reveal nothing more than a black void where their face should be... Well, if they kept their hoods on, at least.

At the moment, there were only about a half-dozen users in attendance, sitting quietly in patient contemplation. All eyes were focused on the empty dais at the bottom of the shrine, a dense, sinister atmosphere of mystique and danger permeating through the whole server, only amplified by a crushing, deafening silence. Though the mood was patient, there was still a burgeoning question that was beginning to burrow in the minds of each user, one by one, like a worm descending onto an apple... Or, well, the question-bearer couldn't really speak for his... Co-conspirators, but it was definitely burrowing into his head. One cultist in particular, clad in black robes and as interchangeable as the rest of them, was beginning to shift anxiously in his seat.

The dais all eyes were focused on was large enough to hold a whole troupe of performers and was illuminated by a by a series of eldritch, black-tallow candles that burned with an otherworldly blue glow the program's author was doubtlessly proud of, but it was also... Completely empty - and had been for a while. Longer than it should have been, by the anxious cultist's estimate...

"Hey..." The question-bearer piped up as he slowly turned to the user beside him. At least, beside him in a relative sense - the other man was sitting at least two metres away. "When's he gonna get here?" He asked.

"Hm?" The other user responded, and though the question-bearer couldn't exactly tell from the shadows obscuring the other man's face, he was fairly certain from the tone of his words that he'd raised an eyebrow.

"Like..." The first cultist just fidgeted a bit with his hands. "The boss-man? The head honcho?, The master of ceremonies? The leader cultist guy-"

"We just call him 'Thanatos' here, though... " The other cultist shrugged his shoulders. "He kinda likes going by 'Professor', too."

"Ah, right..." The awkward, fidgeting cultist just laughed a bit. For every one of these web cults, secret societies, organizations of secret lore, he knew, it was different. "I'm still a bit new here..."

"Yeah, don't worry. We were all noobs once." The other cultist responded, and, though, it was true, somehow the comment still irked a bit. 'Noob' is what you'd call a generally 'new', inexperienced web user, and this particular cultist had been plying The Matrix for years now, hunting down secrets and forbidden knowledge.

His days had been spent feverishly searching for illegal attack programs, the rituals and devices needed to summon rogue artificial intelligences, backdoors and developer codes to shut down corporate security systems, the works. He wasn't new to this sort of... Hobby in the slightest, though he was new to this server, and... The cultist just looked all around him. There were a lot of the trappings here those matrix cults usually had, but something about it felt... Different. It gave him an impression that his own experience as a member of a few dozen cults prior would prove a bit inadequate tonight.

"So..." The question-bearer just cleared his throat. "When's Thanatos gonna get here?"

The other cultist just shrugged his shoulders, which didn't really fill him with much encouragement. "Iunno." Came the response. "He's usually ALWAYS late. I've just started loading a newsfeed program onto my cyberdeck when I jack in these days."

There was a long, awkward pause. "It's..." The first cultist took a quick look down at the wristwatch program embedded on the sleeve of his robes. "Half past eleven already."

"Yeah?"

"And your front-end page said the lecture was supposed to start thirty minutes ago!"

The other cultist shrugged his shoulders again. "Thanatos is a busy guy. He does a lot of work in meatspace and in the matrix. Something's probably keeping him..." There was another pause, and the questioner could feel a bit of irritation on the other man's tone as he took a deep breath. "Again. Y'know, cause it's not like the rest of us have schedules or anything - being interested in the secrets of life and death doesn't exactly produce you from, you know, having a life or whatever?!-"

"Er... Well..." The first cultist just found himself laughing awkwardly and trying to shift his weight in the wooden pew a bit. "What's there to do in the meantime?" He asked, finding it a bit prudent to distract his now slightly irate sounding contemporary.

Once again, the man shrugged his shoulders. "Do you read The Sun and Anchor?" He asked.

The first cultist knew of it. He knew it as a worthless, wholly corporatized yellow rag peddling a suite of grandiose conspiracy theories and agitation propaganda designed to keep it's readers angry, opinionated, and to keep them from actually being a threat to the status quo. Oh, and to sell advertising space. Can't forget that. He wisely just shook his head and said, "Not a fan of newsfeeds."

"Suit yourself." The other cultist responded, and, with a word of command, brought open a little panel of words and images hovering in front of him, and the questioner just sighed and scooped his bum a bit away from the other man, trying to get as comfortable as it was possible to on the virtual wooden pews, the conversation rather awkwardly smothered in it's crib.

The rookie cultist soon found himself groaning and leaning forwards, staring down absentmindedly towards the dais with an irritable, bored demeanour hiding behind his veil of shadows, the clock ticking ever-onward, only punctuated by an occasional glance towards the other net users, who, from their more relaxed body language and the way they were leaning back in their seats, were probably about as bored as he was, if not outright taking it easy like Mr. Sun and Anchor to his right.

Time seemed to go a bit runny, and he settled into an odd distracted routine of sorts, adjusting his seating and fiddling with his watch-program, constantly asking himself if this was REALLY worth the wait.

He'd been intrigued by that message he'd found on a directory server, something about promising immortality through science, and it'd seemed legitimate enough to entertain, but if their leader was THIS delinquent, well?... The questioner just found himself stretching out the stiffness from his virtual avatar's limbs, and even reflexively miming a yawn. Maybe he shouldn't bother with this cult. After all, there were dozens of net secret societies, and most of them had leaders much, much more punctual than this 'Thanatos' character. A little voice was popping in his mind, telling him he was wasting his time. He ought to just cut his losses, log off, and go to sleep-

\*AHEM!\*

A throat-clearing with all the intensity of a cannon blast boomed throughout the shrine, the atmosphere shifting suddenly like there was a gas leak, and all the users of this little web-circle quickly snapped into focus, turning attentive and present as they all looked down towards the dais, where with little fanfare or special effects the questioner had seen in other cults, the leader had... Logged on, and was now standing in front of them, in the centre of all the candles, at the focal point of the dais. About time, the questioner mused.

"Apologies for the delay." Thanatos began his speech, his voice... Not quite what the rookie had been expecting. His avatar certainly looked imposing enough and clearly communicated to them all exactly what position he held. Like the rest of them, Thanatos' avatar wore a long, black robe, though, his' was ornamented with gold braid and decorated with what looked like glowing, blood-red ritual script. As the rookie got a closer look, though, he realized it was just a string of numbers and letters - hexadecimal code, he guessed.

"My cyberterminal was on the fritz." He added, in a voice that was certainly rough, gnarled and brash, though, it somehow didn't really feel like... 'cult leader material.' He certainly sounded imposing and commanding, though, more in the way a teacher would, even possessing a slight rasp that betrayed his age, with the rookie feeling like it lacked a certain... Sinister quality he'd come to expect from fellow scholars of forbidden lore.

Still... He just took a deep breath. At least the 'Professor' bit made sense. Hell, Thanatos even slightly reminded him of his old Philosophy teacher.

"Now then!..." The leader addressed his followers, dramatically extending both arms upwards and outwards. "I am pleased to see you've all made it, and I am quite equally pleased to see a new face among you." There was a slight pause, while the rookie looked all around at his fellow cultists, feeling a bit awkward, wondering if all the server's eyes had really focused on him, or if it was just his imagination - the shadowy hoods made it really hard to tell. "It is always good to see such... Interest in science as important as this," Thanatos continued, "Though, I had thought the promise of immortality would have attracted more."

From behind his veil of shadow, the rookie cultist raised an eyebrow. That was... Another question that was weighing on his mind. Immortality. It was an... Odd sort of something. He'd seen advertisements ran by The Catholic Church that promised much of the same, but this was... Different. For one, that bulletin-board post had said it was entirely scientific, and the questioner would be lying if he'd said he hadn't mostly come to this meeting to find out for himself exactly what in the world was meant by that...

"But," The leader continued. "Though it is reassuring to see you all here, hungry for knowledge and lustful for immortality, to put it quite simply, we are going to need more people to participate in this... Scholastic venture, so!" With more theatrical, dramatic flair, Thanatos extended a hand out towards the audience and bellowed, "When this meeting ends, I want to step up recruitment! Each of you must further advance our cause and recruit new members into our society!"

"Go out into the forums, the web-rings, the chat-rooms and find those with a hunger for knowledge, the discipline for research, and the will to defy..." He clenched his hand into a fist. "DEATH ITSELF!" The cult's leader bellowed, and, the rookie couldn't exactly speak for the rest of the users present but he found himself... A bit captivated. The man could definitely give a speech. "Those of you who prove yourself stand to be... Rewarded."

That most definitely got his attention. The questioner could only image what sort of rewards a man promising to conquer life and death could bestow.

At the very least, he was hoping it would be more than the tacky buttons and box of chocolates he'd gotten as a gift from his last cult affiliation...

"Now then..." Thanatos cleared his throat once again, and turned away from the audience, uttering a word of power as a large screen materialized into existence with a blazing flicker of light, and with it, a large pointing stick floated down into his avatar's gloved hand, a diagram of the human body appearing on the screen as the cult's leader turned back towards his captivated ring of users.

"I'm sure you scholars are quite hungry for knowledge, so I won't delay anymore!" He proclaimed. "Get out your notepad programs, because all of this WILL be on the test. Now, without any further ado," He tapped the screen with the pointing stick. "The latest, bleeding edge scientific developments in the field of... Eternal life!"

In the real world, at around the same time, Serena was finding herself bored out of her mind, and with little actual reason to be. She was in a nightclub! Not even one of those tacky disco-revival joints, either. On the surface, this was her kind of place - The atmosphere was dingy, smoky and moody, with lots of reds and blacks in it's colour palette and a faintly sinister gothic style to it's interior design, and an angsty, warbly, sort of dark trance music emitting from the disc jockey's speakers, though, she admitted, she'd have probably preferred something calmer and more laid-back, like jazz or classical music... She just shook her head at that - that line of thought really punctuated the question that'd been weighing on her mind: 'What the hell was she even doing here?'

She wasn't even dressed properly, either. The right attire wasn't even really something she thought about until it became relevant - everyone here wore an outfit somewhere between 'punk' and 'gothic lolita', with the guys all done up in leather and black denim with studs and chains all over, and the girls were all dolled up in sensual, almost erotic outfits with plenty of straps and strings and lace and frills, and even a bit of bare skin. With her comparatively plain black leather jacket and jeans, Serena felt really, really out of place. It was just the way she liked to dress, and, she hadn't had much issues with it until tonight, where, with the dingy, smoky darkness and her short, black hair, she'd been mistaken for a guy twice already.

Serena took a drag on her black-wrapped cigarette and blew a cloud of acrid smoke into the nightclub's atmosphere, determinedly ignoring the music pounding at her eardrums like a battering ram. A weary, inattentive look found it's way onto her face as she leaned over the bar, propping her face up with her elbow and free hand. THIS was her night off after a few weeks of hell. She just groaned, and shook her head.

To call the last few weeks of her life intense would be an understatement. It was the most hectic, physically and mentally - and hell, probably spiritually - demanding thing she'd ever experienced. Her life so far had been twenty four years of a bland, pedestrian existence and six weeks of utter insanity, like a glass of milk with a spider at the bottom. Six weeks ago, she was certain she was going to die. Three weeks ago, she'd gotten promoted at work, and every day up until now they were absolutely running her ragged.

She understood why - The Bathrette Beautronics Special Asset Protection Squad wasn't exactly a girl scout troop - but that didn't exactly make it any easier on her. Before she'd gotten that promotion she'd been regularly - almost obsessively - exercising for weeks, to the point where an associate had compared it to a boot camp. That comparison just made her laugh, because the training regimen Bathrette Beautronics had subjected her to made her earlier exercise regimen feel like an extended snooze on a park bench.

Live fire exercises, intensive melee combat training, demolitions work, even something they'd called 'aggressive network access' that Serena pretty quickly figured out was just corporate-speak for 'combat hacking'. It'd all pushed her now superhuman abilities to their absolute limit and, by week two, if she had the option she'd been ready to give up. By week three, she was just about ready to crawl right into a casket and call it there... Serena just groaned, and laughed at the irony of that, and then fell silent, shaking her head and taking another deep drag off her cigarette.

"Hey." A voice called out from the other side of the bar, smoky and sultry, but sharp and sarcastic, it's owner a polar opposite to the leather-jacket clad commando. The bartender was all feminine and flirty, with a long black dress almost reminiscent of a lounge singer's, complimented by a blonde, shoulder length curled 'do that had a nice, springy flip to it, and even a black bow tied around her neck, and set of decorative white cuffs adorning her bare arms that marked her as not just another patron. "You gonna order something, or what?"

The bartender's tone had been amicable and a bit jokey, though there was a pretty clear touch of venom to it. Serena had indeed, just been sitting here for an hour and hadn't ordered so much as a glass of water, but she had nearly burned through an entire packet of cigarettes.

"Er..." Serena's eyes just darted awkwardly back and forth, as she tried to figure out what to say. "Just..." She took a deep breath. "I dunno, surprise me." Her tone was dismissive and inattentive and her mind was clearly elsewhere. Serena didn't even realize the horrifyingly stupid mistake she'd made until the bartender returned, a giggly look on her face, with a sand-rimmed highball glass filled with a disgusting, viscous red liquid.

"One Bloody Mary, vamp girl." The bartender girl responded, which almost made Serena recoil right out of her seat in a blind panic, though... She took a deep breath, and analyzed the bartender's expression. It was all smug and jokey and, she quickly realized, no, the bartender isn't onto you, she's just making fun of you... Serena just groaned. She wasn't sure if that was better or worse.

"Really?" Serena asked, a disappointed, irritated look slowly crawling onto her face.

"Like, no offence." The bartender said, giggling a bit. "You kinda have a bit of a 'vampire' look. Especially those eyes." She pointed towards Serena's vibrant, blood-red irises, to her awkward chagrin. "I like e'm. Are those contacts or prosthetics?"

"Contacts." Serena quickly - and harshly responded, as she reluctantly pulled the vicious, sanguine looking cocktail towards her. In truth, those red eyes of hers' were neither. They weren't naturally that way, either - she could still barely picture a reflection in the mirror that still had a dull, greyish blue gaze looking back at her. Those days were long over, and Serena just found herself shaking her head and reluctantly taking a drink of that vile cocktail she'd 'ordered', struggling not to flinch - and not to show relief. Her secret hadn't been sussed out of her yet.

She hadn't been... Fully human for a good while now. It wasn't her choice, really, but, when the chips came down onto the table, she wanted to live. It was a situation right out of one of her favourite horror novels, and, it was almost a bit alarming how dead on the money the bartender was. Serena idly ran her tongue over the sharp, canine incisors that she'd been fitted with that now defined her mouth, and cynically supposed there was little else you could call somebody who needed to drink blood to survive. She was a vampire, and there was no way to skirt around it.

Six weeks ago, she'd been diagnosed with a progressive, aggressive type of blood cancer and given three weeks to live. In spite of her clear lack of piety, however, someone had clearly been looking out for her and she'd received a miracle treatment that same day. Of course, it came with a price. The vampire just took a deep breath, her eyes irritably fixated on the sanguine-filled highball glass in front of her.

The nanotechnological augmentation that kept her going, that prevented the cancer from destroying her from the inside out, had an unfortunate side effect. It needed to break down and consume her blood for fuel, so, she needed to regularly... Top up. Serena just groaned, and took another drink of that horrid-tasting red liquid. She'd cheated death, but now she needed more life than ever...

'Was it worth the cost?', she thought someone might ask, and found herself bitterly laughing. After coming so close to death, she mused, anything was worth the cost. If she couldn't handle it, she'd probably have thrown herself into traffic or off a building, or, better yet - a bitter, ironic smile came onto her - go for 'the classic' and thrust a stake right through her heart. That'd probably do it. She wouldn't, though. She knew for certain she couldn't. She more than wanted to live, she absolutely needed to. After coming so close to death, she found herself brimming with a lust for life that just couldn't be suppressed, and a desire to, well, live it...

Serena found herself groaning, and shaking her head again, taking another drag off her cigarette to burn the taste of tomato juice out of her mouth. Well, she was trying to live it, anyways. With her new lease on life, she was making efforts to be less of a shut-in and be more social, ditching her old pastimes of shutting herself up in her apartment, reading horror novels and lurking on Strangeworld in favour of...

The vampire sharply exhaled a cloud of caustic smoke, almost as bitter as her expression. In favour of this. She spied a quick look around the nightclub, peering through the smoke over at all the patrons dancing, laughing, and generally having a good time. She'd hit a snag somewhere, and her need to keep her... Condition under wraps definitely wasn't helping.

Her bosses made it very clear, under threat of, well, termination in both senses of the word, to keep her sanguine needs under wraps. Obviously, the general public, even as numb as they were to the casual violations of natural order technology kept creating as it marched ever onward, would probably consider a blood-drinking monster to be a step too far. As a blood-drinking monster, Serena found it prudent to avoid being on the wrong side of an angry mob that might've been the pitchforks and torches variety a few centuries ago, but now would probably opt for night-vision goggles and machine guns.

The other reason was that her treatment was, in fact, a bleeding-edge nanotechnological augmentation, and if rival companies caught wind of what she was carrying inside her bloodstream, then they'd probably try to steal it... Out of her. Her bosses had decided to just leave it there and let her imagination run wild, but her colleague Gabriel had 'helpfully' demonstrated by cutting wildly into the air with a surgical scalpel in a reckless pantomime.

Needless to say - Serena took another drink of the indescribably vile cocktail she'd 'ordered', trying not to gag - it was something she didn't really want to contemplate. So, she dutifully kept her condition hidden. It'd been horrific at first, but now, six weeks on, it'd just been reduced to another source of stress in her life. Something she was trying - and largely failing - to get away from.

Serena took another drink, finding this one going down... Just a tiny bit easier. It was bad. Really bad. Absolutely not to her tastes at all, in spite of the way the bartender profiled her. The Bloody Mary, to her senses, appeared to be a theoretical intersection of tomato juice, vodka, and the entire contents of some Londoner's sauce cupboard. It tasted vile, meaty in a way no drink should, and it tasted absolutely nothing like its namesake.

The 'Blood' in Queen Mary's nickname was, clearly, all metaphorical. There was none of the... Vicious wetness, that pulsing feeling, the stickiness and persistent taste of iron that lingered in her mouth after, well, needing to resupply. Still... The vampire mused, as she took another drag off her cigarette. It was alcohol, and maybe it was what she needed to... Loosen up, at least for one night...

She exhaled deeply, blowing a streamer of smoke that mingled in with the nightclub's haze, and relaxed a bit. She could feel it's... Effects already working away at her mind like a beaker full of hydrochloric acid was slowly being poured over it. The nanites had were supposed to counter-act the mental effects of all the steroids and drugs they were manufacturing in her bloodstream, but a bit of experimentation on her part revealed they weren't quite as proof against the brain-killing effects of good o'l ethanol...

The vampire's stare unfocused and she let the cigarette hang in her mouth, and found herself leaning forwards over the bar once again, a heavy-lidded, inattentive look coming in her eyes as a sardonic, buzzed smile came onto her face. Maybe Gabriel programmed it that way on purpose, and she wasn't sure whether to thank him or call him out for it. Either way... Serena took another draught from her cocktail, finding each sip of that vile red stuff going down easier than the last, almost on the verge of being... Enjoyable. By the looks of things, getting hammered was probably her only chance of having a good time tonight, so, the vampire supposed, she'd better make it count.

Still, there was probably a limit to how much enjoyment she could really get from sitting at the bar, drinking and smoking like a soldier on liberty - which, she mused, she sort of was. A cursory glance around the room revealed her mistake - she was alone! Everyone else was hanging out with friends at the bar or at a table, or tearing it up with a partner on the dance floor, but here she was, a leather-clad wallflower, just lurking at the bar and drinking some horrifyingly bad concoction she most definitely did not order.

This was a sort of social thing she'd need a friend for, and about the only person she was even more than just casual acquaintances with was the aforementioned Dr. Gabriel McGarahann, the Bathrette researcher who'd installed the nanotechnological augmentation in her in the first place, and his relentless positivity and teasing attitude was something she got enough of in her work life.

Serena just groaned and took another draught of her cocktail, feeling the vodka already hard at work at eroding her senses and her stress, life slowing down a bit and things getting a lot... Heavier as she found herself already a little bit buzzed, and she wasn't even halfway finished with her drink... Maybe it was time to just throw in the towel, the vampire mused, as she took a very irritated drag off her cigarette, trying to burn the taste of tomato and Worcestershire sauce out of her mouth. She didn't really belong, and it was looking less and less likely she would even do anything tonight, and Serena found a niggling little voice at the back of her mind whispering for her to just go home, hopefully while she was still sober enough to drive.

There just didn't really feel like any chance of some whirlwind friendship or romance approaching her out of the fog. As much as this felt like her type of hangout on paper, a quick look at all the other girls pretty quickly communicated that she just wasn't one of them... The vampire just blew out another cloud of acrid cigarette smoke as she leaned forwards even further over the bar. Plus, from all the piercings and metal all the guys here were rocking, the whole club felt like a hub for those with mommy issues.

She was beginning to sort of check out from reality, lapsing into a very hazy, slightly drunk contemplation, nursing her vile-tasting drink and sort of just idly musing over all the mistakes and misfortunes that led her to this terrible idea. She didn't need to wallow in self-pity for too long, however, as she soon caught something out of the corner of her eye that piqued her interest.

All the way at the other side of the bar, the darkly-dressed bartender was talking with somebody, and normally Serena wouldn't have given a virtual rat's ass, but something about the new girl was... Well, especially after taking another draught of her Bloody Mary Serena was starting to struggle to put it into words, but something about her was ringing a bell in her head.

In stark contrast to the way she - or anyone in this club, really - was dressed, the new girl had vibrant, free flowing red hair down to her shoulders, wore a chic little sandy brown capelet coat and a matching bucket hat adorned with a ribbon, and framed her face with a pair of coquettish-looking squared-off eyeglasses. There was something about her that was really bothering Serena, for reasons she really couldn't put her finger on until the bartender turned towards the vampire, pointed, and presumably said, "Over there", and Serena's eyes went wide, the vampire nearly erupting into a vodka and paranoia-fuelled panic.

Instantly, a million questions flashed through her mind. Who the hell was she?! Was she looking for her?! Did she know her secret?! Was that a stake under her coat, or was she just seeing things?! The vampire's breathing picked up in pace, the cigarette in her hand nearly falling to the floor as her anxious and slightly drunk brain began rapid-fire thinking up contingencies.

If this was going to end in a fight, should she make a pre-emptive strike? Should she just jump out of her seat and run towards the door now? Should she wait for just a moment to see what this girl was up to before throwing the remnants of her awful drink in her would-be assailant's face?...

Of course, Serena didn't actually get to do any of that - mostly because she was a teeny bit tipsy and a bit deadlocked like a deer in the headlights, unable to think of a course of action, but also because, as the girl slowly approached, Serena's blind panic began to fade out and a confused and awkward smile came onto her face. She figured it out - how the girl caught her attention in the first place.

"Lisa?!" The vampire asked, somewhere between nonplussed and pleasantly surprised. In a place like this, where she most definitely didn't belong, a familiar face was definitely something... Unexpected.

The bespectacled girl just gave her a coquettish laugh and stole the seat right next to hers'. "I had a feeling I'd find you here, Serena." The dark-haired girl just looked a bit nervous and uncertain about... Well... Everything. Her face was obviously familiar - even for an old co-worker. It WAS a bit hard to forget someone who looked so... Pedestrian. Serena didn't want to be an ass, but Lisa had a sort of disarming next-door neighbour, plain-Jane look to her, like somebody you could probably lose in a crowd, with that pleasant childhood friend air about her. Somebody who, at age 24, you'd normally only distantly remember from girlhood days gone by.

However, when Lisa got up close Serena realized her acquaintance had... Changed a bit since they'd last spoken. Last she'd seen of Lisa, shortly before blacking out a few steps out of the elevator as her blood cancer was closing it's icy talons around her, the redhead's hair was kept in a rather neat ponytail, and as far as she'd known Lisa hadn't ever worn glasses. Serena brought that up, and in response, Lisa just took a deep breath and flicked a tress of hair, explaining, "I stopped wearing contacts when I transferred out of cybersecurity." That only made Serena look even more awkward, and she followed it up by adjusting her glasses and cracking a smile, saying, "Besides," The spy pointed at her own blood-red eyes. "You're sort of going for a new look too, aren't you?"

"Er..." Serena took another small, nervous sip of her drink, raising an eyebrow. "Yeah, I guess so but..." She paused for a second, fidgeting a bit in her seat, eyes darting back and forth over the bar and all the stacked bottles catching the dim, dingy lights as the realization crept up on her. "Wait a sec..." The vampire turned back over to her old co-worker. "You're not in cybersec anymore?"

"It's a bit of a long story, but you're," She cracked a wry grin, and pointed over towards the vampire sitting opposite her. "Not the only one who got a promotion around here."

"Huh?"

"Well, the short version is..." Lisa took a deep breath. "Well, there were a few vacancies in Information Retrieval and since the pay's better, well..." She laughed a bit. "I sent in my application, and... Here I am!"

Serena just shot her a heavy-lidded look. "So... What the hell's 'Information Retrieval?'"

"Information Retrieval's the intelligence division of the Corporate Security Department" Lisa answered, adjusting her spectacles a bit. "We're concerned with the acquisition and analysis of intelligence on elements both outside the company and within the company itself-"

"So it's the spy division, then?" The vampire sarcastically responded, and Lisa just sighed, a her expression growing just a bit irritated.

"Yes, it's the spy division." She bluntly confirmed, and Serena just groaned, and took another drink, though, this time it was less out of irritation or boredom and more out of a need to steady her nerves, a weird, disquieted feeling creeping up on her. Even as buzzed as she was, the vampire herself was still lucid enough to be a bit... Uncomfortable with that. She WAS keeping a pretty dangerous, heavy secret, after all, and the last thing she wanted was a spy coming over to suss it out. Serena took a deep breath, leaning back as far as the bar-stool would comfortably allow and chasing the taste of tomato out of her mouth with another drag on her cigarette. If her... Bosses didn't already tell her, anyways.

"So how much information do you know about me, then?" The vampire sarcastically asked, though, to her slight nervousness Lisa seemed to be taking it completely seriously, crossing her white stocking-clad leggings with a thumb against her chin as she actually gave it a bit of thought.

"Well, not THAT much, honestly." Lisa shrugged her shoulders again, and The vampire looked a bit relieved. So, she didn't know her secret then - unless she was lying - but Serena tried to compose herself. Now wasn't the time to get paranoid. It might show on her face.

"I don't mean to be an ass, Serena," Lisa continued, "but we didn't really talk too much when we worked together. I know you're with the Special Asset Protection Squad now, but that was just in the quick briefing I got before your boss sent me out to find you."

"Wait..." Serena's expression suddenly turned into a look of shock as she leaned forwards and exclaimed, "They sent you to find me?!"

"Weeeeeeeelllll..." Lisa just awkwardly laughed and scruffled up the back of her hair. "I mean, it's kinda more of a training mission than anything else - I'm still kinda getting shown the ropes of this whole 'spy' thing. Your boss needs to get in touch, and you weren't answering your phone, so they kinda sent me to come and get you."

"So how'd you know to find me here?"

"No offence," The spy cracked another wry smile. "But if you were gonna be anywhere in the city you were probably gonna be in this place." They both took a look around the dark, sinister atmosphere of the nightclub. "I mean, you're kind of a moody sort of person-"

"I'm not freaking moody!" Serena snapped, feeling a bit indignation at the accusation, and Lisa just shook her head, a heavy-lidded stare coming onto her face as she pointed towards Serena's libation.

"Come on, look at what you ordered." She replied, cracking a sardonic grin, and Serena just groaned, choler on her tongue.

There was a long, awkward silence - between them, at least - before the vampire just decided it wasn't really worth explaining it or lashing out at her old co-worker, and just replied, "Touché." before taking another swig from her sanguine concoction. "So, what was so important they had to send somebody down to come and get me?"

Lisa needed to pause for a second, the red-headed spy just taking a few moments of contemplation as Serena fidgeted in her seat, wondering exactly what sort of bad news she was going to get before Lisa just tore the bandage off and said, "Well, they didn't tell me, but they need you back at The Castle. STAT."

Serena just looked a bit flabbergasted, eyes wide, stopped dead in her tracks like a particularly dumbfounded statue before just taking a deep breath and groaning, "Are you freaking kidding me? On my night off?!"

"Nope." Lisa bluntly responded. "Not kidding."

The vampire just shot her an irritated, surly frown, her cigarette hanging precariously from her lips. "Did they really not tell you what was so important I don't get time off because of it?"

"They probably would have told you if you'd picked up your phone." Lisa replied with a heavy-lidded stare, and Serena just sighed once again and took another drink of that foul, tomato-y concoction she'd 'ordered'. Her phone was an older model, and the battery had a bad habit of just dying spontaneously on her, but she didn't feel like making excuses now.

"And I guess I don't have the option to tell them to buzz off?"

"You'd probably have to make that demand in person." The red-haired spy bluntly replied, and the dark-haired blood-drinking commando just shook her head, the irritation and choler drained from her face, replaced with resigned despair. So, her night off had been a complete wash, then. Serena took a deep breath to brace herself, and, to Lisa's shock, pinched her nose and just slammed that Bloody Mary back like a warrior of some ancient tribal culture performing a vicious, sanguine ritual to grant them strength in battle. She'd definitely need that tonight.

\*CLINK\* The hollow, glassy sound of the glass was just one more noise against the cacophony inside the nightclub, but to Serena's slightly alcohol-addled perception at least it seemed to ring a lot louder and just turning her head was giving her an odd, almost detached feeling, a small mote of laughter escaping her lips as she realized her mistake. "Crap..." She mused aloud.

"Are you drunk?" Lisa inquired, and Serena just laughed her off, to her simultaneous irritation, worry, and bewilderment.

"No, No, I'm nooot!..." The vampire took a deep breath. It was a lie, but a little white lie. The cocktail... Might've been made a bit stronger than she expected.

Serena found herself somewhere on the precipice of going from buzzed to outright drunk, and one more drop of vodka would probably do it. Showing up to whatever emergency her bosses had planned while two sheets to the wind wouldn't look good at all. Doubly so if it was actually something important... She'd need to fix this, and fast... "HEY!" The ever-so-slightly drunk vampire girl turned back towards the bar, peering her red eyes into the darkness and the smoke for a figure clad in a slutty dark dress. "BARTENDER!"

Lisa's eyes went wide, the spy ever quick on the mental draw, though, she wasn't quite quick enough to stop Serena from raising her hand up to wave the mistress of libations over, neither black-haired girl really caring so much that she was busy pulling Serena's hand back down - or, trying to, anyways. Serena's nanite-enhanced constitution, coupled with all the training she'd been subjected to meant by now trying to pull Serena's strong arm - surprisingly muscular underneath her leather sleeve - was a bit like trying to move a car. The spy barely had enough time to look confused before a look of horror overtook her as Serena yelled out, "I have to get back to work! Got anything that'll sober me up?"

"I mean," The bartender just smiled, and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know if it'll sober you up, but I can definitely get you something for a long night."

Lisa, letting go of Serena's arm as the whole situation seemed to slip right out of her control, just groaned, and leaned in over the table, hands holding up her head as she mused, "Why me?..."

"Almost there, Serena..." Lisa said, smiling but sounding a bit irritated, as she had the less than enviable job of needing to keep a now definitely drunk, heavier than she was expecting vampire girl on her feet and right back to 'The Castle'. That'd been the informal nickname for the large, highly secure main offices of Bathrette Beautronics, and one look at it's towering spires and imposing battlements against the night sky would easily explain the moniker. Unable to fit the both of them - and it's owner being in zero condition to operate anything more dangerous than a can opener regardless - Serena's motorbike was right out, and they ended up needing to take the bus.

"Okay, okay..." The drunken vampire girl replied, sticking a hand out to try and catch herself if she fell, her legs feeling horrifically unsteady underneath her, weeks of combat training to move as efficiently as possible having seemingly been blasted right out her with a bit of hard liquor. She wasn't really sure what the hell was in that ominous looking coffee-coloured concoction The Bartender had called a "Randall No. 2 Special" since she and Lisa had some very horrible timing and turned away from the bar to argue right as the ingredients were being mixed.

Contrary to her expectations, it didn't sober her up at all - far the opposite, actually. She felt three sheets to the wind, and whatever ELSE was in there had her heart feeling like it was about to explode right out of her chest, a wired-up feeling of energy buzzing through her body, much like she'd felt the first time she'd woken up after being 'treated'. The depressant feeling of the alcohol and the energizement of something 'a bit like X-spresso, but kicked up a few notches' weren't exactly mixing well, and she felt conflicted between wanting to collapse into a nearby cubicle to sleep this off, or have a panic attack and start screaming at the things in the walls. "One sec, one sec..."

"Come on, steady girl..." The spy was definitely trying her best to keep things under control, as, one rough, unsteady step at a time, they'd gone from stumbling into the lobby and catching funny looks, all the way to the labyrinthine, starkly-lit corridors of the Security Department, which had reminded Serena more of a military base than any office she'd seen in her time, closer and closer to the Special Asset Protection Squad's wing, and to her - new - boss' office.

All the while, Serena was desperately taking in deep gulps of stale air, trying to sober up apparently through sheer force of will alone. The SAPS Commander was absolutely not somebody you reported drunk to, saying the least.

It felt like an eternity to Serena's booze-addled mind, though, to Lisa it was thankfully much more mercifully short. She'd gotten the vampire right up to the heavy double-doors to the SAPS' parade ground, helped the vampire hold up her ID card to the very weary and bewildered and foul-tempered looking guard posted outside, and helped navigate her around the rather small parade square and up a flight of stairs to the commander's office, all the while Serena was just nervously laughing to herself, and Lisa, caught somewhere between irritation and pity -the vampire WAS sacrificing her only night off to be here, after all - just found herself trying to reassure her colleague, whispering, "Calm down, calm down, you'll be fine..."

Of course, she was right, just not in a way either of them would have possibly been able to anticipate. Serena rather unsteadily knocked on her commanders' door and received a rough-sounding, "Enter!" from inside.

When vampire did, the spy trailing nervously behind her, she was barely even able to take a single step into the office before she locked up, eyes completely wide and her expression somehow even paler, a look of nervous, awkward bewilderment plastered on right her face. The vampire immediately sobered up in a way that would otherwise require a good night's sleep, a large mug of X-Caff, a greasy breakfast plate and a smack in the face. Serena actually could have sworn she felt a \*crack\* in her psyche as she was thrown violently back onto the wagon.

"Well?" Vincent Van Steyr just gave her an expectant look, as the middle-manager motioned for her to enter with a gesture of his hand. "Serena, don't just stand there."

"Why!?- " Serena stammered, "How?!-"

"Just sit down." Commander Sikorski cut her off, waving in with a stern look on his face, and, audibly taking in a gulp of air, Serena nervously complied, finding an empty seat in the stark, militarized-looking commander's office and making herself as comfortable as she possibly could - which wasn't much. Sikorski - and Serena didn't know his first name, nor did he care to tell her - was, as she mused earlier, not a man to be kept waiting.

Her actual boss had a very stern, uncompromising appearance and a chiselled-looking face with the harsh, almost hawkish features of Eastern Europe, and practically oozed with military bearing from the way he sat sharply upright in his seat and the immaculate nature of the blood red-coloured beret he wore over a dark buzz-cut rather than the usual peaked caps of the Security Force, though, he still wore one of their long, woollen overcoats, and the obviously artificial green eye in his right socket and the metal hand poking from his right sleeve betrayed some prior horrific injury that had done little in the way to slow him down.

"So... Well..." Lisa took a deep breath, and nervously adjusted the fashionable little bucket-hat she wore. "Good luck, you three, on whatever-"

"You too, Lisa." Vincent piped in, and both girls almost turned white - Serena moreso, due to her already somewhat pale complexion. "It'll be better," The middle-manager in charge of R&D's Special Projects Division turned over to the Special Forces' commander, raising an eyebrow. "To have one of the intelligence eggheads on this too, won't it?"

The two men were... Almost diametrically opposed in demeanour, Sikorski being of the sort to explode into a choleric, profanity-filled ranting session to make any drill instructor of the Federal Marines' shed a tear in pride, while Mr. Van Steyr was of a more taciturn, cold, detached and dispassionate sort, the very image of your typical obstinate middle-manager type on the surface with his agonizingly neat dark brown hair, slightly wrinkled black waistcoat and slacks over a white dress shirt, who could - and did - order her to tear the throat from a victim of hers' as calmly as if he were just asking her to fetch some coffee.

Yet, by some miracle of the universe, Serena somehow felt like they were getting along pretty well, and that... She tugged her collar a bit. Sort of disturbed her. She wasn't really sure whether the Hellish inferno or the Stygian blizzard were worse - it was looking like she and Lisa were both between the hammer and the anvil now...

"I dunno about her..." Sikorski shot Lisa a look from out of the corner of his eye, and the red-haired girl just fidgeted a bit. "She's still pretty green, too. I dunno if we should have something that sensitive in the hands of those two trainees."

"I guess this whole thing can double as a training mission, but I wouldn't worry too much about it, Commander." The middle-manager responded, pointing over towards Serena. "I think I've told you already, but she's the best agent we've got." Serena wasn't really sure whether to feel proud or very nervous about that.

"We'll have to see how she handles a real mission." The Commander responded, sizing her up, his tone audibly reluctant - they'd both seen the results gathered from her training, but the vampire had quickly come to know Sikorski was of a more conservative outlook, unwilling to believe in the efficacy of anything unless he'd seen it proven, which...

Serena took a deep breath. Was probably what they were looking to do. She shot a quick look over towards the spy, who, by now was a bit sick of standing in the doorway and being the centre of attention and reluctantly took the folding chair right next to hers'. Lisa just looked really awkward and almost a bit nervous about being roped into this, and Serena couldn't help but feel sorry for her. After all, she was by no fault of her own, getting dragged into the presumably upcoming shitshow that was her night off.

"Believe me," Vincent replied. "I want this resolved as quickly and cleanly as possible. I wouldn't have put forward anyone I didn't have confidence in for this mission, though I understand your concerns, commander..." The middle-manager took a deep breath, and produced a dataslate, fiddling with it as he added. "I'll have one of my most reliable men assigned to supervise them. Everything should go... Smoothly."

"Er-" Serena piped up, though, she was interrupted with Sikorski just loudly cleared his throat, immediately grabbing the centre of attention as he planted a dataslate on the surface of his dark, worn-looking oaken desk, and motioned for Serena to pick it up.

"This," The Commander introduced the figure who's file photograph occupied the device's screen, Serena and Lisa both looking over it, the spy now curious but the vampire began to look a bit concerned - even suspicious. There was something about that gnarled, grizzled old man with thinning gray hair and a large, drooping moustache that was setting off a ton of alarm bells in her head, for reasons she couldn't quite pin down. "Is Doctor Hendrick Adolphus Lazerian. Ex-Department of Special Projects."

Serena raised an eyebrow, and looked up from the dataslate in her hands to the commander, intrigued and concern plain as day on her face. "Ex?..."

"He left the company." Vincent explained, an irritated, displeased, look on his face. "About six weeks ago - right before the... Events that led to your promotion, he... Walked out on us."

"Isn't that a breach of his contract?" Lisa asked, and the middle manager just took a deep breath.

"It is." Vincent explained, taking a deep breath. "Due to the... Sensitive material Dr. Lazerian was working with, his contract stipulates he isn't allowed to resign with Bathrette Beautronics or accept an offer of employment from another company under pain of liquidation and a prolonged and extremely painful lawsuit-"

"Wait, wait a second, lets' take a step back, here..." The vampire piped in, feeling a nervous sort of hunch welling up inside her. "What do you mean, 'left?' Like, did he actually sign up with another company or something?-"

"I literally mean, 'he left'." Vincent just groaned, and shook his head. "He just up and stopped coming into work one day, and nobody even noticed his laboratory was empty until the janitorial staff unsealed it for cleaning and found... Well..." The middle-manager just took a deep breath, and broke eye contact for a second, looking away and tugging his collar. "That's not exactly here nor there, is it?"

Serena just raised an eyebrow, the vampire finding herself a bit perturbed by that. "The point is," Her 'boss' continued, "Dr. Lazerian up and vanished, and we need you two to find him and drag him back here before he spills his guts. Or discloses any compromising information."

"Er..." Lisa raised an index finger, looking a bit concerned. "If Dr. Lazerian vanished six weeks ago, why are we only being sent after him now?" At that, both The commander and the middle-manager just groaned, and, both men operating on the same mental wavelength of resigned irritation, just shook their heads."

"There was a clerical error." Sikorski explained, shaking his head, and a pair of awkward, anxious smiles came on both Serena and Lisa's faces. "The retrieval order only came on my desk about two hours ago."

"What." They flatly responded in unison, both girls operating on the same mental wavelength of bewildered confusion, and Vincent just took a deep breath and leaned in over his chair towards them, the annoyed and weary look on his face showing he was no happier than they were to know of this.

"Yes, well, between the ongoing budget cuts and restructuring in R&D and the number of other, more..." The middle-manager shot a knowing look at Serena, who just sighed. "Pressing issues to deal with in the immediacy, I'm afraid a little bureaucratic backlog is just an unfortunate inevitability of the situation." The vampire just shot him a funny look - she felt like he was really understating things. "Now then, I shouldn't keep you here any longer, but..." The middle-manager looked down to his wristwatch as an impatient, slightly displeased look came onto his face, "Where the hell is he?-"

\*Pound! Pound! Pound!\* Came a loud rapping at the office door, and Vincent's face lit right back up, as Serena and Lisa both looked a bit dubious at how well that timing was. "Enter!" The commander harshly barked, and Serena turned around just in time for a familiar looking bespectacled face to enter through the opened doorway, an awkward, unpleasant smile on her face as Gabriel waved to her, visibly quite out of breath as though he'd ran all the way here from Research and Development at a top sprint, which, Serena had come to know the man to do.

"Hey!" He greeted them all with a wave of the hand and an energetic, upbeat smile on his face, and Serena just took a deep, slightly irritated breath, even though she had a warm smile on hers'. Over the course of her... Initial transformation into something both more and less than human, she'd come to be quite reasonably acquainted with the ponytailed scientist, his rather bizarre fashion sense, and his slightly irritating, but uplifting attitude. She had to admit, though, she wasn't exactly sad when he was absent. It wasn't that she didn't get along with him - far from it, but the admittedly sort of gloomy vampire girl just found his overpowering optimism and playful demeanour to be... Irritating and overpowering, to say the least. "Sorry if I'm a bit late, the guy out-front was giving me a hard time..."

"You're just in time, Doctor." Vincent coldly replied, having settled back into his usual managerial indifference. "Serena, I don't think you and him need any introduction, but," The middle-manager paused, clearing his throat as

he turned over towards the slightly bewildered-looking red-haired spy. "Sorry, I don't actually think we've been acquainted either, miss."

"Er-" Lisa just stammered awkwardly a bit, before Sikorski just loudly cleared his throat once again.

"This." The commander somewhat irritably gestured over towards her. "Is Lisa Klauetzer, she's with Information Retrieval, and she'll be the intelligence officer for this mission."

"Nice to meet you, Lisa!" Gabriel leaned in and extended a hand, cracking an earnest, though slightly wry smile, and the red-haired spy just rather awkwardly took it.

"Nice to meet you too, I guess... Doctor." Lisa responded, and Serena just looked on, her expression slightly bewildered and slightly sardonic.

"As I was saying," Vincent continued, gesturing back towards Gabriel. "This is Dr. Gabriel McGarahann." He said, and Serena took the opportunity to size up her acquaintance once more - he hadn't really changed much from the last time she'd seen him.

Gabriel still looked alot like he'd just rolled out of bed, with messy brown hair drawn back into a ponytail and a pair of short sideburns framing his face, dressed in a labcoat draped over a wrinkled blue dress shirt half-tucked into a pair of jeans, contrasted by a vibrant, multi-hued, tie-dyed necktie that altogether gave the vampire more the impression of a burned-out hippie as opposed to a renowned biotechnologist with three doctorates, and a bane of the Grim Reaper, but... She just sighed, and took another look at her hand, rendered a bit more pale than healthy by her... Treatment. She couldn't exactly deny he was good at what he did. "He'll be your liaison from the Special Projects department for this mission."

Serena and Gabriel exchanged stares, the vampire's cynical and slightly displeased, and the scientists' almost a bit playful. They both knew that he was here more to keep an eye on Serena specifically than anything else - after that last... Breach of secrecy, the vampire cynically mused, Vincent probably didn't entirely trust her to be able to... Keep everything under wraps, or keep herself under control.

"Now then," The middle-manager pointed towards the door. "We've been delaying this for long enough. I want you three to resolve this issue as quickly and neatly as possible. Get your sidearms from the armoury, find that deadbeat, and bring him to us, ASAP."

"Dead or alive." Came the Sikorski's harsh, no-nonsense order.

"We'd prefer alive, for the record." Vincent coldly and sardonically added. "But-

"Yeah..." Lisa piped up, her tone and her demeanour turning a bit nervous and reserved. "Is this the sort of mission where we're gonna be, you know..." She nervously adjusted her spectacles. "Shooting people?"

"That depends on who he's working with, and whether or not he comes quietly." Sikorski bluntly responded, while the vampire raised an eyebrow, a... Disturbing possibility crawling up on her.

"And what if he's not working with anyone?" Serena asked, and Vincent just took a deep breath.

"It means we have bigger problems." The middle-manager pessimistically replied, and the two exchanged a knowing, uncomfortable glance, the vampire and her quasi-superior on the same wavelength for once. It was a possibility they were both hoping wouldn't be the case.

"Geez, he really cleared this place out..." Serena mused, stretching out a bit as she took a long look around Dr. Lazerian's one-room apartment, flinching as the gunbelt concealed under her jacket dug into her side a bit - The vampire still found herself unused to it's presence. She was sorely hoping she wouldn't need to make use of it, especially since shooting straight was something that, much as she didn't want to admit, STILL eluded her after all these weeks.

"No duh..." Lisa couldn't help but just stare into the emptiness of it all, somewhere between irritated and genuinely surprised. She'd said coming here would probably be useless, since it HAD been six weeks since Lazerian disappeared. Though... The redhead put her index finger to her chin, staring contemplatively into the peeling wallpaper. "Well..."

"Well, what?" Serena replied, turning over towards her, a bit visibly displeased. They had to start their search somewhere, and, given this was her idea, she wasn't too pleased to see so far, it was a dead end. The place was absolutely empty. Just a faux hardwood floor, a stucco ceiling, four walls of musty, peeling red wallpaper, and a small window overlooking the dismal streets outside. It was even worse than her old apartment, and that was saying something.

"It's... I wasn't really expecting it to be empty." Lisa shrugged her shoulders, a very perturbed look on her face, though, Serena just groaned.

"Yeah, I was hoping he'd been nice enough to leave us a clue." The vampire sardonically replied, kicking a bit of dust around with her black leather riding boots. This didn't exactly leave her in a particularly good mood. The trail was already looking dead before they'd even begun. In lieu of any idea where to start looking, Serena had figured starting their search at his last known address would have revealed SOMETHING, but... She took a deep, weary exhale, and leaned back against one of the walls, crossing her arms and just pouting a little bit. That had just been a load of wishful thinking, hadn't it?

"Well, that's just it, isn't it?" The spy replied, leaning into the window and looking down over the downtrodden, rough-looking streets below, barely illuminated by old, warm orange lamps, cutting into the night with a distinctive hazy glow. The spy's expression and her demeanour were both heavily focused and contemplative, the little wheels turning in her head, and Serena found herself raising an eyebrow, intrigued. "This place shouldn't BE empty."

"Huh?"

"Think about it." Lisa turned her head over her shoulder towards her. "It's been six weeks, hasn't it? You'd think the landlady would have rented the place out to somebody else by now, right?"

"Yeah..." Serena replied, suddenly looking very sharp and thoughtful, a little 'eureka' moment firing in her head, as she snapped her fingers. "That is pretty weird." In a city as overpopulated as this one, the vampire knew any rental suite larger than a room at one of those coffin hotels was in hot demand. She had to wait for YEARS on a waiting list to get that crappy old apartment she used to live in, so this suite still being empty after six weeks...

She took a deep breath, turning away to the window, peering past Lisa into the graffiti-covered streets below. Well, that just raised more questions than answers, didn't it? "Do you think it has something to do with him disappearing?" The vampire asked.

Contrary to her expectations, Lisa just took a deep breath and shook her head, disappointed. "I doubt it." She responded. "It's weird but in all likelihood, it's just a coincidence. Those sorts of things don't happen in real life, you know."

Serena, who found herself turned into a horror-novel monster six weeks ago, couldn't really keep a rather harsh look off her face. "And what if it's not a coincidence?" She asked. "What if they're connected?"

"Well..." Lisa took a few moments to contemplate what that meant, and found herself suddenly looking very uncomfortable. "Then, well..." She took a deep breath, adjusting her spectacles reflexively.

"It means we've got a really big problem, doesn't it?" Serena finished that sentence, not exactly happy about it. The mission was already giving her a bad feeling, and her gut was telling her it was only going to get worse from here.

There was a bit of an awkward pause between the two of them, before Lisa just took a look another look around the empty apartment. "So..."

"Nothing left for us to do, huh?" Serena replied, stretching her arms out once again. "Lets' go see if Gabriel's had better luck."

Unfortunately, the way Gabriel just shrugged his shoulders and dejectedly exhaled as the girls entered the warmly-lit, cream-coloured apartment lobby didn't exactly fill Serena with confidence. "Nothing." He said, with a weary, awkward grin, and the vampire just groaned. "Mrs. Rosalyn, here." He gestured over towards the lady standing next to him, a rather pleasant, matronly-looking older woman with neat, wispy white hair and sharp blue eyes, "Doesn't have a lead on our man, either."

"I really wish I could help you youngsters, but..." Mrs Rosalyn - the landlady - just shook her head. Serena was already... Well, faintly acquainted with her - they'd last spoken about ten minutes ago, when they'd arrived, and it was her who - after a bit of prodding - gave them permission to search Lazerian's apartment in the first place. Probably because of just how worthless it'd be to them, the vampire cynically mused. "Like I said, Dr. Lazerian and all his things just up and vanished a few weeks ago." She explained, her voice warm and understanding, with a tiny bit of a southern 'twang to it. "Didn't even bother to leave a forwarding address."

"Well..." Serena rather blankly replied, the neurons in her head finding themselves badly locked up in irritation and disappointment, which she was really hoping weren't showing on her face. "That's... Err..." Although, she locked up a bit, trying to express her frustrations in a way that wouldn't be, well... 'rude.' Somehow, it just felt wrong to swear in front of an old lady. "It's irritating." She finally said, a bit disappointed in herself, and Mrs. Rosalyn just sighed.

"It really must be annoying for you kids." The landlady responded, with a bit of a slightly joking, but mostly irritating tone, and a deep sigh. "It's definitely been for me - it feels like nothings' been going right since that weird old man up and skipped town or wherever he's off to." She punctuated the point with a dismissive wave of her hand, though, it looked far from dismissive, and Serena found herself a bit curious at that.

"Nothings' been going right?" The vampire raised an eyebrow. It might have just been idle curiosity - or idle paranoia - but, with as little as they'd had to go on, Serena felt like anything they could find would be useful, no matter how... She groaned a bit to herself as the thought crept up on her. No matter how debatably relevant it might be.

"Well," Mrs. Rosalyn just laughed sardonically, as she shrugged her shoulders exasperatedly. "Where to begin?" She half-joked. "I've been picking up constant interference on the net, I've caught suspicious-looking characters coming and going at ridiculous times, and I haven't been able to rent out a single apartment for a few weeks!"

Serena's red eyes lit up at that, a sharp, attentive look coming onto her face, rather neatly mirrored by Lisa's very curious expression, both girls found themselves piping up at once, "You haven't been able to rent out-

"-Lazerian's apartment?" Though, they differed in the way their exclamations ended. Serena, a bit focused on their quarry, was more concerned about Dr. Lazerian himself, but Lisa had noticed something potentially more pressing.

"-Any apartment?" Lisa finished, and Serena suddenly looked a bit concerned - and ashamed of herself. That... Was... Probably more serious, she mused.

The landlady just shook her head again. "Believe me, I've been trying." She explained. "The rest of my tenants, they've got iron-clad contracts and ain't going anywhere, but whenever someone new comes in, I can barely get them to have a look around the place and talk about the lease before they catch wind of all the weird stuff that's been going on here, and they're out like the tax men jumped out of the walls!

"Maybe we should talk a bit more about that..." Serena added, a bad feeling beginning to roll up in her gut.

"I mean..." Mrs. Rosalyn just tugged uncomfortably at her collar. "Are you cops?"

"No, Ma'am." Gabriel cheerfully cut in, saving Serena the need to think of a lie - and she'd been embarrassingly caught a bit flat-footed at that question in the first place. "We're private investigators." That just made the vampire give him a very funny, agitated sort of look, but somehow, it calmed Rosalyn down a bit, and she just laughed a bit, before taking a deep breath.

"Oh, there's really no skipping around it." She explained. "There's been a few disappearances in the neighbourhood lately." That instantaneously grabbed the intrepid trio's attention.

"It's been mostly drifters and gangsters, but... Well..." She half-jokingly added, looking out the lobby's glassy doors out into the rough, run-down neighbourhood outside, it's faded, poorly maintained road somehow looking even worse under the dim, orange streetlamps overhead. "That's just making everyone else who lives here worried that they're gonna be next. You combine that with all the weird characters coming and going around, and there's a full-blown panic in the works."

"What sort of 'weird characters?'" Serena asked, and the landlady just turned back to her, a somewhat sardonic look on her face.

"Believe me, when I say 'weird characters' I'm not talking about the usual thugs or punks or whatever." She rather curtly responded. "These guys pop up every so often and they stick out like a sore thumb. They're usually lurking in and around the property and meeting up with people for... Well..." She took a deep breath. "I'm not even sure. I watch them on the security cameras and at first I thought they were selling drugs, but not a cent changed hands. They usually just talk for a while and disappear somewhere."

The vampire just raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

The landlady just shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, some crazy esoteric babble, whenever they're not just whispering to each-other or passing notes over a dataslate. I think they're speaking in code - they might be onto the fact that I'm watching them."

"Have you gone to the police, yet?" Lisa asked, and Mrs. Rosalyn just laughed at that.

"Dear, would YOU want to deal with Monty's Mounties?" The landlady sardonically responded. "As far as I'm concerned, those weirdos aren't a problem until somebody gets stabbed, and I doubt those rent-a-cops could find a joygirl in a joyhouse." She laughed a bit. "Pardon my French."

There was a bit of a pause, until Gabriel just cleared his throat. "So, do you think Dr. Lazerian could be behind any of that?"

The landlady just shrugged her shoulders. "Of course, I can't say for sure, but, you know, when you get to my age you start knowing how to see patterns."

"Whenever something really weird starts happening in this city, I'd bet currency to churros that some crazy corporate scientist is behind it." She said. "And he was pretty crazy."

Serena just raised an eyebrow. "How crazy?"

"Well, maybe not so much 'crazy' as 'eccentric.'" Rosalyn elaborated, and Gabriel just nervously tugged at his collar. "The man was a bit of a recluse. If he wasn't out at work, he was always in his apartment, working on... Whatever it was. I got a look inside his unit once - the whole place was filled with terminals and diagrams and whiteboards to the point where even I thought it was excessive! He didn't much like me getting a look at it, either. Just muttered something about how I'd never understand it."

The landlady just puffed a bit, both hands on her hips. "The nerve of him!... I don't really have any evidence-" In this way, Serena bitterly mused, they were alike. "But I wouldn't put it past him to be making people disappear."

"So, why'd you rent out to him in the first place?" Lisa asked.

"Because he had money and it was as good as anyone else's, that's why." The landlady snarkily replied. "When he paid up, anyways. Getting his rent payments was like pulling teeth."

"Pretty tightfisted, huh?" Gabriel cracked in.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe how bad it was!" Mrs. Rosalyn just laughed at that. "It got to the point where I had to start threatening to hack into his computers to get him to pay up - now, I was a real hotshot console cowgirl back in my day," She explained, a proud smile coming onto her face, and Serena finding herself a bit... Reassured. Like she was with a kindred spirit of sorts. "And I can still hack pretty damn good, so that definitely got to him. He always ponied up after that..."

"Was he trying to hide something?" Lisa asked.

The landlady just shrugged her shoulders again. "Wouldn't know. I was only bluffing."

"It probably has something to do with why he left, then." Serena added in, a rather sour look on her face. No wonder Lazerian took everything with him, she thought.

"It could be." Lisa piped in, adjusting her spectacles a bit. "What about those weirdos who keep popping up?"

"Them?" Mrs. Rosalyn just shrugged her shoulders again. "Can't see a single way how they're connected with Lazerian, but at this point I'm just about willing to believe anything until I get proof otherwise."

"It..." Serena took a deep breath. "Might be worth a shot looking into, can you give us a call if they turn up again?"

"Good idea, dear." The landlady warmly replied, taking out a small dataslate from her pocket and quickly writing down Serena's E-mail address and phone number. "Just make sure you sort those reprobates out good, 'ya hear?"

"If Serena remembers to charge her phone this time." Lisa found herself snidely piping up, and Serena had to fight down a very choleric, irritated look on her face when she heard Gabriel laughing a bit.

"We'll..." The vampire just groaned, and shook her head. "Look, yeah. I'll keep my phone charged, and..." She needed to take a moment to think about what she was agreeing to. If all these mysterious events WERE connected to Lazerian, the way she was assuming - because that was the only thing they had to go on - then no harm done. That WAS their job, wasn't it?

If there wasn't a connection, and they were just random, regular garden variety weirdos?... Well... Serena just shrugged her shoulders again. Well, then what was wrong with helping a nice old lady keep local hooligans off her property? Mrs. Rosalyn sort of reminded her of her grandmother, a distant, hazy, but warm figure somewhere in the back of her mind, and... A small smile came on her face. "Sure. We'll chase them off for you."

"Well..." Gabriel took a deep breath, and adjusted his tie, changing the subject and saying, "I think that's just about everything, isn't it?" He turned over to Serena, and flashed a reassuringly irritating smile. "Do you wanna call it a night?"

Serena found herself a bit shocked at that - and a bit indignant under the surface, too. This whole situation was just weirding her out by the minute, and the more she learned about it, the worse it got. Already the whole scenario made her uneasy, and the vampire had a very bad feeling that the longer they put off actually tracking down Dr. Lazerian, the worse things were gonna get. She turned over towards the eccentric scientist, extended her index finger in a gesture of import, opened her mouth-

\*YAAAAAAAAAAAAAWN...\*

Unfortunately, her body didn't exactly agree with that assessment, and Serena rather suddenly became aware of just how late it was. Despite her nanite-enhanced physical abilities, Serena still needed regular sleep, and the wry smile on Gabriel's face and the way Lisa needed to visibly suppress a snicker just hammered that home.

"Fine." The vampire grouchily responded, crossing her arms and pouting a bit. That guy was annoying enough, she mused, when he wasn't right all the time...

"So..." Serena just cleared her throat, a somewhat dejected and grouchy look coming onto the vampire's face as the three colleagues briskly walked on down the cracked and poorly maintained sidewalks of Claycroft, the rather rough and tumble neighbourhood where Lazerian used to live. From her observations though, it was fairly nice as far as lower-class parts of the city were.

It was run down and shabby and you ran the risk of having your purse or your throat cut, yeah, but the streetlights all worked, you could catch a bus or a train to somewhere nicer for work, there were a few handy shops and businesses around, and it was far enough from any big hotspots of gang violence so you only really needed to worry about small-time local toughs. Overall, not a bad place, and she could see why Lazerian would deign to live here. Still, relatively nice as it was, it couldn't mask the fact that- "We didn't figure out anything at all, then." She irritably finished her sentence.

"Well, we sort of did." Gabriel piped in, ever the optimist, trying to find the silver lining behind every cloud that simultaneously irritated and reassured his vampiric colleague, though, tonight she wasn't really sure which one it was. "We figured out a bunch of stuff about Lazerian, and the way he lived - not to mention the disappearances and those," There was a very brief pause, before the eccentric scientist just cracked a wry smile and did the accompanying finger-quote gesture to emphasize "Weirdos." In a way that just made Serena shoot him a heavy-lidded stare.

"Which might not even be connected to Lazerian in the first place." Lisa added, though, from the tone of her voice, she wasn't too sure herself. Maybe Serena's paranoia was already rubbing off on her, the vampire sardonically mused.

"What do you think, Serena?" The eccentric scientist asked, stretching his arms out a bit as he turned towards the very moody looking commando. "Do you think there's a connection?"

All Serena could really do was shrug her shoulders. "It's worth a shot." She replied. "Like I said, we've got nothing else."

After they'd left the apartments - which, Serena learned thanks to a timely look over her shoulder, were called the 'Santa Monica Apartments.' She couldn't fathom why, since Santa Monica was on the other side of the continent, but she hadn't exactly felt like going back and asking. All that was left to do was walk down to the train station. It wasn't far - only a few blocks away. The trains in this sprawling, neon and gargoyle-covered city, at the very least, could be counted on to run on time. With how complicated and convoluted - and in a few places, multi-levelled and multi-tiered the roads were, bus service was irregular, gripped by delays, and, in her experience, didn't stop in rougher parts of the city after dark.

Claycroft might not have been in the grip of gang violence like the neighbourhoods to the south were, but you could tell from the austere, weathered concrete and brick buildings, the bars on windows and razor wire topping walls and fences, this was still a dodgy part of town. The graffiti everywhere and the cracks in the weathered, poorly maintained road and sidewalks didn't help either. Still... The vampire took a deep breath, exhaling a cloud of condensation into the late-fall air. She wasn't exactly on edge.

Okay, she'd had that attitude in a situation once before and it ended about as badly as it could have without them having to lower her into the ground, but things were pretty different tonight. She wasn't just a blood-drinking horror with the strength of ten men. She also has two friends, and - Serena patted her jacket, finding the weight of the gunbelt still slightly chafing underneath - an actual weapon this time. She wasn't even really worried about random thugs, either - not when she had Lazerian and the weird things he might be involved with at the back of her mind.

"Well, what else could we go on?" Gabriel asked, trying to inject a bit of hope and energy into the conversation, though, judging by the way Serena groaned he wasn't doing a very good job of it.

"I have no clue." The vampire frankly admitted. "The one thing we had to go on was the stupid dossier on that dataslate they gave us, and it was less useful than toilet paper. All it had was the address and basically nothing that could help us track him down." Serena groaned, a very foul, suspicious heavy-lidded look coming onto her face as she turned over to the somewhat awkward-looking scientist beside her and said, "I really freaking hope that they didn't give us intel this useless on purpose."

"It could be," The eccentric scientist paused for a second, adjusting his glasses as a bitter, cold late-fall breeze barrelled down the streets, ruffling hair and scarves as it went. "That's about all they know. If our bosses already knew where Lazerian was," He cracked a wry smile. "Do you really think they'd have sent us to find him?"

Serena just deeply sighed, a cloud of condensation hanging in the air in front of her. "Point taken."

"So what do we do now, then?" Lisa asked.

"Get some-" Serena found herself deeply yawning once again, punctuating the point. "Sleep, obviously."

The red-haired spy just rolled her eyes. "I meant after that."

"Well..." The black-haired commando paused, taking a few moments to think before just sighing and responding. "I think we're just gonna have to go and do some... Y'know?"

"Detective work?" Gabriel asked.

"Yeah, that." Serena replied, gesturing with her index finger to punctuate it. Just sort of dig around and see what we can come up with..." She took a deep breath. "It's better than standing around and waiting for the answer to just drop in on our heads, I guess."

"That shouldn't be too hard." Lisa just cracked a smile, and adjusted her glasses. "It's my job, after all."

Serena just raised an eyebrow. "Your job?"

"Information retrieval, remember?" The spy impishly responded. "I'll check my usual sources to see if anything's popped up."

"I'll..." The vampire paused again, finding herself looking off into the distance as they rounded a corner, the train station finally coming into view. It was a graffiti-covered, but fairly stylishly moulded building of concrete and glass, with the tracks rising just a story above the street on similarly tagged up pillars of iron - probably a remnant of when some city planner had higher hopes for this neighbourhood, Serena mused. "Check The Matrix. Somebody on Strangeworld might know a thing or two."

"Isn't that..." Gabriel piped in, a slightly nonplussed but teasing look on his face. "That notorious server of hackers and cybercriminals?"

Serena just sighed. "Sorta." She explained. "Mostly it's just kids and idiots these days, but there's still a lot of useful information there and people who know important stuff." There was a long, awkward pause. "Sometimes. If you're browsing on the right day and get lucky."

"Well, you are..." The eccentric scientist just laughed a bit. "The luckiest girl in the world, remember?" Serena just groaned, though, try as she might, she couldn't suppress a small smile, and Lisa just looked on, very confused - and a tiny bit intrigued. "I think you'll do fine."

"Well, what about you, Gabriel?" The red-haired spy piped in, and the brown-haired scientist just tugged at his collar.

"I'll... Well..." He just let loose a bit of awkward laughter. "Well, I've got some stuff in the lab to take care of tomorrow-" Serena and Lisa just gave him a funny, exasperated look. "But I'll see if anyone in the office knows anything."

The three of them didn't have too much to say after that. With a... Plan of sorts drafted out, they resolutely walked into the train station, onto its red linoleum tiles and underneath its stark fluorescent lamps, and reluctantly paid their fare - mostly because Serena decided it wasn't worth the risk of jumping the turnstile with all those cameras watching them - and headed up to the platform.

The vampire took a quick look at the map to figure out where she needed to go, and, surprising her companions, she said her goodbyes and good nights and went over to the other side of the platform, to the train that ran in the opposite direction, to her colleagues' slight confusion.

"Hey, Serena!" Gabriel called out from the other side, and, it'd have probably been a bit more embarrassing if, at nearly midnight, there were more people on the platform than just them and a small selection of the 'usual crowd' - a tramp sleeping on one of the benches, a visibly drunk looking office drone sprawled on another, some leather and denim-clad teenagers who were loudly talking among themselves and were probably up to no good, and someone with ridiculous neon pink hair, about five pounds worth of random gadgets visible on his person, and a stud-covered black leather jacket that so obviously said, 'I'm a computer hacker!' that would make any actual hacker mortally offended. Luckily, Serena was just too tired to make it an issue. "Don't you live this way?" He asked.

"I've gotta head back to the nightclub!" She replied.

"Why?"

Serena just groaned, and a disappointed - in herself - look came onto the vampire's face. "Because I left my bike there, that's why!" Now that she'd sobered up, she could probably drive it home. If it hadn't been stolen in the meantime, at least.

The rest of the night after that was sort of a blur, though she could hazily recall nearly falling asleep on the metro and needing to focus hard to avoid a horrifying motorbike crash on the drive home. The next thing Serena could recall, she was rising up from her bed, yawning deeply and stretching her arms out, displacing the blankets a bit as she groggily took a look around her apartment - her new company apartment. It was in a decent neighbourhood, and would have probably taken years on a waitlist and be out of her price-range anyways if not for her 'promotion'. The vampire just blinked, and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. It was also still taking a bit of getting used to.

Serena just yawned and displaced the covers fully as she stepped out of bed, dressed in the slightly ill-fitting tank top and the black panties she'd been wearing under the rest of her outfit last night. The vampire groggily fell into motion, driven by instinct, her brain still in the process of waking up but her body already stepping forwards towards the other end of her apartment, closer to the front door where her kitchen was.

The new apartment was almost double the size of the old one, and the first time she'd seen it, she was amazed. It was still only one room, but it'd felt nowhere near as cramped - she could take a whole dozen steps from the door to the balcony - and she had a balcony, now! There was enough space that she could upgrade from an eastern-style floor mattress to a western-style twin bed and still have room to spare. The underside had even doubled as a nice place to install a little slide-out compartment for her cyberdeck and it's associated peripherals.

Directly across from her bed, against the opposing wall was a black plastic-shelled digital piano mounted on a collapsible stand that, in spite of her schedule being very spoken for and - even in spite of the augmentations - having little energy in what little free time she could eke out in between long training sessions, she'd been attempting to squeeze in more practice on - the closeness to dying she'd experienced having definitely shaken the vampire up a bit.

Right beside it was the monolithic, black computer housing Serena's home server - her 'home away from home' in The Matrix, which she usually mostly used to house her collection of old horror novels and illegally downloaded movies... That, and she liked to customize it a lot a bit like a virtual dollhouse.

The aforementioned balcony was a marvel - she'd never had one of those before, even as a little girl, and she'd probably have been able to get more use out of it if the weather in this city didn't flip-flop between gloomy overcast and oppressive downpours. That, and winter was fast on the approach like the hobnailed boot march of an invading army.

Still, the fresh air it brought into her tenement was very much appreciated, even if it was making the place cold enough that her skin was beginning to cover in goosebumps... Serena, still groggy and half-awake, paused in her tracks, then quickly turned and ran back and closed the balcony door fully. Really, she could have just slipped on a sweatsuit or something, but right now she didn't feel like it.

Her brain, still weary and tired and her body feeling a bit faint, settled right into her morning routine, stepping past piles of clothes and around bits of computer equipment over to the refrigerator. Feeling the cool brush of the artificially-maintained climate inside blowing on her naked arm as she reached inside for a large, gray cardboard box way in the back that could be mistaken for a twelve-pack of crappy, store-brand beers, all the way up to the point where she reached into it and pulled out a small, foil drink sachet from within.

It was vaguely reminiscent of those prepackaged sugary beverages she'd enjoyed as a girl on a hot summer's day, and just like with the box itself, the sachet was gray and unlabelled. Serena held it in her hand, feeling the coldness radiating onto her skin, taking a few deep breaths as her blood-red eyes focused intensely on it, a disturbing sort of hollow feeling permeating through her whole body and an instinctive urge throbbing in the back of her mind. Serena's expression began to glaze over, going into a trance of sorts as her gaze was intently fixed on the sachet she was holding, the vampire's mouth gradually opening up, revealing two long incisors peeling out over her lips, catching the small slivers of morning's light filtering into the apartment as she drew in closer and closer-

Serena's eyes went wide and she caught herself, recoiling back and bringing the sachet full of blood away from her. It was an... Unfortunate necessity of her new life. The nanites she was implanted with to stem and contain the spread of her cancer required regular transfusions of blood to function. The fangs that Gabriel had installed in her mouth merely made that process easier and allowed her to... Take any blood she needed 'directly from the source', if the need arose. As much as Gabriel could joke about it, there wasn't anything remotely supernatural about her predicament, and yet... The vampire took a deep breath, her expression turning a bit irritated and heavy-lidded as she stared down at the sachet of blood in her hand. There was still obviously something horrific about it. Something instinctively... Wrong. Something that went against everything she'd ever known and learned as a human being. Yet... She took a deep breath, taking a quick, slightly paranoid look around, watchful for prying eyes. It was also something she needed to live, and she'd already become way, way more acquainted with dying than she wanted to.

"Just calm down..." She told herself. Was this really anything more than a routine medical procedure? It was something she did every day. There wasn't anything special about it. Serena closed her eyes, opening her mouth, baring her fangs once again as she drew the blood sachet closer. It was just part of her morning routine.

\*splsh.\* Came the faint sound of pressure being relieved as her fangs pierced the aluminum-lined plastic pouch, a feeling of overpowering vigour and - though she was very much loath to admit it - a slight twinge of pleasure burning through veins with each droplet she took into her bloodstream. Less pleasant was the persistent, cold tang of iron that lined her mouth, a stark reminder of what she was doing.

Originally, she'd been hooked up to an IV every morning, but that had quickly proven itself to be quite awkward and cumbersome and there had always been the lingering, awkward question of what would be done if Gabriel found himself too busy or unable to administer her transfusion when she needed it? Serena pulled away from the now empty sachet, her mouth coated a bright crimson and a dazed, glazed-over, heavy-lidded expression on her face as she took in deep breaths of air, slowly, sensually licking the last few flecks of vitae off her lips.

The vicious, sanguine deed done, vigour and energy began to gradually return to the vampire's face. The brief, very slightly euphoric sensation beginning to fade, a feeling of... Disgust hammering at the back of her mind came in it's place, and Serena did her best to ignore it as she swiftly disposed of the now empty sachet in the trash and began to wash herself off in the sink, cleansing away the red both from her face and the inside of her mouth as Serena tried to ignore that... Uncomfortable feeling banging against her head.

That was the company's solution. Sending her these little gray sachets of blood to 'self-administer.' Serena didn't know where Bathrette got the blood, and frankly, she didn't want to know. Vincent had explained to her, while explaining her 'promotion', that the company had a contractual right to use the blood - among other things - of it's employees as it saw fit. The vampire got a feeling at the back of her mind that her co-workers probably couldn't possibly account for every drop she was getting, and also that the less she thought about it, the better.

\*click!\*

The cheap lighter's flame was like a warm, comforting beacon in the morning's gloom. Almost instinctively, Serena had found herself with a black papered 'Nightstick' - one of Sir-Tek's products, their knight's-helmet logo even emblazoned on the package - held in her thumb, index and middle-fingers, leaning over the balcony's rail, the cold metal surface pressed up against her forearms and the cold, late-autumn wind searing her skin with it's icy embrace, but now, Serena didn't care. The chill felt almost... Refreshing, and after... That, she needed to cool down a bit, anyways.

The view from her balcony was... Calming, in a way. The Bathrette company apartment building had an squared-off shape to it and had an inner courtyard her balcony was fortunate enough to face. The rest of the tenants would likely be at work by now or otherwise preoccupied - and Serena would have been too, if she still had a normal job. So, she had effectively the whole courtyard below to herself, able to just calm down and blow out clouds of smoke into the cold, gloomy fall air around her without needing to worry about how she was basically half-naked.

Far below on the ground was a scene much like a highly miniaturized version of a public park you'd find in an old-century city, A long concrete path tracing the building that surrounded a grassy field decorated with a few large, abstract concrete block things like some rather demented ultra-modernist art project. It was in harsh contrast against the more classical style the rest of the city's statues and construction went for.

The grass was fake - it was the first thing the vampire had checked when she moved in - but, she couldn't deny, with another deep breath and a large puff of smoke, there was still something relaxing about it. A small patch of green in a jungle of concrete and neon, even if it was artificial, was still... Something, she supposed. It was a flash of something more natural, ironically. A reassurance of human nature. A reminder that life didn't exactly end at the city's borders.

Of course, The vampire wouldn't get the chance to really appreciate the small patch of fake nature below her balcony for very long, as eventually, the brief emotional high of caused by drinking her daily infusion of blood had subsided, and she'd been able to cool down - very literally. Serena's eyes went wide and her teeth started clattering with chills as she finally came to and realized she'd stepped out into the late-November cold in nothing but a tank top and her underpants.

Faster than most would have expected of her, she quickly dashed right back into the comparatively warm confines of her apartment and slammed the sliding glass door shut behind her. Later than she should have, Serena finally found herself rushing for and donning the warmest articles of clothing she could find laying on her floor, which turned out to be a horribly unflattering baggy wine-coloured sweater and a pair of black sweatpants with woollen socks, but it'd stopped her shivering and banished her goosebumps for the time being, so as far as Serena was concerned, it was perfect.

Warmed right back up, the vampire soon noticed there was another issue - she'd gotten her sanguine needs for the day, though, she was still... Really hungry, and set about addressing that issue as quickly as possible, fetching a well-used fry pan from the sink and washing it off before setting it on her stove and, running almost completely on a groggy, hungry sort of autopilot.

She'd just started out by pouring in a base of amino-yolk and adding whatever she could find. Diced up potatoes, bits of leftover takeout noodles and vegetables from last night, cut-up soya-sausage, pickled hot peppers, and topping the whole mess once it was done frying with some more hot-flavoured pepper-sauce, for good measure.

As a whole the omelette she'd made wasn't exactly 'old century diner' material, but from the way she was hungrily taking into her breakfast, sitting down on her bed, watching the sky through her window, the city's lights overhead poking up past the top of the other side of her apartment building like mountains rising past a forests' treeline, the vampire certainly thought it was pretty good. It was a quiet source of pride for her, that she could at the very least cook - a bit - where most of her co-workers and associates were content to just order takeout.

Her belly full of food, her veins full of blood, and her mouth full of smoke, Serena put her attentions back towards the day ahead - and the events of the night before. The last time she'd seen her co-workers, it was when she - already half asleep by that point - waved goodbye to them from the other side of the platform as their train arrived. She had to wait another five minutes for hers', and it took a legendary amount of self-control to avoid falling asleep and missing it. Lisa would probably be back at her place, and... The vampire just sighed, a heavy-lidded, irritated look coming onto her face. Well, if Gabriel wasn't asleep, then he'd probably be with his nose in some insane death-defying project, avoiding actually helping them with the investigation. Well... She just took a deep breath. If they needed him, Serena mused, she was pretty confident she could get him. The vampire just found herself hoping Lisa was a better morning person than she was.

With the plate and fry-pan dumped unceremoniously back in the kitchen sink as a problem for 'Future-Serena', The vampire reached over towards the vid-phone mounted in her wall by the door, quickly putting the handset to her ear as she began to fiddle with the interface. It was a two-part device, comprising of the aforementioned wall-mounted screen and the handset mounted in it's charging port - which Serena had forgotten to do last night, hence the need for Lisa to come after her.

Calling the handset merely that might have been understating it, though, it was a fully-functional cell-phone, complete with a small, but usable keyboard and numerical pad underneath a visual display, all wrapped up in a shell of black plastic.

It had a few functions similar to a PDA, like a calendar, an itinerary, and even an E-mail function, and there were even some more expensive models that were essentially miniaturized data-slates with a phone built in, but this little thing suited Serena just fine when the battery wasn't crapping out on her. That, and even if she was making more money now, the vampire found herself still a bit leery to replace it. Old habits just died hard.

When Serena dialed the phone number she'd gotten from the spy last night, she wasn't really too sure what to expect on the other end. However, when Lisa finally did pick up the phone, the wall-mounted vidscreen dropping its little solar-patterned 'Sunburst Communications' display with a quick flash, replaced with the video feed of her conversational partner on the other end of the line, as an amused, but very bewildered grin came on Serena's face as she caught a look at Lisa's avatar.

"Oh! Serena!..." The spy responded, pleasantly surprised to see her, though, the pleasantries quickly drained from her face as the realization crept up on her. The fact that she'd answered a phone call while plugged into her cyberterminal wasn't, in and of itself, unusual. Lots of people had a setup to do just that, Serena included. It was a bit of an inconvenience to have to disengage the trodes and wait for your senses to come back every time you needed to answer the phone, after all.

What WAS unusual was the form her old acquaintance had decided to represent herself with on the internet. It was almost completely naked, save for a handful of vines covering up any areas of interest, and they'd both realized it immediately, Lisa letting out a girlish, embarrassed scream as her avatar recoiled back, her virtual hands and legs adding a bit more censorship to cover up her scandalous appearance, and Serena, taken for a bit of a shock, couldn't help but break out into a fit of laughter.

"I didn't know you were... Er..." The vampire awkwardly responded after she'd calmed down, a slightly playful grin coming onto her face that effortlessly deflected the angry look Lisa's avatar was giving her. "Into that sort of thing."

Similarly to the work-avatars they'd both used back in the cybersecurity department, The spy's virtual proxy was a more cartoony representation of a human being, with large eyes and a small mouth, and a head of red slightly wavy hair that, in rather stark contrast to the more restrained 'do she wore in the real world, flowed gracefully all the way down to her hips.

That would have been the first thing Serena had noticed if Lisa's avatar weren't so scandalously exposed, with only a small covering of vines and leaves wrapped around her naked virtual body to cover her up, sitting in a chair that looked as though a tree had simply grown to give her a place to sit. Her whole appearance was reminiscent of some sort of nature spirit straight from the pages of a book of myths. All of that, plus the lack of glasses gave the vampire a very different image of her old colleague and only her voice indicated this was the same girl - Unless a user has a program to spoof it, one's voice in the matrix is either very similar to, or outright identical to one's voice in 'meatspace'. Fairly convenient, Serena mused, though, right now Lisa probably didn't appreciate it much.

"I'm not!" Came Lisa's embarrassed, irate reply, and Serena was fairly certain if it were possible, her virtual face would have turned red as a beet. "My... Ex made this, and I forgot to take it off..." She explained, which just made Serena snicker a bit, finally able to indulge in the sort of mild ribbing she was usually on the receiving end of, and the vampire needed to take her gaze off the screen and clasp her free hand over her mouth to avoid reducing herself to a state of nonfunctionality.

Really, thinking about it that certainly sounded like what had happened. Being a female she couldn't really state for certain, but the impression she'd gotten from her interactions with members of the opposite sex was that they found such things... Better than mere nakedness. Then the situation crept up on Serena like a caterpillar across her neck and her smile faded, and an awkward, guilty look crossed her face.

"Oh..." The vampire rather sheepishly responded. "I'm...Er... Sorry to hear."

"It was mutual." Lisa irritably growled back, clearly not wanting to spend any time discussing that, and Serena felt more than happy to oblige. She felt a bit guilty thinking about it, but after several lunch breaks too many spent listening to gossip about boyfriends and other irritatingly stupid topics, she had to admit, this felt a bit... Satisfying, in a way that made her feel a bit like a total bitch.

The vampire wouldn't feel very guilty for long, however, as Lisa's avatar just looked back up at her, with a sharp, embarrassed, but harsh-looking grin on her face and added, "Besides, when I dress myself in the real world, I actually have some taste." Her tone was all condescending and distinctively passive-aggressive, and quick on the uptake, an awkward, disappointed grimace of a smile came on Serena's face as she realized just what she was wearing, and her gaze shifted down towards the floor, a deep, irritated sigh escaping her lips. Well, it was looking like the score was even now...

"Whatever, look." Serena responded, her voice just a touch cranky, and audibly eager to leave this behind them both. "I know it's a bit early in the morning, but-"

"Serena, it's one in the afternoon." The vine-covered spy flatly replied, and the vampire looked surprised, before checking the digital clock in the corner of the videophone's screen and just sighing deeply once again, the display reading '01:14 P.M.' to be exact. So she... Wasn't exactly an early bird. At all.

"-But I was wondering if you've looked into Lazerian and those disappearances yet." The vampire continued on, undeterred but a bit irritated.

"Oh, I've been going through my news-feeds all morning." The spy replied, with a slight smile, matched by Serena's slight frown. She was doing that on purpose, wasn't she? "I haven't found anything about our target yet, but... Well..."

Serena raised an eyebrow, less irritated and more intrigued. "Well, what?"

"Well, I WAS looking into the disappearances and I found some interesting stuff - should I send it to your phone?"

"Nah..." The vampire shook her head. "The battery would probably just crap out on me, and I'd rather have it on my cyberdeck - what's your server's address? I'll come by to have a look and download it."

When Serena's avatar stepped through the doorway representing her connection to Lisa's matrix server, she thought she had a decent idea of what to expect. Lisa's... Naturist depiction of herself in virtual space had clued her in a bit. When she actually got in, though, the vampire still hadn't found herself quite... Prepared for what sights lay in front of her.

If The Matrix - or the net, the wired, the grid, the information superhighway or whatever dumb slang term one wished to call it - was a free-flowing sea of information that existed both on and in-between every computer on Earth, individual servers were a bit like islands. They're roughly analogous to websites on the 'pre-crash' centralized Internet that the modern peer-to-peer Matrix replaced.

From any particular server one could run and alter existing programs, develop new ones, connect to other servers, communicate with friends and associates, and, of course, give the 'world inside the computer' any appearance one desired. To Serena's disquiet, Lisa's home server was definitely a different bucket of pixels to Bathrette Beautronics' corporate server back at the castle or even Serena's home server from which she opened the connection. For one, if she weren't currently in the matrix, the vampire would have sworn she'd travelled back in time - she'd stepped right through an archway grown from two trees into a rich, verdant forest glade in the midst of a pleasantly cool spring day.

The vampire felt simultaneously... Out of place, and at peace just being here, and briefly took a look over her virtual shoulder at the connection back into her own server, catching a view of a baroque, richly-decorated parlour room with tall, ornate wooden baseboards and red wallpaper. Their tastes were as distinct as night and day - and funnily enough, Serena's matrix server was set to a night sky right now, but she digressed.

The vampire made her way through the picturesque, grassy path laid out before her, intricately manicured rows of flowers bordering the treeline, like the dwelling of some fey creature, which some primal sense inside her found a bit unnerving. It was definitely an oddball sort of place - and a bit antithetical to the very concept of The Matrix in general, but the strange serenity of it all still made Serena wonder if she should add a few plants to her own virtual dwellings...

"Hey! Lisa!" Serena called out, a bit bewildered and a bit lost, and a bit surprised when she actually got a response.

"I can see you on the screens." Came the host's voice from somewhere deeper within the forest. "Just come over... Hold on a second..." Lisa trailed off, before a raptor with stunning, almost jewel-like blue feathers came barrelling at her out of the treeline, and Serena fought down an urge to flinch back or summon up a defensive program - she WAS a welcome guest, wasn't she? "I'll just have one of the ICE programs guide you..."

The cybersecurity technician turned commando raised a virtual eyebrow. "You've got ICE here?" ICE was a rather popular acronym for 'Intruder Containment and Expulsion' - any sort of program designed to detect and counteract tampering on a server, whether that be from programs such as computer viruses or users intruding on places they shouldn't be for whatever reason.

Most ICE - like the falcon circling over Serena's head in the springtime air - would be classified as 'White ICE' - with protection of it's host server as a priority. Usually all you'd risk from an encounter with white ICE was getting booted back to your home server or maybe setting off a few alarms in meatspace, but there existed nastier forms of ICE on the deepest levels of the net that could hurt more than just a hacker's ego.

"I mean, it's something my bosses had me install." Lisa responded, as the raptor-shaped program touched down on the grass in front of her, staring into Serena's cartoony, virtual eyes. "I didn't really bother with security programs before, since I didn't keep anything really worth stealing on this server before I joined up with Information Retrieval."

"Good point..." Serena replied, as she crouched down a bit to get a more level look at the azure-coloured avian predator standing before her. "So, is this thing just gonna start flying, or..."

As if to punctuate the vampire's statement, the ICE program just wordlessly turned away from her and started to run, getting a bit of speed built up like an airplane on grassy tarmac before taking to the virtual skies once again with a battering of it's programmed wings, and Serena's eyes went wide as the realization caught up with her.

"Wait a sec! wait a sec!" She broke out into a sprint, an awkward, only slightly amused smile coming onto her face as she tried to keep up with the flying ICE program. "I can't fly with it, you know!"

"I do." Lisa's voice came filtering down the verdant path again. "I turned that off. I prefer having gravity, don't you?"

"Usually, yeah!" Serena responded, as the bird led her on a wild goose chase throughout Lisa's server, passing through a few wide-open clearings, paths through the treeline, springs and ponds and carefully manicured groves of trees and beds of flowers and even a hedge maze that the vampire mused, probably all contained some manner of program or application, but she didn't get too long to actually mull over it since she was more concerned with not losing track of the program Lisa had sent to fetch her.

Eventually, she'd been led towards a large ring of ancient-looking trees, covered in vines and moss and blocking out the sun in a dense canopy of leaves. At the very centre, sitting in that grown-wood seat Serena had gotten a good look at over the vid-phone, sat a familiar-looking red-headed girl's avatar surrounded by a massive array of screens.

Serena quickly noticed that the red-headed spy had swapped out the vines for something more decent - a long, sleeveless white robe with crimson accents to match her wavy hair, reminiscent of an ancient pagan priestess' garb. She also had a slightly amused look on her face as she turned around to get a proper look at her approaching guest, while the azure raptor took it's perch on one of the many myriad branches dotting the canopy, and Serena's expression went from slightly awkward to bewildered and very confused when Lisa just started snickering a bit and even needed to look away with a hand over her mouth.

"Er-"

"Nothing, nothing..." Lisa responded, even if it clearly wasn't. "I guess I just haven't really seen this... Side to you before, that's all." The vampire locked up, her expression a bit agitated and confused, nervously wondering exactly what Lisa was talking about...

Right up until her gaze drifted downwards and Serena caught a glance at what her virtual representation was wearing, her demeanour turning utterly embarrassed and unable to look her colleague in the eye, as Lisa, unable to control herself any longer, broke out into a fit of cathartic, ironic laughter that just put a sour, disappointed look on Serena's face.

It was nowhere near as racy as what the redhead's avatar had been wearing, but it was about as far a cry from how Serena dressed in the real world as one could get. The base was still the same big-eyed, cartoony representation of herself she'd used professionally, but considering the repertoire of outfits that generally ranged from 'professional' to 'boyish' all the way down to 'horrifyingly unflattering', this was... Odd to say the least.

Serena's virtual self was clothed in a very old-fashioned sort of black dress that hung to just over her knees, with long, puffy sleeves and a white collar, complete with a pair of light stockings and black dress shoes, and... Serena's avatar took a breath of virtual air through irritated, clenched teeth as Lisa gradually calmed down. She couldn't even remember why she had the damn thing, and unlike her associate she didn't have the appealing scapegoat of an ex-boyfriend to blame.

"I..." Serena just shook her head, and - stupid frilly dress be damned - fought down the mortification and just approached the naturally-moulded throne, getting a better look at all the screens hovering in the air around Lisa in the process - though, now she looked more befuddled, and a bit impressed. It seemed to be an array of two-dimensional feeds, tuned to newsvids, reports, articles, info-broadcasts and all sorts of information channels, and Serena just found herself wondering exactly how her associate was getting even a single useful scrap of intelligence from all of that... Noise at once. "Look, just forget about it."

"But it looks so good on you!" Lisa responded, and Serena wasn't really sure how much of that was joking and how much of it was genuine, but it just irritated her regardless.

"-and lets' talk about what you found." The vampiric commando completed her sentence, just as the spy climbed down from her wooden perch and, with a word of power, pulled a few strands of light out from the surrounding trees, coalescing in her hand in the shape of a large, radiant, luminescent gold-coloured leaf, which she handed over to her intrigued-looking co-worker.

"Like I said," The spy replied, as Serena began to fiddle a bit with the information nexus she'd been given, the obverse side of the leaf rippling and flowing like a clear pool of water before displaying a graphical interface similar to a dataslate, showing a neat compilation of article clippings and images Lisa had downloaded for her browsing pleasure. "There's nothing about Lazerian - at least nothing I could find - but his landlady was right. There's been a LOT of weird stuff going on around Claycroft. Almost two dozen people have disappeared there over the last few weeks, and that's just how many the newspapers have reported."

"Have the cops been looking into it?..." Serena asked, as she brought up an image on the leaf-dataslate of some of the more recent disappearances. A rather sour - but intrigued look came onto her face as three police file photographs of some rough, burly-looking gangsters with their hair tied up in top came onto the leaf's 'screen.'

Lisa just sighed and shook her head. "The Mounties SAID they've opened an investigation, but you know how it is with them." The spy pointed down onto the display. "Like Mrs. Rosalyn said, most of the disappearances have been drifters and crooks - those three guys are the most recent disappearances, and they're members of the 889th Street 'Top-knots' gang."

"Really?" Serena looked a bit disdainfully disappointed. "They named their gang after their stupid hairstyle?"

"I mean, I wouldn't say that to their faces." Lisa responded. "According to the rumours I've heard, these guys are apparently pretty tough."

"Tough enough to... Well..." The vampire paused. "Avoid getting..."

"Kidnapped?"

"I'm not really sure - maybe?" Serena just shrugged her shoulders, looking more confused than ever. "My point is, if twenty or so people just up and disappeared in the same area, it can't have been an accident, can it?"

Lisa's avatar just looked a bit uncertain. "We can't leave the possibility out."

"Two guys, maybe." The vampire responded with a heavy-lidded look. "Twenty can't be a coincidence."

The spy just had a bit of a weary, resigned look on her face. "Coincidence or not we're still sort of in the dark on this." Lisa replied. "And on whether or not it's even related to Lazerian in the first place."

There was a long, awkward pause, before Serena just sighed. "It's still the only connection we've even got."

Lisa raised an eyebrow. "Based on?"

Once again, the vampire shrugged her shoulders. "Instinct, mostly. I mean, it stands to reason that if some scientist working on a weird black project suddenly disappears, and MORE people go missing in the area where he used to live, then it's probably either he's the one kidnapping people, or..." An uncomfortable expression came onto Serena's face as, back in meatspace, a feeling of dread crawled into her stomach. "Or, whoever's ACTUALLY behind this all probably got him..."

Another period of silence erupted between the two girls, quiet enough to the point where Serena could hear the distant calls of songbirds from somewhere in between the cacophony of noise still pouring out of Lisa's monitors. "I... I mean..." Lisa just sighed and shook her head. "We don't really have any other leads on this, and it might just be sort of tangential but I'm... Starting to get some bad vibes off this whole disappearance thing."

"You and me both..." Serena let out a relieved laugh, glad that someone else was finally seeing it. "Can you keep looking into this, then?"

"I will, but..." Lisa responded, and a small bit of chill went up the vampire's virtual spine as the spy gave her a slightly sardonic sort of suspicious look. "Well, do you have any ideas on how to find him?..."

"I... Well... Er..." Serena just awkwardly laughed while reflexively ruffling the back of her avatar's neck, trying to figure out a way to skirt around the fact that she... Didn't. "No..." She just took a deep breath, deciding to just not bother with pretenses and rip the bandage off all at once. "Like I said, I'm... Just gonna see if anyone on the net knows anything."

"We're already on the-"

The vampire just shot her as harsh a glare as her avatar was capable of. "You know what I mean, Lisa." To the uninitiated, it was probably very confusing, but Serena was referring to what would probably have just been called 'The Internet' before The Crash - public matrix servers where people would mingle, exchange data and rumours, and bootlegged movies, pornographic material, and pirated video games, as well as yelling out abominably stupid, inflammatory comments and voicing ones' utterly moronic, uneducated opinions.

All Lisa could really do was shrug her shoulders. "Good luck with that." The spy responded, and Serena just took a deep breath. Having exhausted all other options, luck, it would seem, would be the deciding factor as to whether or not they'd even be able to complete this mission. "Do you think Gabriel's found anything yet?"

"I don't think he's even looking." Serena responded, her tone mostly deadpan with a small undercurrent of irritation. Officially, Mr. Van Steyr had assigned Gabriel to their little 'team' in order to supervise the two rookies and make sure they didn't get in way over their heads, but... A sort of weary look came onto the vampire's virtual face. That burnt out hippie would probably chafe pretty badly trying to keep her and Lisa 'in line', wouldn't he? On one hand, she could definitely appreciate the 'hands off' supervision style. On the other, Serena groaned. It felt like he'd just fobbed off his share of the work to the two girls and went back to work on...

An awkward look came onto Serena's face as she realized it. He'd probably been - or, at the very least, was supposed to be - working on a solution to her... Sanguinary needs... The vampire just found herself turning away from Lisa and pouting a bit. Gabriel, she mused, was a really irritating person, especially when she couldn't figure out whether or not it was right to be mad at him...

"I think..." The dark-haired commando took a deep breath, sidling towards the exit of Lisa's server as the redhead just gave her a funny look. "I'll start looking." She said. A bit of lurking on the web should calm her down, right?

"I'm not freaking trolling!" Was the first thing Serena had heard as her avatar entered the thread that seemed to be taking Strangeworld by storm, with dozens of users all surrounding... Something. Her search for any intelligence about Lazerian, the local disappearances, or anything that may have been able to connect the two, and she might as well start the search at her favourite net hangout.

"This has gotta be the weakest bait I've seen all week." Another forumite in the crowd responded. Of course, she was here on business, not pleasure - she had a job to do, and this was no time for goofing off. This was also no ordinary internet forum.

Strangeworld wasn't the most popular English-language matrix server in the world, but it definitely was one of the most notorious. As Gabriel had said last night, it was famed as hub of sorts for computer hackers and other malcontents, stealing passwords and credstick information, raiding other matrix servers and blowing up yellow vans - at least, according to those sensationalized and poorly researched news reports that had become somewhat of a running joke among the userbase.

There was truth to it - the server had started as a hub for the computer hacker scene, but over the years it's topics and crowd had diversified a bit from those elite cyberdeck users who plied their talents into the unauthorized access of highly secure matrix servers, becoming a more general use forum. It's core, however remained as a hub for accomplished console cowboys, and a fair deal of technological proficiency was expected from it's user-base.

The server itself wasn't white-listed, but to access it, one still needed the server's connection information - no mean feat, considering how most users considered giving it out to be a 'faux pas' of sorts and the server's most accomplished deckers make a little game out of scrubbing it from the rest of The Matrix. Serena herself had only managed to actually get the address after about a straight week of digging through the net and chasing rumours back in college, only eventually finding the address through a sheer stroke of luck in the end.

The server's exclusivity, coupled with its userbase mostly being comprised of seasoned net users and computer hackers, many of whom having absolutely nothing better to do with their time than obsessively scan the net and pore over logs and logs of information - and watch science fiction movies - meant that if you wanted to find somebody - or something - then it was the right place to ask. Although, at the moment it may not have been the best time...

"It's not bait, either!" The user being accosted - 'Thoth', from the nametag hovering over his head - angrily responded, and Serena could feel a small twinge of sympathy for him. The thread seemed to mostly be him getting dogpiled, arguing with basically whoever was willing to listen, though, nobody was really giving him the time of day, and as he kept on talking, Serena would rather quickly figure out why. "I'm telling you guys, we SERIOUSLY are on the verge of inventing immortality!"

That... Definitely got Serena's attention, outlandish as it was. Of course, it was hard to take seriously, what with all the pawns surrounding him cracking jokes and making stupid comments. That wasn't Serena thinking in figure, either. Strangeworld had a very... For want of a better word, 'retro' design philosophy to it. It had a very ethereal, electric-dream-like appearance, making use of visual design that wouldn't have been out of place on a website on the very, very early old internet, with neon primary colours against flat, metallic blacks, casting grids of red, blue and green on the dark walls and lighting the outlines of black furnishings and program-cases.

Similarly, the server was one of the few that instituted a very strict 'dress' code. Realistic avatars were very heavily frowned upon, in Strangeworld's commitment to strictly separating the real world and the matrix, but also because they needed a lot of processing power to render. It was considered 'in good taste' to use an avatar based off a very minimalist, extremely stylized template. A large, round head with oval shaped, button-like eyes and an oblong body that terminated in a flat edge where the avatar made contact with the floor, reminiscent of a very minimalist pawn piece right off a futurist chessboard. No legs, no arms, - which one technically didn't even need to manipulate code - no frills, and no fuss.

Beyond those ground rules, however, it was effectively open season, and everyone besides the newest of noobs customized their 'pawn' to some extent.

Someone who considered themselves a bit of a nerd would add a pair of coke-bottle glasses and a labcoat, a punk would likely add a neon mohawk and bits of flair on a simulacrum of a leather jacket, Serena had given her Strangeworld avatar a short, dark haircut reminiscent of how she wore it in the real world and a long, shadow-coloured cloak with a flaring, red collar - and she had plenty of time to 'appreciate' the irony of her situation. 'Thoth' had an appearance... Well. Serena found it a bit blasé to use the 'C' word, but he really DID look like some sort of weirdo doomsday cultist with his long, black robe and rather sinister hood obscuring a round, button-eyed face that might have actually been a bit cute if she was looking at a plushie or something.

"Whatever he's on, I want some." Another user snidely added. Even though this 'Thoth' character had undoubtedly captured the attentions of the forum, none of that attention was good, and most of the userbase seemed to be completely enraptured with riffing on him.

"I thought Mr. Ayashii banned cultposting years ago." Came a more annoyed remark from the other side of the crowd. Everyone who didn't seem to be treating Thoth like a joke seemed to be more irritated than anything else.

"IT'S NOT A FREAKING CULT!" Thoth snapped, getting more defensive and irritated as the thread went on. "IT'S A SCIENTIFIC SOCIETY DEDICATED TO THE PURSUIT OF ETERNAL LIFE, AND WE'VE BEEN MAKING A TON OF PROGRESS ON MAKING PEOPLE IMMORTAL!" Though, no matter how much he explained nobody seemed to be taking him seriously, which just made Serena more confused - and even a bit worriedly intrigued.

So, this book could be judged by its cover, then. She'd heard of these 'cults' springing up on the net - pseudo-religious philosophy clubs with pseudo-mystical airs to them run by edgy college kids. Just an indictment of the times, and harmless, for the most part. Or so the vampire had heard.

Outside the pages of the occasional sensationalized hit piece, there seemed to be little evidence of cults running around sacrificing people, but... An uncomfortable look crossed her virtual face. She'd heard the rumours, stories that floated their way down the net of kidnappings, secret profane rituals, and consorting with rogue artificial intelligences. Mostly nonsense, right? Just web horror stories meant to scare noobs and kids... Serena found herself giving the cultist a bit of a weird, suspicious look.

Of course, whenever the topic of cults came up on Strangeworld there always seemed to be a few news articles posted about cases of disappearances and even murders apparently connected to so-called 'Matrix Cults', and The Vampire had to admit, it made a bit of terribly morbid sense - after all, you would need a pretty large and well-coordinated group to make that many people disappear.

"Oh shiiiiit!" Another user piped up, clearly enjoying teasing Thoth a bit too much. "He really IS a cultist, guys!... I didn't know we had any real cultists on this server."

"I was in one of those cults once." Another voice spoke up from the crowd, this time a bit irritated and disappointed. "I thought they were gonna teach me to summon Ghost AI's to do my bidding, but it was literally just a bunch of 13-year olds talking about how they wanna blow up their school. Biggest waste of my time since Tank War Europa."

"I told you, it's not!-" The cultist just shook his head and groaned, his demeanour stuck somewhere between angry and desperate as the conversation began to rather rapidly spiral out of his control, and Serena just sighed. Okay, she might have been jumping to conclusions a bit with the whole 'cult' thing. It definitely had to be a group - any sort of kidnapping operation on this scale definitely needed one - but if it could be a cult, it could also be a rival gang to the top-knots, a rival corporation to Bathrette, or even just The Federal Army press-ganging people again. If it was a cult - and if it was this cult in particular...

The vampire took one look at the cultist at the centre of the thread just stewing in his own frustration, and shook her head. If this guy really was a cultist, then judging by the one member she'd seen that organization probably couldn't even manage kidnapping candy from a baby. His talk about immortality and eternal life could mean something, but, more likely than not it was a bunch of hot air or pseudo-scientific nonsense being pushed by a con artist.

"Hey, screw you! Tank War Europa's great!"

"God damn, I wish I had a cultist girlfriend..."

"It's a fucking time vampire and it kept me from finishing my goddamn college essays!"

"ZOMG how do I summon girlfriend AI?"

"Just picture those curves she'd have with those tight clinging cultist robes..."

"LOL. Imagine having basement dweller time-management skills."

Serena just sighed again and shook her virtual head. So, the thread had managed to completely devolve into utter nonsense. It was definitely frustrating, though, she had to admit, her frustration probably paled in comparison to what Thoth was feeling. The cultist just stood there, bewildered and disappointed as all around him, the rest of the users had long since stopped paying the cultist and his talk of immortality any mind, having moved to arguing about Tank War Europa, and half-ironically posting about how desperately lonely they were. The vampire just took a few steps back to watch the virtual carnage unfold, figuring it was only a matter of time before-

\*POOF!\*

A new user had entered the thread, appearing right in the centre of the action, right behind Thoth, with a flash of smoke and a burst of light, immediately commanding the attention of the thread's population, and not just for his flashy entrance.

"Alright! Thread's over! Everyone outta here!" The moderator sternly declared, a large, black iron hammer with the word "BAN" emblazoned along the side of it's head in blazing white letters hovering in front of him as though being held by an invisible arm. His arrival and proclamation elicited groans and complaints from the assembled forumites as they all shuffled towards the virtual doorway representing the thread's egress exiting back out in the 'hall' - Serena and Thoth included, and for good reason.

Strangeworld's moderators were somewhat akin to a virtual police force, responsible for enforcing a reasonable quality of discourse on the forum and removing anything that might infringe on it's rules with those mighty banhammers of theirs. Aside from their obvious badges of office, it was customary for a moderator - while on duty, at least - to have their avatar wear a great, silvery helmet with blue plumes somewhat reminiscent of an officer in the ancient Roman legions.

The whole look gave the moderation staff a sort of mystical, dangerous air to them, effectively communicating a sort of blunt - literally - 'don't mess with us.'

That was probably good advice, Serena mused, catching a quick look through the other side of the doorframe of the moderator facing the wall and pulling his hammer back for a mighty swing. The door closed right behind them all just as the banhammer impacted against the wall with a sound like a thunderclap, a spiders' web of fractures appearing on the black surface of the virtual doorframe before it all fell apart into a million tiny splinters like broken glass. The pieces of Thoth's thread falling to the virtual ground and revealing the hallway wall right behind it as the doorframe began to fade out of existence.

All around her, the thread's former occupants all dispersed, some still talking among themselves, a few just deciding to log off, their avatars disappearing into thin air with little fanfare, and Thoth in particular just looking as disappointed as his avatar's minimalist button-eyes could allow, sulking off somewhere presumably to go feel sorry for himself, though Serena thought he should have been a bit relieved to only get his thread deleted. Strangeworld was relatively laid-back as far as internet forums went, but when the moderators decided they didn't like something, they usually came down HARD.

Still... Serena's avatar took a deep breath, as she stepped away from the space where Thoth's thread used to be, tracking her eyes over the walls, looking over which threads were active today, getting back on track with what she was supposed to be doing. There was usually a rumours and information megathread on the off-topic board, which she'd been looking for prior to getting distracted by Thoth's rants about immortality. Usually whenever there was something she needed to know, that thread could, at the very least, point her in the right direction... When the users could stay on-topic, that was. The vampire just sighed, and shook her head. Hopefully the way that 'eternal life' thread got derailed wasn't a bad omen...

Serena just sighed and shook her head, taking another sip of the coffee she'd ordered. Black as the night, the way she liked it, but the cafe Lisa had dragged them to apparently had a different supplier, and the subtle differences in flavour compared to the Sir-Tek X-caff she was used to threw her off a bit. "I couldn't find anything out either." Neatly, and moodily summarizing a rather disappointing three or so hours of posting on Strangeworld.

It failed to shed any light on Lazerian's whereabouts or the disappearances in his neighbourhood, but DID tell her a load of stupid gossip and conspiracy theories that now rattled around her head like loose bolts in a tumble-dryer. Overall, she felt a twang of sympathy for that other forumite - it had been a bigger waste of her time than Tank War Europa, which she offhandedly mentioned, half-joking.

"I didn't know you played that, too!" Gabriel actually looked surprised, and she and Lisa just looked a bit bewildered. After Serena had logged off from Strangeworld and powered down her cyberdeck, she'd called the spy up once again and, in a bout of frustration and restlessness, told her to get dressed, they were going to have a serious in-person meeting to try and figure out what to do from there. Presumably by forcing a solution in the brainstorming equivalent of just headbutting a brick wall until it broke out of pity. When Serena found herself having to actually decide where to go, however, she'd had an awkward sort of realization her course of action was more motivated by the fact that she was just feeling a bit cabin-fevery and just really wanted to get out of the house.

She had no idea where they could even meet up beyond that stupid gothic nightclub, and Lisa - after a lot of probing and pressure, just decided to satisfy Serena's stir-craziness by dragging the vampire out to her favourite coffee shop, with Serena ALSO dialing up Gabriel at his laboratory and, a bit fed up, forcibly dragging him out with them, since he was part of the team and also on this case and common sense dictated three heads were better than two. Mostly because Serena was still a bit resentful that he'd basically fobbed off all the work onto them.

"I don't." Serena groaned, tired, irritated, and a bit disappointed in herself. "I was joking."

The vampire took a quick look around, away from her table, tracing her eyes over the cafe's warmly-lit interior, its orange-painted walls and old-fashioned artificial wooden furniture, plush faux leather couches and the persistent smell of synthetic, ersatz coffee permeating the interior - even with Serena's promotion, none of them had enough money to afford to drink 'the real stuff' more often than on special occasions.

She couldn't deny the atmosphere was somewhat comforting, especially when compared to the gloomy, cold, neon-lit streets of the city right outside their booth's window, but the vampire still felt distinctly out of place. This wasn't her type of hangout, either. This was a place for self-satisfied philosophy students to mingle and bounce ideas off each other and write essays and poems that weren't as deep as they thought they were. Serena, with her wrinkled white, short-sleeved dress shirt tucked into a pair of dark jeans and her black leather jacket laying crumpled-up behind her in the booth's seat, sandwiched between her and the plush backing, most definitely did not belong here.

"Ah." Gabriel responded, the bespectacled scientist just laughing a bit and getting comfortable in the seat right across the table from hers' close to the aisle as he took another sip from the coffee he'd ordered, which Serena had seen him slip about five packets of sweetener in when he thought nobody was looking.

"Well, unfortunately, I didn't really have much luck figuring out what happened to our guy, but..." He just shrugged his shoulders. "I wasn't really looking too hard." The eccentric scientist flatly admitted what Serena already knew in that half-joking tone she'd come to know, and the vampire just groaned, still more disappointed in herself more than anything else.

In spite of how HE obviously didn't belong here, either, still in his labcoat and slacks but having brought along a cozy-looking sweater-vest underneath to ward off the late November chills, it seemed to affect his usual demeanour as hard as a stiff breeze... Serena just took another sip of her coffee, trying to fight back that sense of disquiet from how different it tasted. It could probably be that she was just overthinking these things... Or Gabriel just didn't care.

Both of their gazes turned back over towards Lisa, and the red-headed spy across from her, sitting by the window just shook her head. "Besides what I already showed Serena... Nothing. I can't find a trace of that guy anywhere."

Of the three, she seemed to fit right in, with her bright red sweater matching her hair and a fancy, black tube skirt with gray stockings underneath, and not having quite gone to the same lengths as Serena, she still wore her sandy brown coat over her shoulders with all the buttons undone. It was something she should have expected, the vampire mused as she rolled her eyes. This WAS her idea, and it WAS her hangout spot, after all. "It looks like we're pretty much stuck here." The spy added, clearly none too pleased about it.

"Is there anything else we could check?" Serena asked, as Lisa took a sip of what the spy had called a 'flat white', but really just sort of looked like a regular latte to her admittedly uncultured red eyes. "Like, his records or anything?"

"I mean, I tried to find anything on Bathrette's net and The Federal Government's websites I could use." The spy just shrugged her shoulders. "But it's all 'information restricted' and 'need to know' only."

"It's like he doesn't want to be found." The vampire replied, and the spy shot her a heavy-lidded look.

"Gee, what gave you that idea?" Lisa sarcastically added.

Serena just took another drink of her coffee. "Must have something to do with just up and disappearing."

"Didn't you say he might have been a kidnapping victim, too?"

"I give it a fifty-fifty chance he's behind it all."

"Based on what?"

Serena just stared blankly at the redhead for a few seconds while she tried - and failed - to come up with something witty. "Detective's instinct." She finally, flatly responded. She absolutely, definitely didn't have that. She wasn't a detective - she was a jumped up corporate thug with veins full of nanobots that gave her a horrifyingly literal thirst for blood - but she did have a healthy sense of paranoia, which, granted, she wasn't about to tell her colleague for reasons that began and ended with, 'do I really want to make her think I'm an idiot?'

"I thought I was the only one with one of those." Lisa cracked a small, teasing grin, and Serena just sighed and shook her head, disappointed and frustrated at all the varieties of nowhere this was going, and how Gabriel was just sort of watching, looking amused from behind his coffee cup. "Mine isn't really activating, though-"

"I mean, come on, what the hell ELSE is there to go on!" Serena snapped, leaning over the table again, slamming her palms on the surface to Lisa's surprise and Gabriel's continued amusement, her moodiness and frustration hitting a fever pitch of sorts. "This guy's practically a freaking ghost already, and our bosses just expect us to find him, like we can track his scent or something." She groaned, shaking her head. "This would probably be a lot freaking easier if we didn't get treated like mushrooms."

"Huh?" Lisa just looked confused, raising an eyebrow.

"Kept in the dark and fed horseshit." Gabriel helpfully explained, and Serena actually looked a bit surprised that they were on the same page.

"I mean, you SAID there was more stuff about him on Bathrette's servers, right?" Serena added. "If our bosses want this guy found so badly, and if they actually DO know more than they're letting on, why the hell wouldn't they just give us everything they've got on him?"

"Well..." Gabriel just stroked his chin, looking remarkably collected under Serena's intense, irritated gaze - he was the one who suggested that their bosses back at The Castle were as in the dark as they were. "Probably to avoid any intelligence leaks, and since the bosses are already pretty confident you'll be able to do this with the information you've been given?" The eccentric scientist responded, though, even he didn't sound too sure of himself like he usually did, and Serena and Lisa just gave him a pair of heavy-lidded stares.

"I doubt that." Serena responded, and Lisa looked in fairly firm agreement there. "Besides, that would mean instead of being assholes, they're just idiots. Which is probably worse."

"Isn't that more likely, though?" Lisa raised an eyebrow. "Occam's razor and all."

"I don't think that's the right razor." Gabriel added, and, even though he was probably right, Serena was still finding him really annoying, and her annoyance was, for the most part, directed inwards - she WAS the one who'd dragged him here."

"Well, it doesn't change much, does it?" Serena shook her head again. "Point is, our bosses probably have more intel on the guy we're supposed to find that they're not giving us for reasons, and just expect us to squeeze blood from a stone."

"But they..." Lisa paused for a second, looking down into her flat white, a contemplative expression coming on the spy's bespectacled face. "DO have it on the server, I'm guessing..."

"Hm?..." Serena raised an eyebrow as she took another drink of her coffee. "Yeah, but?..."

"Do your login credentials still have Operator access?" The spy asked, and the vampire's eyes went wide, an enthusiastic, mischievous grin coming on her face now that she knew where Lisa was going with this...

"I mean, they SHOULD, and if they don't..." The vampire just laughed a bit, as Lisa began to smile with her and Gabriel began to look a bit worried. The two girls, before being promoted over to the Special Asset Protection Squad and the Information Retrieval division were both in Cybersecurity... "It shouldn't be THAT hard to get them re-instated, right?"

"I REALLY hope..." Gabriel cut in, laughing nervously. "You girls aren't thinking of what I think you're thinking of."

"That's the first time I've seen you worried about anything." Serena added, somewhere between mocking disappointment and genuine surprise, and the scientist just laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"That's because I'm just trying to look out for you." The eccentric scientist replied, and it gave Serena a bit of pause, the vampire suddenly feeling a tiny bit guilty. "I'm pretty sure it's a really terrible idea - you're not thinking of actually going and hacking the employee database, are you?"

"I mean, we are now." Lisa jokingly added.

"It really won't be that complicated." Serena tried to reassure him. "We just go in, download some files, and go out. The ICE will recognize us as users with access to it, and we'll have gotten everything before anyone even figures out we were there."

Gabriel shrugged his shoulders again, a nervous, awkward smile grin on his face. "Yeah, and the bosses don't really like people doing that. Serena, if they catch you..." He leaned in over the table, the scientist's expression still very warm and optimistic, but the look in his hazel-coloured eyes more serious than she'd seen him before, with maybe the exception of when she'd lost her cool entirely, convinced her 'treatment' had failed, and taken out all of her anger and frustrations and fear out on him. "They'll probably fire you." The scientist responded, and Serena went pale - paler than usual, anyways.

"I... Er..." Serena just laughed nervously, unable to meet her co-workers' gaze, finding the collar of her shirt suddenly uncomfortably tight. They were both... Intimately familiar with what that meant. Vincent had explained the terms of her employment - and what terminating that employment meant to a company that seemed so obsessed with protecting its secrets. Even though she wanted this freaking mission to be over with as soon as possible, she also had no will to die. "I... See what you mean." The vampire responded, taking a deep breath. "Looks like that's off the list."

"Err..." Lisa just looked very, very confused, and even a bit awkward. "I... Didn't know you liked being a commando THAT much Serena." The spy responded, to the vampire's immense visible relief, needing to take another deep breath and recline back in the booth. So, small comforts at least, Lisa really didn't know about her... Condition.

"Yeah..." The vampire just laughed nervously, ruffling up the back of her head, running her mouth more on nervous instinct than anything else. "I guess once you've got a taste of blood, going back to working cybersecurity isn't really as fulfilling-"

Gabriel just erupted into a fit of poorly concealed laughter, and Serena's eyes went wide as she'd realized the slip of the tongue she just made, stammering a bit and struggling to look Lisa in the eyes, the spy just giving her a bit of a funny look. "Metaphorically, I mean." She added, like putting a band-aid on top of a sucking chest wound.

"Well..." There was a very long pause, before Lisa just groaned, and reclined back in the booth as well, a disappointed, heavy-lidded look behind those eyeglasses of hers'. "If Serena's too scared to hack the employee database-" A shot of Choler flared in the vampire's veins, even if the oft-ignored logical part of her brain was telling her that it was better to just have her assume that than find out the truth. "-Then that just leaves us right back to square one. Sitting in this coffee shop with no information and no idea where to go from here."

"Well..." Gabriel just cracked a warm smile, shrugging his shoulders once again. "They did say it was 'need to know', right? We kind of DO need to know, don't we?"

Lisa just shot him another funny look, even while Serena just took a deep breath, the vampire looking somewhat disappointed, since she already had a clue of what he was going to say. "What's that supposed to mean?" The spy asked.

"It means, that maybe if we ask nicely..." The eccentric scientist just laughed a bit, taking another sip of his overly sugary coffee. "They'll let us in instead of needing to hack the database ourselves."

A long, awkward silence filled the coffee house as Serena and Lisa just stared at him, disbelieving and bewildered, and even a touch irritated. "Are you?-" The dark-haired commando asked.

"-Serious?" The red-haired spy completed, and brown-haired scientist just adjusted his glasses and leaned back in his seat, looking a bit amused and self-satisfied to Serena's continuing irritation.

"Sometimes it's not really WHAT you say, Serena..." Gabriel began to explain, shooting her an almost pleased, knowing look, and the vampire felt somewhere between intrigued and a bit worried. "But HOW you say it, and how you... Frame it to the person you're trying to convince."

While Serena just fidgeted a bit in her chair, trying to put a finger on why he was suddenly making her a bit... Anxious, Lisa just raised an eyebrow. "No offence, but I didn't really take you for the... Social type... Err..." A warm, slightly sweet smile came on her face. "Can I call you 'Gabe'?-"

"I'd really rather you didn't." Came his quick, sharp-tongued response. Though he was still smiling all amicably, Serena could feel a sudden... Harshness and intensity to his tone that caught her off-guard. She was about to open her mouth to say something, though, as if anticipating it, the eccentric scientist just took a deep breath, cleared his throat, and shifted his demeanour damn near a hundred and eighty degrees. Gabriel just reclined back in the booth and taking another sip of coffee before just laughing to himself a bit - while Serena still looked a bit on edge.

"It's something I've had to... Pick up a bit." He added. "I don't think I could have gotten my bosses to let me do HALF the projects I've done if I didn't pitch it right..." Once again, he just gave Serena a sly sort of look and the vampire once again went a bit pale, an awkward grimace of a smile coming onto her face as the realization clicked. Of course, he'd sold the damn... 'medical procedure' to his bosses, and, even if she hadn't had much of a choice in the matter he'd even sold it to her, too. The vampire looked back up, into her co-worker's playful, hazel-coloured eyes, feeling a flush of irritation through her veins, even as a smile crept up on her face. He really was a... Serena just took a deep breath, and chased it with another gulp of that awful coffee. Pain in the ass.

"Fine." The vampire groaned, reclining back in her seat. "We'll try it your way."

\*KPSSSSH...\*

The sliding doors opened, and Serena could feel the change in the air-pressure as the darkened laboratory complex stood before them, the space feeling particularly cold and menacing even after Vincent walked in. With a clap of his hands, the middle manager turned on the pale, stark fluorescent lights above, exposing the myriad of meticulously organized laboratory and computer equipment that lay before them in a way that just made Serena feel a bit... Off. Vincent turned back towards the intrepid trio, a heavy-lidded, expectant look on his face, as though he was saying. 'Well?' with just his cold, pale blue eyes.

Not wishing to loiter in the doorframe any longer, Serena just took her first step into Lazerian's old laboratory, taking in a deep breath. The air in here smelled... Stale, but not quite in the way she'd expected. There was a touch of something nauseating, sickening for reasons less related to the smell itself and more for the associations it brought. Serena could smell the faint, cloying scent of disinfectant hanging in the air, a bitter tang of chlorine and ammonia and other nasty such cleaning products she'd gotten more intimately familiar with than she'd ever wished to be as a result of her... Sickness. That's when she realized the source of that off feeling she'd noticed with this lab, the revelation hitting her like a thrown brick, her eyes going momentarily wide as she took it all in.

From the stark white tiled floors and the similarly sterile, bone-white paint on the walls, to the counter tops and the steel, gray cabinets and cyberterminals to the rows of metallic tables near the centre that reminded the vampire rather uncomfortably of the surgical slab Gabriel had her lay on while he installed her cybernetics. All of it was... Clean. Immaculately so - more than any normal person would have bothered with.

Even by the standards of supposedly sterile facilities, this one looked like someone had anxiously scrubbed it top-to-bottom with some of the most powerful cleaning supplies one could get their hands on until they were certain it was spotless, and then just kept going for good measure until they'd collapsed from exhaustion and needed to be dragged to their bed. The vampire idly mentioned all of this to her superior, who just took a deep breath and adjusted his tie.

"Yes, well..." Vincent explained, as already, Lisa and Gabriel were both hard at work poring over the lab, rifling through cupboards and checking drawers for any scrap of evidence or information they might be able to find in the realm of physicality. "We needed to clean the laboratory very... Thoroughly." Serena raised an eyebrow, detecting the hint of something... Uncomfortable on her boss' tone.

Just getting access to this laboratory had been like pulling teeth, and to make matters even less convenient, Gabriel declined to actually talk to their boss himself, half-joking how he couldn't do everything for her and forcing Serena - who felt she was infinitely less qualified to do so - to speak with the Director of Special Projects all by herself and ask for access to the employee database.

It had taken a lot of cajoling and smooth talking and trying to skirt around the fact that they were sort of at a dead end to finally convince Vincent Van Steyr to let them, at the very least, poke around their mark's old laboratory complex to see if there was anything there to form a trail on. Serena just took a deep breath. It beat getting potentially fired, she supposed.

"So..." The vampire said, taking a quick look around the laboratory for herself, and getting more and more concerned and more and more weirded out the longer she was here. It wasn't just the tang of disinfectant hanging in the air that was putting her off, it was all the subtly... Wrong things she was finding here. The racks of surgical tools on the wall, the glass alembics and retorts and beakers and other chemistry equipment, and a few devices Lisa had found in one of the drawers that reminded her a bit of a cross between a trode headset and a highly-technical slave collar. Eventually Serena just turned right back towards her boss and out and asked, "What the hell was this guy doing here?!"

There was a long, awkward bout of silence between the commando and the middle-manager, as Serena just gave him a slightly irritated, expectant, heavy-lidded stare, saying, 'I really need to know this' with her blood-red eyes, and Vincent, already quite visibly annoyed and galled at having allowed this much, just matched her stare, irritation meeting irritation, cold indifference meeting burning, anxious discomfort until finally the middle-manager just groaned and deigned to explain, because Serena was clearly not the sort of girl who'd bugger off if you just ignored her.

"He was conducting an experiment involving the practical application of digital thought-interface devices." Vincent pointed towards the trode... Things Lisa had planted down on a nearby operating table, which the spy and the scientist were now studying closely. "Those were some of the... Prototypes he came up with."

"Not really what you' expect from a makeup company, huh?" Gabriel joked, and Serena just shot him a heavy-lidded look, even as she couldn't resist smiling either. With all the commando training and bleeding-edge - quite literally - cybernetic enhancements swimming through her bloodstream, and all the cybersecurity work she'd done with the company before, it was really, really easy to forget that, in spite of their forays into cybernetic augmentation and their deadly commando squad and spy division, that Bathrette's main stock was in cosmetics. In Serena's defence, though, she barely ever wore any.

"You should know by now, Doctor McGarahann." Vincent rather coldly responded as the two of them drew in closer to have a better look at the collars as well. "That we've been diversifying, though, I'll admit this may have been a step too far."

Serena just raised an eyebrow, and Vincent, having caught that sudden slip of the tongue, just cleared his throat and reflexively adjusted his tie. "So what, uh, pitch did he sell you guys to do with thought-interfaces?" The vampire asked. These strange, trode-like devices were just raising further questions and concerns in her mind.

"That's classified." The middle-manager quickly responded, ignoring the irritated, weary groans of his dark-haired subordinate. "And irrelevant," He continued, and Serena raised an eyebrow again, suddenly a bit less annoyed and a bit more intrigued. "Because his research rapidly went off the rails. The company was willing to allow Dr. Lazerian a great degree of leeway, owing to his seniority and myriad of accomplishments and his history of producing results."

"However," Vincent continued, "When my superior - The Senior Vice-President of Research and Development - and I caught wind of his..." The middle-manager loudly cleared his throat. "For want of a better word, 'shadiness', combined with how reclusive he'd become over the last few weeks leading up to his disappearance, we told him that we'd be making an inspection of his lab and wanted a detailed report on what he'd been up to. Which is about when he'd left, wiping the data from his computers with it, and leaving us to clean up his... Mess."

"So..." The vampire sounded particularly irritated at that, her gaze turning over towards the bulky-looking cyberterminal right next to them. "There's nothing on those computers we can use?..."

"Well..." The middle-manager cleared his throat once again, and Serena just took a deep breath and gave him another heavy-lidded look.

"Please?..." She asked, already anticipating what was going on in her superior's head, and, after a rather lengthy stare-off, Vincent just reluctantly capitulated and produced a dataslate from the inside of his vest.

"The techs managed to salvage a... Bit of data from his machines." Vincent replied, as he began to fiddle with the slate a bit. "I'll send it over to Dr. McGarahann's terminal for your... Perusement, but..."

"But what?" Serena asked, and Vincent looked right back up, the coldness in his eyes dialed right back up, practically freezing the vampire with his glare, Serena fighting off the urge to recoil back but already looking a bit awkward and shaken up from the sudden shift in his demeanour.

"None of this leaves the building." The middle-manager clearly sternly informed all three of them. "Anything you find on Lazerian's data-banks, you keep to yourself. The last thing we need is ANOTHER potential intelligence leak. Serena..." Vincent gave the vampire a very serious, dire look, even leaning in a bit further to really hammer the point home, which just made her look even more awkward and nervous, needing to lean back a bit. "I'm putting a lot of trust in you here. Don't screw it up."

"Err..." The dark-haired commando just stammered a bit, finding herself very unnerved at the implication he'd let loose like a cloud of poison gas. "O... Kay..." He'd given her the impression that she was playing with fire, which, the vampire mused, her anxious expression turning more disappointed and cynical, was probably what Mr. Van Steyr had intended.

Despite the lengths they'd gone to just obtaining the data off Lazerian's computer, Serena still found herself just a bit... Pessimistic about the whole situation.

She wasn't even all that certain if the data would even be useful at all, especially with how fragmented it was. However, she and her team lacked any other real options unless they wanted to start pestering Vincent again - and Serena most definitely did not. So, they left the unsettlingly clean and still faintly disinfectant-smelling laboratory, heading down the starkly-lit, white-painted corridors of the Research and Development wing to the lab a few blocks down. It was much smaller and much less impressive - but thankfully didn't smell like a hospital. Here was a site that Serena had gotten all-too familiar with, on account of it being where Gabriel did his research, which also meant it was where his terminal was.

When she'd first seen it, the vampire had gotten the impression more of something between a dentists' office and a hacker's lair, her opinion mostly formed by the dentists' chair and the computer equipment hooked up to it that formed the lab's centrepiece, but Gabriel had corrected her. It wasn't a dentists' chair, it was a nanotechnologists' chair, and he'd often used that equipment to analyze and even adjust the programming of the nanobots swimming in Serena's bloodstream that kept her cancerous body from destroying itself and gave her that eerie, perpetual need for blood.

Beyond that, the tiles under their feet were a nice medium-green, complimented by a matching stripe on the wall, and the frosted, translucent glass panels and a similarly translucent sliding door that kept out the rest of the hallway yet let the eccentric scientist have a general idea of what was going on right outside and keep enough privacy - which was good for Serena, as before Bathrette just started sending her boxes of blood, this was where she'd been administered her daily... Transfusion.

Right now, however, they weren't all crowded around Gabriel's terminal for anything that dramatic. Vincent had sent the data over to the only one of them who was actually his direct subordinate, and he'd given them a very stern warning not to copy or send the data over to anyone else.

This meant Gabriel had to sit down in his high-back office chair with Serena and Lisa hovering over his shoulders, and put the data up on the monitor, operating in 'turtle mode' since there weren't enough trode helmets in his lab for all three of them, and there was already a bit of contention brewing over who'd have to spend potentially a few hours going through the very large file the middle-manager sent over.

As it was being loaded up into the document viewer Gabriel and Serena were slowly turning away from the monitor towards each other, the commando looking a bit tense and even dour, and the scientist looking playful and mischievous, a small smile coming on his bespectacled face as Lisa just watched their ritual, just bewildered and uncertain what to expect.

"Serena, I think you shou-" Gabriel opened, but Serena was quicker.

"I'll get you some coffee." The vampire shut him down with a single sentence, not even bothering to add the 'if' part, since they were both already on the same page. The scientist just paused, thumb and forefinger on his chin, considering the offer for a few seconds...

"Deal." He responded, and a small, impish grin came on Serena's face, the scientist just laughing a bit as he caught it. "I'll let you know if I find anything useful..." The scientist rolled his chair in a bit closer and grasped the optical mouse with his right hand, the fingers of his left resting on the keyboard as he began to sift through the data with the antiquated interface, documents and diagrams and research notes popping up on the screen. "What about you, Lisa?" He asked, catching the attention of the red-haired spy who'd been just watching everything with a weird look on her face.

"Er..." Lisa just looked slightly surprised, then a bit contemplative, and very focused when she actually turned back towards the screen, Serena in particular raising an eyebrow with a somewhat concerned look coming on the vampire's face as she caught a glance at just how... Intense her expression was as the spy started sifting through the data on the screen. "I think I'll stay for now."

"Suit yourself..." Gabriel replied, and the two of them began the long processes of combing over all the scattered and fragmented notes and documentations that had been recovered from Lazerian's computer, while Serena just watched, suddenly feeling a bit awkward.

"So... Err..." The vampire turned her blood-red gaze over towards Lisa, the spy's focused glance still unmoving from the computer screen. "Do you want anything?"

"Normally I'd say no since I don't wanna be up all night..." Lisa responded, her gaze still intently focused on the screen, as Serena just gave her a bit of a funny look - it was still only about four in the afternoon, wasn't it? Nowhere near 'too late' for more coffee, by the vampire's own estimates. "But we might have to be, so can you get me a latte?"

By the time Serena had returned from the cafeteria with a tray and three disposable mugs of X-Caff, one with way too much sweetener in and another that seemed to be comprised of mostly steamed milk, she'd returned to a laboratory that seemed to have a much more dire, serious sort of atmosphere to it, with even Gabriel's usual vibrant, chipper demeanour having been turned down a bit. Even the fluorescent lights overhead felt like they'd been dimmed a bit to match the mood, and Lisa had even found another roller-chair from somewhere to rest on the edge of it's seat.

"So... Err..." The vampire asked, handing out refreshments to her co-workers and planting down the tray on a nearby counter, leaning in a bit over Gabriel's shoulder while she took a sip of what was probably her fourth X-caff of the day. "Find anything?"

In response, the scientist just sighed deeply, half disappointed and half bewildered. "I really don't know." He said, and Serena raised an eyebrow. "I can barely make sense of any of his notes - it's all rambling at best and incoherent at worst.

"Yeah..." Lisa groaned, the red-haired spy sounding and looking very, very disappointed. "I thought this would be something interesting, but the parts of it that are even legible at all are just insane rantings."

"Seriously?..." Serena leaned in a bit further to get a better look at the screen, a very weird, bewildered look coming on her face with the first thing she read being a rather vague, but determined affirmation that 'someone was watching' and how he'd need to 'double-up on security', though, with much more flowery language and plenty of expletives, reminiscent of something she'd see scrawled on the walls of an insane asylum, or on an internet forum. "You guys haven't found ANYTHING useful?"

Gabriel shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we haven't even looked through one tenth of his writings." The scientist responded, and the spy sitting right beside him just grimaced at that, clearly not looking forwards to it. "But so far, nothing on where he might have gone or even what the hell he was doing besides trying to make himself immortal."

Though, his delivery was a bit dismissive and jokey, Gabriel's choice of words stirred up something fierce within the vampire's mind, Serena's eyes going wide and the coffee cup slipping right out of her hand, splattering the black liquid sleep substitute onto the green tile, and normally that would have made her pretty anguished and disappointed, but at the moment she had more pressing things to worry about. "Did you say..." The vampire asked. "Make himself immortal?"

"I mean." Gabriel shrugged his shoulders again. "I'm just making an educated guess - Lazerian certainly liked the subject." The scientist pointed over to a particular paragraph displayed on the screen. "The words 'immortality', 'eternal life', and just 'cheating death' come up a lot in his notes."

Serena leaned in a bit further, a cloying, anxious feeling settling in her stomach as she read the line her colleague was pointing out, this one a rather wrathful assumption that Lazerian's work on immortality was going nowhere, and his assistants were beginning to have their doubts, as well as the paranoid - or, maybe justified - fear that one of them was going to rat him out. Her red eyes jumped to another segment of the mad scientists' notes. Then another, another more, her anxiousness and that feeling of gloomy foreboding settling uncomfortably in her stomach like a lead weight.

The more and more she'd read, the worse that feeling became. Not everything was on the topic of 'immortality', mind. Most of it was paranoid ranting about the quality of his assistants and the obstinate, technophobic nature of his superiors, but there was definitely a good deal of talk about his 'lack of time' and his need to 'live forever', and it was making Serena very, very worried, since this wasn't the first she was hearing about this.

Her colleagues were rather quick to dismiss Lazerian's rants of immortality as madness, and Serena probably would have dismissed it too, if it weren't for that chance encounter earlier with that strange 'Thoth' character on Strangeworld'.

He hadn't spoken too much on the subject. Most of his energy seemed to be devoted towards trying - and failing - to shake off the users heckling him. However, he had been quite passionately talking about the 'latest scientific advances in the achievement of immortality' a bit before Serena had showed up in the thread, and now his words were ringing rather painfully in her ears.

The vampire took in deep breaths of air as she tried to focus, feeling a flash of irritation flush right up her neck as she found herself annoyed that she'd dropped her coffee, kind of needing it right now. It was a connection she'd come across by sheer happenstance, but it was still a pretty disturbing one, especially if it turned out there really WAS a connection between Lazerian and the disappearances plaguing Claycroft of late. Serena took a deep breath, a cold, disturbed look coming on her face as she contemplated what sort of gruesome experiments a mad scientist would be getting up to in order to discover the secrets of eternal life, the tang of disinfectant from Lazerian's lab still hanging heavily in her nose...

Serena began to sidle a bit towards the door, a myriad of possibilities floating around in her anxious mind. Was 'Thoth' just an alias Lazerian was using online?... She found it a bit unlikely - Thoth had sounded and acted pretty young. Still, the coincidence felt just a bit too... Strong to ignore, and even if this didn't exactly lead them right towards their mark, it still couldn't hurt to... Investigate this possible connection further...

"Serena?..." Gabriel gave her a look that was half-amicable and half-concerned, while Lisa was just looking at her funny again, a slightly awkward expression coming on the dark-haired commando's face as she realized she was already halfway out the door. "Leaving already?"

"I just... Uhh..." The vampire laughed a bit, knowing already how crazy she'd sound. "Well, that whole 'immortality' thing gave me kind of a hunch..."

"Huh?" Lisa raised an eyebrow, the spy's expression quickly turning very intrigued - and confused. "What kinda hunch?" She asked.

"Detective's instinct! I'll explain it later!" The vampire yelled out, dismissing the spy's question with a wave goodbye as she disappeared through the doorway.

Her colleagues' eyes were tracking her silhouette through the frosted glass window as she broke into a dead sprint, running through the halls in the general direction of the elevators. It wasn't so much that she didn't want to entertain Lisa's curiosity and make herself look like a paranoid lunatic in the process...

Well, not entirely that, but also because that one lead she had might've been a time-sensitive one. After all, if she wanted to talk to the user who went by the name of Thoth, she'd have to do it before he logged off or quit the server entirely... Or got banned.

Serena's pawn-shaped avatar stared into the glowing white outline she'd drawn on the black, neon-outlined wall of Strangeworld's off-topic board, the virtual calligraphy brush she'd used now hovering right between where her lip and nose would be in the real world.

It was a thread in the making, and she'd gotten started on it as quickly as she could, rushing back home on her motorbike and slapping on the diadem-like trodes almost as soon as she'd gotten in through the door. Unfortunately, she was beginning to stall a bit, her avatar's wide, black button eyes focused on the space right in the middle where the thread's subject was supposed to go. Serena was having a bit of trouble trying to figure out what exactly she should call it - and it needed to be just right.

The vampire had a bad hunch about this whole situation, about the disappearances, about Lazerian, and about those ridiculous ramblings about immortality, but for the time being, it was just that - a hunch. If this was going to go anywhere then she'd need to speak with the man who, by an insane coincidental stroke of luck on her part, had tied all of this together. The matrix user who called himself himself 'Thoth.'

So, she'd come back to Strangeworld, the matrix server she'd first found him on, but there wasn't exactly a big, glowing sign that could lead her to him - and the forum didn't even have a list of online users, either. Serena had gone around a few threads, asking around, and those few users who were taking her seriously couldn't really help much, with one user advising her to 'lurk off-topic' - referring to the server's topicless subforum where anything and everything was discussed - since he'd probably be hanging out there, talking about his latest cult bullshit'. Serena just didn't have the patience to yell at him for stating the obvious. Out of options, she'd elected to just make her own thread and hope Thoth would find it, but that just left her with the dilemma of what to call it...

Something subtle, like 'secrets and forbidden lore?...' Serena's avatar just shook it's round head, the eyes giving a cartoony impression of an annoyed, heavy-lidded look. No, too subtle and it'd probably just fly right over his head. Completely overt, like 'Cults about scientific immortality?...' It could work, but there was also the potential of it getting filled with trolls and idiots and, if Thoth did see it, he'd probably just take one look at the ensuing circus show and do a one-eighty out of there.

Just open the thread with something inflammatory and offensive?... The vampire just groaned, her round, button-eyes going heavy-lidded and irritated again. That would just be worse, wouldn't it?

Eventually, after spending way too long contemplating the issue, Serena just gave up and went with something as direct as possible, just writing - 'Scientific Immortality' on the door, and pausing for a few seconds before deciding to be even more direct and adding, 'Thoth, I need to talk to you', right underneath.

She dismissed the brush, uttered the words of power, and right before her eyes, the wall became engulfed in a bright, white light that slowly coalesced into the form of an elegant-looking black doorframe with a neon red outline that Serena quickly had changed into a much more inviting and appealing looking blue, and lovely lacquered plastic-y plaque right on the door that'd changed her flowing cursive script on the thread's topic into a series of elegant, white serif block letters with an old-century, art deco flair. All that was left to do was head on in.

A few users stumbled in while Serena was busy changing the furniture in the little parlour room that represented her thread, the first of them while she was moving a digital couch around the soft, blue-tinted room, and he didn't really have anything constructive to say, being more surprised that 'Sanguina' - the alias Serena had chosen for herself, and like with her avatar it had become painfully old, painfully quick after her cybernetics were installed - was the one to start this thread, as opposed to the user she was looking for. Despite the fact that they were in agreement on that, Serena quickly had to chase him and his moose antlers off when it became clear that 'BigMooseMan' wasn't here to do much more than troll and make stupid comments.

The next few users to enter the thread weren't that much better, being rather obviously just here to start trouble and acting bit disappointed the 'man of the hour' wasn't even here, only some 'stupid emo kid', which just sent a flush of choler running up Serena's virtual neck.

Things sort of degenerated from there, with the thread getting wildly derailed as more users showed up and, disappointed at Thoth's absence, just started getting rowdy and making dumb comments about cults in general, trading wild rumours and stories about what those wacky cultists get up to.

Serena found herself constantly cutting in, trying to get things mostly back on track before they managed to preemptively chase Thoth away, or, worse, brought the wrath of the moderators down on them. Unfortunately, nobody was willing to actually listen to her, and the vampire found herself just lurking in a corner, stewing in her own irritation and annoyance and self-loathing for thinking this was a good idea, and contemplating the door at the room's other end, weighing up whether or not to just abandon the thread and re-think her approach.

While Serena was debating absconding from the horrible mess her thread had degenerated into, something soon seemed to shift in the virtual air. The atmosphere changed with an audible snap as the previously vibrant and rowdy gaggle of forumites she'd managed to attract fell silent, and as the crowd parted, Serena's eyes went wide in shock - and pleasant surprise.

If her avatar had a mouth, it probably would have formed an astonished, but relieved smile. As though welcoming the guest of honour at a ball, everyone moved collectively off the sides of the room to reveal a familiar-looking pawn-shaped avatar wearing a long, black robe, the hood down this time to reveal a face that was as irritated as two button-like eyes could convey. Thoth had noticed her thread.

There were a few cheers of "WHOOO!" and "THERE'S OUR CULTIST!" as Serena rapidly approached him, hoping to salvage things and get a word in before he just logged off out of disgust. There were a few hecklers yelling out stuff like, "Hey, are you immortal yet?" or, "Can't believe you haven't been banned!" but Serena's avatar just took a deep breath and gave the cultist a slightly exasperated, but sympathetic look, just telling him to ignore the trolls with her gaze, and Thoth just sighed and shook his head.

"So, you wanted to talk to me?" He asked, his tone still sour and irritable, and Serena didn't blame him, especially after his last thread and ESPECIALLY especially with how the rest of the users with them were hollering and hooting and jeering them on in a way that reminded Serena more of a pack of drunk football hooligans than elite computer hackers.

"Well... Err..." Serena paused for a bit, needing to mull over it for a moment. Embarrassingly, she hadn't actually bothered to plan this far ahead.

Serena had a bit of a pessimistic assumption floating in the back of her mind that this silliness would never actually work out. Now that it had, she was kicking herself for it, and not helping her concentration was the peanut gallery surrounding her, cracking stupid comments about them.

"Wait..." One user fairly close to her looked genuinely shocked. "You think she called that Thoth guy here because she's putting the moves on him?"

" 'She' " Another user mockingly jeered, even momentarily summoning a pair of cartoon hands to pull off the finger quotes while Serena just blanked out and Thoth just looked at him with as much disdain as could be crammed into a pair of button-like cartoon eyes.

"Yeah, retard!" A third user piped in, playfully bumping into the first, his tone more jocular and jokey than mean-spirited. "There's no girls on Strangeworld, remember?!"

"ALRIGHT, THAT'S IT, EVERYONE GET THE HELL OUT!" Serena finally snapped, losing what little remained of her composure and silencing the guffaws and jeers of the peanut gallery. "I'M PRIVATING THE THREAD!" It wasn't so much that this unspoken rule of this particular internet forum offended her. She was just pissed off at how everybody else seemed to be treating this like a joke and being loud and rowdy enough that it was impossible to even think.

Like with the last thread, there were a lot of groans and complaints. Some users even voiced accusations of 'backseat moderation,' but eventually most of the users just headed out through the door, back into the general space of off-topic. The few users who mostly remained to heckle 'Sanguina' and 'Thoth' and make insults pertaining to their sexual orientation were forcefully booted when Serena's avatar finished updating the thread's privacy settings by writing a fairly simplistic runic symbol on the wall with her virtual calligraphy brush. The last remaining users' avatars flickered right out of existence, with nary even a 'pop', and that was that.

Serena's avatar took a deep, relieved sigh, the silence feeling like a soothing, silken pillow right underneath her head. Finally, she and Thoth were the only two users left in the thread. The robed cultist stood at the centre of the black, neon-blue bordered room with a look in his eyes somewhere between surprised, relieved, and actually quite glad.

"So... Err..." He finally asked, his tone much warmer and his attitude much more amicable after Serena had kicked all the trolls out. "Did you... Seriously wanna talk?"

The vampire just locked up a bit, an anxious feeling creeping up her virtual spine, the silence making it much easier to think, but the answer just as difficult to find. Well... The answer was 'yes', obviously she wanted to talk, but only so much as she could determine if he had anything to do with Lazerian or the disappearances, or if those were related, and if Thoth caught even the slightest hint of disloyalty or motive off her she could kiss that trail goodbye. "I mean, I..." She stammered, laughing a bit, trying to break the tension. "I do. Your er... Last thread gave me a bit of food for thought."

"Seriously?" As far as his simplistic avatar could articulate emotion, Thoth looked a bit pleasantly surprised, tilting his head a bit. "I was thinking this might have been the wrong place to talk about it..." He added. 'Pleasant' summarized his demeanour quite well actually. Serena felt that it was because somebody was actually seriously interested in what he had to say, and she was really hoping the cat wouldn't fly out of the proverbial bag too soon.

"Well, honestly..." Serena just laughed a bit. "This forum's a bit... Colourful." She'd sort of described Strangeworld as a hub for computer hackers and other net-based renegades, and those sorts were definitely there, but... On reflection this server was really more of a breeding ground for idiots, trolls, and idiots trolling trolls. While it definitely could be useful for finding stuff out, most days - like today - it was for the most part, a place for cheap thrills, pirate copies of software and movies, and racy drawings of cartoon girls. "But I am a bit interested... After all, y'know..." The vampire laughed again, just a touch more awkwardly than before. "Who doesn't wanna live forever, right?"

"Yeah..." Thoth responded, his avatar looking fairly pleased, and a tiny twinge of guilt crept up Serena's neck, though, she was doing her best to avoid showing it - which didn't require that much effort, lying over the internet being as offensively easy as it was. "That's kinda what I was thinking when I first heard about it. I mean, I thought it was kinda bogus until I came to one of the meetings, and then it kinda... Clicked."

"What kind of meetings?" She sort of said on instinct, her avatar bearing a curious expression to hide the intense inquisitiveness that lay just underneath. Now they were finally getting somewhere...

"Oh you know, the usual cult stuff..." He half-joked, and Serena could practically feel the wind get knocked right out of her, her avatar probably would have displayed an awkward grimace of a smile if her ball-shaped head had a mouth. "I mean, lets' call a spade a spade, right?" Thoth laughed, and Serena just took a deep breath... This was a good thing, right? He was dropping the facade he'd used while getting heckled and trolled and was being a bit more... Open and amicable. Was it a trick?... "We all gathered in this server, and 'Thanatos' - that's what the leader calls himself-"

" 'Thanatos', as in 'The Lord of Death?' " Serena asked, a bewildered and slightly disappointed look on her virtual face, even as the gears of her mind were beginning to turn... "And he runs a cult about pursuing immortality?..."

"It's a bit unimaginative, I know." Thoth groaned. "But it fits, and he really knows his stuff. I was expecting some occult bollocks or a lecture that ended with, 'So this is when we're gonna try and get a rogue AI to hijack your body', but it's not really a 'typical' cult at all. There's barely any mysticism to it. All of Thanatos' theories and practical experiments are deeply rooted in the scientific method."

The round, ball-shaped head of Serena's avatar tilted a bit and one of her button-like eyes 'lidded' a bit, the gesture a reasonable facsimile of raising an eyebrow. "So, he's a scientist, then?" She asked, not exactly wanting to jump to conclusions, but a few ideas were coming into her head...

The cultist's head just lowered a bit more towards his avatar's pawn-shaped body, tilting a bit with a nonplussed look on his face, a bit like he was shrugging his shoulders. "I mean, he SOUNDED like every single one of my college professors. Anyways, I could probably talk about it all day, but if you're really interested..." He let the words hang in the air for a bit, and, even disconnected from her body as she was, Serena could feel her heart thump with tension. "Why don't you come to one of our meetings?" He asked, and it took all of the vampire's restraint and mental fortitude to avoid her eyes going wide in anticipation. This was her ticket. To more than just a stupid college lecture, if her hunch was right...

"Oh!..." Serena took a deep breath, trying to focus, dialing down the enthusiasm just a bit. She was so close... Just had to... Play it cool for a second longer. "Well, er... I mean..." She just laughed a bit, momentarily unable to look him in the eyes. "Yeah, I'd like that. Do you have the address?"

"Just a second..." Thoth replied, before turning away and uttering a command word, a program in the shape of a pen and a piece of stationary hovering directly in front of him. "What's your E-mail address?" He asked, briefly turning away from his writings.

"Err..." Serena needed a few seconds to think about that. Obviously, her work-email was right out for reasons beyond it being monitored, and she definitely didn't want to give an internet cult her personal mail... "Just send it to..." The vampire groaned, having finally settled on an answer and not liking it one bit. "JoeyDayesFan981 at positronmail dot com."

She couldn't look him in the eye out of sheer force of embarrassment, which rapidly turned to irritation when the cultist just started loudly snickering, barely able to hold onto a composure and failing outright and erupting into a fit of laughter when Serena's avatar gave him a death glare.

"Oh, cut that out!" The vampire growled, flush with awkward choler. "I made that address when I was like, twelve!" Serena was really, really hoping that this sort of thing would stay between the two of them, since she knew damn well Gabriel would never let her live it down if he knew she had an E-mail addressed named for a sugary, overproduced, ear-violating pop idol a young girl who'd yet to develop an ear for classical music would be obsessed with. She was really hoping that Thoth would have just responded, 'who the hell's that?' but, the perversity of the universe being what it was, she'd evidently picked the wrong cultist to probe...

"Alright, alright..." Thoth responded, beginning to calm down, though, still giving off a few idle chortles to Serena's chagrin, as, with yet another command word, the stationary folding itself up into a stylish little envelope, which the cultist was able to quickly write Serena's embarrassing E-mail address on the front and added a quick runic symbol in the shape of a postage stamp, before sending it off with another program in the shape of a blazing white carrier pigeon.

The virtual messenger bird snatched the envelope right out of the air in front of them and disappeared right into the wall, phasing into the space between spaces, the sea of raw information, already fast on its way through the matrix towards Serena's home server - and towards her inbox. "We usually start meetings at ten-thirty P.M. on Sunday nights. The lecture starts at about eleven..." There was a long pause, as an unpleasant, annoyed look settled on Thoth's face. "Usually starts at eleven..."

"That's a bit late, isn't it?" Serena asked.

Once again, Thoth's avatar just mimed shrugging its shoulders. "I guess it's to filter out people who aren't dedicated enough."

"Or crazy enough." The vampire offhandedly added, though, when she saw the slightly moody look coming on Thoth's face, she just nervously laughed it off and added, "No offence intended."

The cultist just took a deep breath, and shook his head. "A lot of people would probably think we're crazy." Having been rattled a bit by the slight repercussions of her earlier stupid remark, her mind was much more focused and attentive and Serena was able to avoid visibly chafing or looking offended at being grouped in with him. "But that's just because they're too stubborn and stuck in their ways to have an open mind about stuff like that, right?"

"Yeah..." Serena forced a laugh, hoping it didn't sound quite as awkward or anxious or dripping with trace amounts of venom and irritability to him as it did to her. "Right. See you there?..." She asked, just a bit too eager to finally end this conversation, the tension and nervousness and the fears she might involuntarily break character or blow her cover starting to well up inside her like steam in a pressure cooker...

"See you there!" Thoth responded, sounding enthusiastic and almost glad that he'd finally gotten someone to hear him out, and in spite of how this cult of his might be connected with Lazerian and the disappearances, it made Serena feel just a tiny bit guilty. Thankfully she wouldn't need to be burdened with guilt for much longer, as the cultist just tilted his head a bit, his button-like eyes as excited and amicable as they could be, before his avatar just popped out of existence.

The man behind 'Thoth' had logged off from his cyberdeck and returned to the real world, leaving Serena all alone in her private thread, the vampire's avatar just standing there, breathing deeply despite not needing to, the tension permeating thickly through the virtual space like poison gas-

\*snrk...\*

Unable to contain herself anymore, Serena just broke out into a violent fit of virtual laughter, more out of relief and catharsis than amusement. Were she in meatspace, she undoubtedly would have been sweating bullets, but... She'd done it! She'd followed up on that lead, and, actually got something out of it, though...

Serena just sighed, her victory a touch bitter by the possibility she was chasing a smoked herring like an overenthusiastic hunting dog, but... The vampire just shook her head. No, she had to think positive, right? She got this information out of Thoth despite being... The vampire laughed at the irony. Probably the least qualified of the three to do any sort of snooping or spying, but there was a silver lining to that too, wasn't there? Gabriel HAD told her there were some things she could get just by knowing what to say, and it couldn't hurt to at the very least practice these sorts of social skills she'd neglected for... A disappointed look came over Serena's button-like eyes... Her entire life.

No! no! no!... The vampire shook her head. She could worry about whether or not anything she'd even done today was useful or lamenting how much of a shut-in she was later. Right now, she needed to focus on what to do next, and what to do about this cult... Maybe she'd better start by telling the rest of the team about what she'd been able to find...

The events of the rest of the week - Thoth having given her the invitation on a Tuesday afternoon - had been... Surprisingly calm, all things considered, which to Serena, just made it a bit more nerve-wracking. The first thing the vampire did after Thoth logged off was log off herself - and since she forgot to delete the thread, the next time she logged onto Strangeworld she got an earful from one of the moderators for 'littering' and 'wasting their oh-so-precious bandwidth' - and ring up her co-workers with the debatably good news.

Gabriel, as she'd been able to predict, sounded pretty enthusiastic to hear how she'd managed to infiltrate a crazy cult of immortality seekers, his positive and sanguine demeanour only slightly waning when Serena broke it to him that she hadn't gotten to the 'infiltration' part yet, only the 'getting invited' part. Lisa, meanwhile - the spy having fallen asleep in the other chair in Gabriel's lab some time ago when the insanity and terror of wading through Lazerian's notes eventually gave way to boredom and exhaustion - thought the whole situation was a bit weird, though, she DID agree with Serena's hypothesis of a connection between all three elements. Lazerian, the disappearances, and this cult of immortality - they had to be related somehow, right?

Serena, as the one who'd been invited, and as Gabriel joked, the one who - by her own reluctant, irritated admission - needed to socialize more, would have to be the one to actually infiltrate the cult's meeting. Though, there was still the matter of what exactly to do about it.

Serena didn't know that much about net cults, but she was an avid reader, and she'd read enough horror novels to know that just gormlessly sitting there, listening to the sermon was bound to be a waste of time at best and a convenient way to get blindsided and tied to the virtual sacrificial altar at worst. The three of them talked over the videophone at length about what to do about it all, when Lisa, all practical and pragmatic-minded, told Serena she should probably try and figure out the server's IP address while she was in there so they could trace it's location in the physical world.

IP, of course standing for Internet Protocol, the name a relic of the older, pre-crash net, but it fit - the protocol's function was very still much the same today. A label associated with a particular server to allow it to communicate with the rest of The Matrix, sending and receiving the peer-to-peer signals that formed the sea of information, and something distinct from the net address that allowed a user to connect to the server in question.

Serena, being the professional - as in, it used to be her job - cyberdeck user she was, found her eyes going wide in surprise, wonder, and excitement at Lisa's suggestion, especially since it gave her an idea of her own - install a worm on the cult's server. The vampire surprised herself with how simple it was... At least, on paper.

A worm is a type of malicious program that is installed on a computer system in much of the same way it's namesake in the natural world 'installs' itself within a juicy-looking apple. Usually they're used by black-hat hackers - the 'scene' term for those users who hack for personal gain and at the expense of others - to farm information like passwords, credstick numbers, or personal information or to just re-write the code of another server or system to the hacker's preferences, which usually didn't have the wellbeing of the server's owner or users in mind.

Compared to the sorts of horror stories Serena had heard about 'computer viruses' holding your system for ransom or just turning your hardware into a very expensive paperweight, just having a worm snoop out a server's I.P. address was fairly benign - and a bit reminiscent of the pranks she'd heard about in college - but programming it was still going to take a lot of work on her part, especially if she wanted it done by Sunday - which they did.

For the rest of the week, Serena found herself in an odd mirror of her prior work life in the cybersecurity department - in that she'd spent most of her waking hours in The Matrix, only really logging off to take the occasional smoke break or grab something to eat. She'd set up a programming apparatus in one of her server's 'rooms' - a tall, open sort of ballroom with elegant red-wallpaper and large, richly-decorated windows showing a gentle shower of rain 'outside' to help her focus. Though, the vampire couldn't ever quite shake the nagging feeling she'd set up the exact scenario a mad scientist would have while creating some sort of patchwork monster, which certainly applied here - since she'd stolen a few snippets of code from some projects she'd found on Strangeworld.

The programming apparatus took the form of a large piece of clockwork machinery, an intricate system of grinding gears and spinning dials and pipes full of steam, all knobs and wheels and levers and buttons and keypads. With the right words of command, it allowed Serena's black dress-clad avatar to dart back and forth, writing, fine-tuning, and altering every section of code of the worm taking shape, gestating in an ominous glass tank full of luminescent fluid, taking the form of... Well... A blue, metallic, shiny-looking earthworm. When Lisa came over to her home server to check it out, she'd jokingly chided Serena for her lack of imagination, but the vampire just huffed and told her a time crunch wasn't exactly good for creativity.

She really had been on a time crunch - she'd barely gotten it done by Sunday afternoon, and her logical mind was telling her to spend the rest of the time between then and now bug-testing and fine-tuning her creation. Her body, on the other hand, was whispering sweet little nothings to the very worn-out and weary programmer about how she deserved a bit of rest. Aren't you a bit cold, Serena? Doesn't your bed look so warm and inviting, Serena?...

So, before she knew it, the sun had drifted over the horizon to bring warmth and light to another part of the globe and the programmer could see a gentle dusting of late-fall snow fluttering outside her window as she displaced the covers and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, a strange... Peaceful feeling having crept up on her, which was burned right out of her like a match thrown into a powder-keg when her blood-red eyes drifted towards the clock by her bed and Serena realized that it was 10:48 PM, and that she'd slept right through her alarm.

The panicked frenzy that ensued as Serena slapped on her trodes and booted into the matrix definitely wasn't helped by that tension that'd been slowly creeping up on her all week, the prospect of infiltrating this cult of immortality seekers created a slow-rising sense of dread inside her like a soldier staring forlornly out into no man's land, clutching her rifle, knowing the battle is quite literally just on the horizon.

It was probably a good thing Serena had found herself very, very busy over the last few days, since, if she wasn't, the vampire felt like she'd probably have been paralyzed with nervousness and pessimistically thinking up a thousand ways this whole plan of hers could blow up in her face and end with a sacrificial dagger up against her throat - and she'd gotten enough knives pressed up there for one lifetime, thank you very much.

As it was, she was only able to devote a small portion of her brainpower to anxiously contemplating her doom, since she was both getting the worm ready for deployment and talking to Gabriel and Lisa about her plans through a communication program - that, and configuring her avatar. Gabriel offhandedly asked if this was the sort of cult meeting you'd have to dress up for, and it was starting to make Serena worry even more...

This sort of thing being a first for her, Serena wasn't too sure what to expect as she stepped through the virtual doorway out of her server and connecting to the secretive, hidden realm where this 'Thanatos' character held his forbidden lectures on immortality. Her mind started to wander, conjuring scenes of fire and brimstone, pentagrams and crossed inscribed on the virtual walls in blazing, fluorescent reds and oranges, shadowy figures in hooded robes chanting something ominous in Latin, and some winsome, blonde virgin tied up naked on the altar - just in case they weren't saving it for her... Though, well... This was the internet, Serena idly mused, a wry smile coming onto her virtual face. If this cult wanted to find a virgin to sacrifice they wouldn't have to look too hard.

Still, she wasn't quite expecting to find herself in a charming-looking entrance hall that, bizarrely, looked like a cross between something you'd find in a church and in a university. The room was illuminated with warm, inviting orange-lamps that kept the whole room well-lit, with soft, green-coloured walls and a hardwood floor, a few plush-looking couches, some flowers sitting contentedly in simple, austere white vases, a set of sturdy double-doors in the back, and even an oaken reception desk that was - thankfully - unmanned, save for an elegant-looking guestbook program which there was no way in hell Serena was ever planning on signing. The whole room was empty, which, for her was definitely fortunate since it was probably the best place to release the worm.

Serena wasn't really sure exactly what sort of dress-style was 'cult appropriate', but she'd been able to get a general idea from what she'd seen Thoth's Strangeworld avatar wear and styled an altered version of her home avatar accordingly.

The black dress was swapped out for a sinister-looking black hooded robe, complimented with a yellow rope around her midsection to tighten it, and plenty of miscellaneous pockets and compartments, one of which she was able to quickly reach into after doing another cursory look to make sure she was truly alone, to pull out a shiny, almost-metallic blue earthworm...

Really, it didn't matter where she dropped it - the 'simulation' was merely just a representation of the program to make it easier for humans to navigate. She just needed to remain undetected - which, thankfully, she was, and needed the worm to remain undetected, which...

Serena's cartoony eyes lidded a bit, and a slightly worried look came onto her face as the worm jumped out of her hand, crawling over the floorboards behind the reception desk and disappearing right into the wall, into the raw code of the server itself where it would get to work. Well, she didn't really know how long the worm could do that.

It wasn't a super obviously malevolent piece of malware, which - hopefully - meant that it could slip by the detection of any anti-virus or ICE programs running on this server, but it was also a very basic piece of malware, not even having the barest scrap of intelligence or self-preservation instincts that even a the lowliest alpha-class artificial intelligence could muster. All she'd programmed to do was slip into the systems of the server and report it's I.P. address - and anything else it could find - back to her. Serena just took a deep, slightly worried breath. She'd just have to hope that was good enough.

With the worm loosed into the bowels of the cult's server, Serena turned her attentions back towards the grand, oaken double-doors at the opposite end of the reception hall, the programmed wool robes she was wearing were doing little to sooth the nervous chill going up her virtual spine.

Aside from the doorway bridging her server to theirs', it was the only point of egress from the cult's reception hall, and it didn't exactly take a genius to figure out the lecture - and Serena just raised an eyebrow at that. It was weird how a cult was holding a 'lecture' instead of a 'sermon', but...

She took a look around the pleasant-feeling entrance hall she found herself in, her cartoony eyes catching an old-fashioned round, analog clock, needing to take a few seconds, recalling half-forgotten memories from her childhood before Serena's eyes went wide, and an anxious, slightly disappointed smile came on her face as she dashed for the double-doors. This wasn't really a normal cult by any stretch of the imagination, was it? She was also about fifteen minutes late for the lecture, so thinking would have to wait.

Past the double-doors was an almost completely different scene, like she'd somehow been transferred from a pleasant small-town church in the old century to a medieval dungeon, with musty looking stone-brick walls and a vaulted ceiling, torches mounted in ornate sconces that illuminated a long, creaky wooden staircase that forced Serena to slow down a bit as she made her descent further and further into the bowels of this forbidden Matrix server.

Obviously, she didn't want to fall; her avatar couldn't exactly have its neck broken, but it wouldn't do her any good to introduce herself to the cult by tumbling down into their meeting room and falling flat on her face. The deeper and deeper she went into the dark bowels of the virtual Earth, the more her feelings began to stir, Serena growing - and looking - more and more tense as the possibilities of what she'd find - and, pessimistically, the possibilities of how she could mess this up - came crawling up on her like a rancid caterpillar jaunting merrily up the back of her neck.

When she did finally reach the bottom of the staircase she'd felt was at least a couple dozen meters longer than it needed to be, Serena looked more... Confused than anything else. While, in retrospect she definitely SHOULD have been, she hadn't actually been expecting an... Actual lecture hall.

Serena had been expecting something a bit more... Cultist-y, and there certainly were the trappings of the occult and the forbidden. The hall was lit with dim orange lamps and black tallow candles down by the stage at the lecture hall's lowest level. The walls were even painted jet black, with a creaky wooden floor underneath to match the staircase she'd just taken, but if she didn't know any better she'd have assumed it was just a university lecture hall a particularly macabre professor had decorated for Halloween.

It was certainly a dead ringer for the one she'd spent much of her early adulthood in back in college, with its semicircular design and the tiered seating descending in steps down towards an empty central dais, which was covered with the aforementioned black tallow candles to create some sort of mystical impression, though...

Serena quickly realized two important differences as she drew in closer, descending down the creaking wooden stairs of the lecture hall itself. For one, rather than the scholarly desks she'd been quite used to, the seating of this lecture hall took the form of several large, rounded wooden pews, much more reminiscent of a church - and more in line with what she'd been expecting. The second difference was that, in her university days, her fellow students didn't ever seem to have hoods drawn up over their heads and black shadows covering their faces, and only rarely were they all expectantly staring at her from behind a legion of shadowy veils.

Serena, suddenly aware that she stuck out like a sore thumb, found herself locking up, eyes wide and a nervous expression coming onto her face as the assembled seekers of immortality just stared into her. The vampire began to fidget a bit and, nervously laugh to herself, wondering if she'd already managed to blow her cover - and if she was going to be able to get off this server alive...

Thankfully, Serena was able to hold onto her composure for long enough to notice one of the cultists sitting in the pews was a bit.... Different from rest of the crowd - which, she'd mused, was a very generous way of describing about eight or so people.

It wasn't in way he was dressed - he was identical to the rest of them, same black robes that were a bit darker than Serena's - as it turned out, she'd gotten the tone a bit wrong - the same shadows covering his face, and the same yellow tassels tied around his abdomen. What really distinguished him in the vampire's eyes was this cultist's demeanour.

The rest of the assembled immortality seekers were staring at her with what was either curiosity, irritation, indifference - or murderousness, Serena really couldn't tell behind those shadows - but this cultist's expression was rather clear even in spite of the darkness covering his face. She could almost picture the enthusiastic, relieved grin behind his umbral veil from the way he'd stood up and was energetically waving her over, and Serena just looked at him a bit awkwardly, even as she raised an eyebrow.

"Thoth?" She asked herself. With little in the way of other options that didn't involve blowing her cover or running away screaming like a little girl, Serena rather nervously sidled over towards the pew where he was sitting all by his lonesome - which wasn't as bad as it would normally have been, since Serena counted at least fifteen pews of varying lengths, and this motley crew would have trouble even filling a single one.

As she'd sat down, the enthusiastic cultist removed his hood, and banished the veil of shadows to reveal a face that was as familiar as it was foreign. The extremely exaggerated, cartoony nature of Strangeworld's enforced style generally left little room for faces - and even hair most of the time - so Serena wasn't exactly expecting to see a simplified, cartoony in a lesser way face a bit like her own avatar, a scholarly, well-read sort of person, only accentuated by a simplistic rendition of what was likely a very neat-cut 'do of sandy brown hair in the real world and a pair of exaggerated coke-bottle glasses - and Serena was beginning to suddenly wonder why it seemed like a lot of people she'd associated with were a bit hard of seeing. Still, the eager, amicable smile he wore told her she was right on the money.

"I'm..." He laughed earnestly a bit. "Glad you came, Sanguina."

"I didn't have much else to do with my weekend." 'Sanguina' responded with an incredibly bold-faced lie as she leaned back a bit in the pew, trying to sort of keep things a bit cool, not to look too enthusiastic or too apathetic - or too anxious, considering what she was really there for. "So I thought I'd see for myself if this 'immortality' stuff is really all you said it was."

"I think it's always important to keep an open mind." Thoth replied, as their twin gazes turned over towards the empty stage. "You'll be able to make a judgment on that pretty soon."

"Wait, err..." Serena raised an eyebrow again. "The sermon-er... The lecture hasn't started yet?" She asked, and Thoth just groaned, a bit irritated.

"I said 'Usually', remember?" He replied, and an awkward smile came on Serena's face even as her brow lidded. So, thankfully enough, she wasn't the only one who was late tonight... "But... Well..." Thoth took a deep breath. "Before the lecture starts, we should probably take care of that hood..."

"Huh?" Serena just looked confused. "What do you mean?"

Thoth just demonstrated, pulling his hood back over his head, his face once again covered in a dense, black obfuscating shadow that seemed impervious to any sort of illumination, no matter the angle his head was facing. Serena, obviously, didn't have such a function installed in her robes, and showed it when she pulled her own hood up over her head, a look on her face somewhere between confused and sour. "So... Uh..." She asked. "Do I need that... Shadow?"

Thoth just shrugged his shoulders, the black umbral veil over his face artfully concealing an expression that probably just said, 'Iunno.' "I mean, I'm not really sure, buuuut..." The two of them once again looked around the lecture hall towards the rest of the cultists in attendance.

The initial excitement of Serena's arrival had long since worn off, and the rest of the prospective seekers of immortality simply returned to what they were doing previously, staring off into space with a body language that seemed to indicate intense, soul-crushing boredom, or fiddling with programs hovering in front of their heads, newsfeeds, videoscreens, and even one cultist who appeared to be playing one of those 'classical' video games from the old century. The kind you'd use a physical remote for, which, in deference to the almighty god of total pointlessness, he'd actually been holding in his virtual hands.

"Well..." Thoth shrugged his shoulders again. "You know what they say, 'When in Rome.' Juuust hold still." The cultist raised a hand towards Serena's face. "This'll only take a second..."

With another word of power and a gesture that looked a bit like he was playing 'scissors' in a primary-school game of psychology, he'd copied and pasted the shadowing script into the code of Serena's avatar, and instantaneously, a thick black umbral veil covered her hooded face. It blended her in almost seamlessly with the rest of the crowd - if you ignored the slight wrongness of her robe's tone or the somewhat 'off' way she was conducting herself, though she'd hoped that could be forgiven for a 'noob.'

Serena was also a bit thankful the veil was concealing her emotional state, because at the present moment she was fairly certain she looked a bit nervous. She'd contemplated telling Thoth she really didn't NEED a shadow, ostensibly because she didn't want to make a fuss but also because she was a bit wary about accepting snippets of code from strangers without, at the very least, running it through an anti-virus program.

It could have a tracking program in it! Or an action logger! Or... Something or another that would tip the cultists off to her true intentions!... Serena took another look over at Thoth, and, though she couldn't see his expression, the way he was slightly slouched in the pew certainly LOOKED relaxed enough, and her paranoia cooled just a bit. She couldn't really feel any malice coming off him, and if the shadow script did have any malware in it, Serena mused, then he was probably unaware of it... Which didn't reassure her all that much.

"So... Well..." Serena took a deep breath, and turned her attention down towards the empty stage. "What now?"

Thoth just groaned again. "Well, now we've just gotta wait, I guess." He his head turned back over to her. "Did you bring anything with you?" Serena found herself once again thankful for the veil of shadows covering her face, as otherwise Thoth would have seen her eyes go wide and a look of panic come on her face, her nervousness jumping straight to conclusions for just a moment before the cultist added, "Like, a videofeed program or a book or something."

"I... Err..." Serena took a deep, relieved breath, and just laughed a bit nervously to herself. So that's what he'd meant. She just thanked her lucky stars she didn't do much more than fidget slightly in her seat - the vampire felt as though if she'd actually flinched, she'd be a goner. "No, sorry..." She just shook her head. "I didn't think I'd need one."

"Well..." Thoth just groaned, and seemed to recline deeper into the wooden pew, an annoyed look artfully concealed by shadow. "Looks like we're in the same boat, then, because I forgot to bring anything..." He paused, and Serena could have sworn she could feel a very irritated-looking frown form on the cultist's face. "Again."

Serena wasn't really sure what to think about that at first, but soon enough she'd be able to figure it out, a spaced-out but irritated look slowly coming onto her virtual face, artfully concealed by the veil of shadows, as her posture began to slump more and more with each minute that passed. Bored. That was how she felt. Really. Bored. Now that she'd actually gotten into the cult the nervousness and fear had been completely exorcised from her as she'd confronted the situation that'd created it.

Without the possibility of what may be laying in wait tormenting her, there wasn't anything stopping Serena from realizing that now she was stuck waiting in a virtual lecture hall for a habitually late professor, and there probably wouldn't be any summoning of rogue artificial intelligences or virgin sacrifice until he arrived... She just groaned, and shook her head. In the real world, at least, she could have fallen asleep. As it was, all she really could do was completely space out and just mull over silly ideas in her head, like what she'd have for breakfast tomorrow and what she'd do after this stupid job was done... Hey, maybe she could try to get some piano practice in-

\*AHEM!\*

Serena - and Thoth, who'd been spacing out with her - snapped right back to attention as a thunderous throat-clearing filled the room like a shell going off, and briefly, the blood-drinking commando's expression turned panicked and agitated underneath her veil, her bored, but still fairly paranoid mind jumping right to conclusions until her eyes drifted down towards the source of the noise, and she let loose a sigh of relief, since it didn't look like the 'professor' - or cult leader, whatever he was called - was onto her.

"Once again, I'll have to apologize for my tardiness." The Cult's leader - who must have been the 'Thanatos' character she kept hearing about - said, and Serena actually had to do a double-take. She had been expecting the leader's arrival to have a bit more... Fanfare? Puffs of smoke, bursts of fire, tendrils of black magic? Anything besides just popping into existence like... Her eyes lidded a bit behind the shadows. Like a regular Matrix user just logging on. "The systems in my laboratory have been a bit on the fritz lately..."

Still, once the initial shock wore off, Serena found herself more... Puzzled than anything else. Somehow... She raised an eyebrow, a small feeling of dread and anticipation creeping up on her. Serena was finding something... Familiar about him, and it wasn't Thanatos' appearance. The cult's leader wore a long, black robe with a face concealed in shadows just like his junior cultists, except his robes were pretty clearly ornamented in a way to display his station.

Thanatos' avatar was adorned with gold braid around the shoulders, sleeves and the hood, and decorated with a string of numbers and letters that, to the untrained eye, probably looked like something cryptographic, but Serena got the impression it was a bit more for show than anything else.

"Before we begin tonight's lecture, however, I'm quite pleased to see-" Thanatos turned over towards 'Sanguina', and the commando had to fight the urge to flinch under his shadowy gaze. "A new face among us." Serena just sat there, confused, slightly agitated, and even a bit nervous for a few seconds, wondering if maybe Thanatos' host privileges on this server let him see through her veil of shadows, until she heard a few stifled laughs and awkwardly realized that the cult's leader had just been cracking a joke. She tried to laugh along with them, though it was more forced and nervous than anything else.

"Y-yeah..." Serena awkwardly responded, trying to sound a bit into it, though she was tripping up a bit when she noticed how many pairs of shadow-covered eyes were focused on her. "I'm err... Pleased to be here, too..."

She took a deep breath, trying to figure out a way to shake off the sudden attention until her eyes drifted over to the left and she realized the answer had been sitting right beside her the whole time, and was - in a generous sense of speaking, literally - staring her in the face. "I heard about this... Uh, 'secret society' from Thoth over here." She shifted the attention over to him with a quick jab with her elbow and a slightly awkward bit of laughter that just made the cultist jump a bit, a look of confusion and surprise coming onto his face. "And I just kinda wanted to see for myself what it was all about..."

Serena took a deep breath as she reclined back into the wooden pew, trying to look as... At ease as possible. She was really, really hoping they'd all buy it. Or just not really question her enough that they'd start getting - rightly - suspicious...

"Well... Well..." Thanatos turned back over towards Thoth, who, a bit like her, was trying to look as calm and collected as possible - for doubtlessly different reasons, Serena mused. "Perhaps we may need to speak... Privately after this, Thoth." Thanatos added, and Serena raised an eyebrow.

It wasn't at the implication - Thanatos' tone, and Thoth' reactions looked... Actually pretty enthusiastic, so they were probably just up to some more stupid cultish crap she'd probably end up having to look into, knowing her luck. No, what was really catching Serena's attentions was figuring exactly what about Thanatos she was finding familiar - his voice.

Voiced over The Matrix were something... Funny, to say the least. Like with your appearance, the way you sounded on the net could be anything you wanted, but unlike with your appearance, most people didn't really bother with changing it. The 'default' voice is compiled from portions of your brain-wave activity and has a tendency to sound similar to the way you do in real life, and most Matrix users just left it as is.

Serena had heard a few people say that hearing someone else's words come out of their virtual mouth felt disorienting, though most people were probably just too lazy or preferred their 'natural' voice over anything else. The more paranoid-minded net users - as well as those who were still too young to be on the matrix in the first place - tended to use voice-changers or outright altered speech tracks in order to provide one more layer of security separating their real-life selves from their net selves, but even people like herself and Lisa never really bothered.

The point being was that - most of the time, anyways - you COULD sort of tell someone you knew in the real world on the matrix by the familiarity of how they sounded, and a smoky, acrid sense of dread was once again welling up in Serena's stomach as she found something familiar about Thanatos' rough, very brash-sounding voice. It was a bit like some of her older, more crotchety and terribly impatient college professors, though very distinct.

There was a darker, more sinister quality to his voice as well - even when he clearly sounded pleased. As a whole, she was absolutely certain she'd heard that particular voice SOMEWHERE, but... Serena just took a deep, irritated breath as she shook her head, her virtual face a touch on edge behind that mask of shadows she wore. She still couldn't put her finger on it, and it was making her antsy.

There was definitely something wrong here, but... Serena just clenched her teeth in frustration and nervousness. She wasn't sure what, and that only made things a bit worse.

It absolutely didn't help when Thanatos loudly cleared his throat, and, turning back over to her, said, "Now then, why don't we get our newest member up to speed," Before turning around, and with a gesture and a word of power, summoned a trio of large, slightly curved screens facing the audience, as well as a large pointer in his hand. Serena just stared at for a few seconds in disbelief, her face a touch bewildered behind her veil of shadows. It really was just like a college lecture, she mused to herself with a sigh.

However, when a few images and diagrams of the human body and the human brain began to pop up on the trio of screens, and Thanatos began his lecture with a brief musing on the fragility of the human form and the ultimately fleeting, temporary nature of life that his 'society's' goal was to overcome, that feeling of dread and nervousness came crawling right back up her spine as she realized this wasn't going to be like any lecture she'd ever attended...

When Serena had finished giving her two colleagues the 'cliff notes' of Thanatos' lecture, both their avatars' looked, for lack of a better word, rattled. Both pairs of eyes had gone wide and a crushing, oppressive silence sank into the virtual parlour room she'd gathered them to, with the only sound being the gentle battering of the rain against her server's windows. Serena couldn't really blame how they felt though. After all, she had been through that sinister lecture on technologically-assisted immortality.

After the lecture was over, she didn't bother to stay to ask any additional questions - especially since Thoth and Thanatos had retreated to some private section of the cult's server for a 'private chat', and Serena didn't want to risk her cover any further by trying to trail them, especially since she had little more stomach for the cult's activities already. As soon as she was back in her own server and back into her much more - comparatively - comfortable black dress, she'd gotten right into ringing up Gabriel and Lisa and telling them to - virtually - come on over. Ostensibly so she could brief them on what she'd been able to find out, but moreso so she'd just have somebody to vent to.

Serena had gathered her co-workers in a section of her server she'd set aside to entertain guests, a stylish looking parlour room with red striped wallpaper and a large, decorative baseboard, and large, richly decorated windows provided a normally calming view of the gloom, rain, and mist 'outside'. The focal point of the room was obviously the large red sofa resting up against a wall, where she'd sat Lisa and Gabriel and conjured up a large screen directly opposite it to give her briefing a few visual aids.

Among other things, her worm had downloaded some of the lecture's images and diagrams that were stored on Thanatos' server, which were definitely helping to hammer the point home that, even if he wasn't connected to Lazerian's or anyone else's disappearances, Thanatos was definitely up to something... Disturbing.

As Serena explained more and more of it, her co-workers began to gradually get closer to her own state of mind. In simple terms. Thanatos had been conducting... Experiments on the preservation of the human psyche after it's death.

So far his research - thankfully, Serena mused - had yet to provide any fruit in that area but he'd apparently made strides in the understanding of both the brain and the body, and had been working quite feverishly in order to... Preserve both.

One area Thanatos' research was more successful in was deciphering the brain's signals. Trodes and earlier data-jacks, Serena had learned, operated under the same principles of sending and receiving signals to and from the brain, but Thanatos' efforts had produced something that, in his own words, 'made those earlier thought interfaces look like child's play.' Though, the necromantic cult leader admitted that the system he had in the works was still a very early prototype, and wasn't yet 'powerful' enough to actually influence a living brain, and Serena didn't want to know what that meant.

As for the lecture itself, Thoth had been pretty right about it. Unlike what she'd been expecting from a cult, there was little mysticism or superstitious nonsense in any of what Thanatos had been saying - it had all been very grounded and scientific, though, to Serena that just sort of meant that half of the lecture was some sort of neuroscientific, biological, or engineering jargon or concept she didn't understand.

Just remembering it all made her irritable and want to sulk off in some corner somewhere. It looked like Gabriel wasn't the only one with the talent to make a college-educated girl feel like an idiot. Overall, she wasn't much of a scientist, but she certainly felt that Thanatos' work, also unlike a lot of cultish stuff she'd read about, actually showed promise, which just made her even more worried.

"I... Err..." Lisa just found herself stammering a bit, an expression on her virtual face that was somewhere between horrified and morbidly fascinated - like she was staring at a car crash. The spy had been using the same long, curly red-haired, cartoony 'base' she'd been using in her home server, but instead of vines or priestessly robes Serena had seen her in before, she'd actually gone with something more professional. Lisa was actually using her work avatar, a dark blue vest and a white, long-sleeved dress shirt with a tube skirt and pantyhose.

Serena knew she wasn't doing it on purpose but it'd made her feel a bit awkward when Lisa had entered. At the moment though, all Serena was feeling was alarm when the red-haired spy turned towards the scientist and asked. "Gabriel, wasn't some of this stuff in..."

"Yeah..." Gabriel responded, the normally amicable and cheery scientist wearing a much more serious, and even slightly tense look on his virtual face that, in Serena's opinion, didn't fit his appearance at all. It was actually her first time seeing the way he presented himself in virtual space and it was about what she'd been expecting.

Gabriel's net avatar was a cartoony simulacrum of himself with large eyes and a small mouth, a brown ponytail and a pair of glasses the way she'd known him in real life, but he'd swapped out the labcoat and jeans for a tie-dyed T-shirt and a pair of cargo shorts, and the glasses he usually wore were replaced with thin, round ones, complete with red-tinted lenses. Serena would probably have laughed so hard she'd crash the server if she didn't have the dread of Thanatos' immortality project burning a hole in her brain.

"I mean, I couldn't make any damn sense of it at the time - I think Lazerian might have been writing in code, actually, but..." He pointed over towards one of the diagrams on the screen. "That 'thought interface' thing 'Thanatos' was working on looks a bit... Similar to a few specifications Lazerian described in his notes... Assuming he isn't actually crazy and assuming this isn't just a coincidence."

"I'd..." Lisa just took a nervous breath. "Like to believe in coincidences, but... Well... Serena?"

"Yeah?" The dark-haired commando responded, a feeling of worry beginning to creep up on her as she raised an eyebrow.

"Do you think Thanatos might just be Lazerian's net alter-ego?" She asked, and Serena's eyes went wide.

"I mean..." Serena just took a deep breath and mused on the issue for a moment. "Maybe?... Probably?... I mean, I've gotta admit." She just laughed nervously to herself. "This is a pretty big coincidence..." Lisa just shot her an odd stare. She was probably just reaching for excuses, trying to... Sugarcoat things. There was an implication brewing that Thanatos and Lazerian were connected, and Serena really didn't like it. "The both of them are focused on immortality," She nervously continued, "And then the... Well..." She turned over towards Gabriel. "What 'specifications?'" She asked.

"Like I said." The tie-dye clad scientist just shrugged his shoulders. "I couldn't really... 'decipher' much of his notes beyond the basics, and a lot of it's only starting to make sense now. Apparently, the big project Lazerian was working on before he disappeared - and was worried about the brass catching wind of - WAS related to thought interfaces, but he wasn't super interested in the 'controlling computers' thought of the technology. He was way more interested in the 'sending signals' part of trodes than the 'receiving signals' one."

"So, what?" Serena replied. "Was he trying to figure out a way to control people's minds?" Any other time her tone would probably have sounded a bit sarcastic, but right now she was deadly serious. The whole situation was proving... Disturbing as it unfolded.

"He could have been." Gabriel explained, though, he didn't sound too sure of it. "Lazerian's notes and Thanatos' lecture went into a lot of detail about brainwaves and neural patterns and how the existing thought-interface technology interacts with them. Mind control's definitely a possibility there." Much as she didn't want to, Serena found herself believing it, too.

Mind control was sort of a 'holy grail' government agencies and corporate black project labs were always in pursuit of, and she'd heard enough rumours - and paranoid speculation - on the net to know it wasn't really an idle existential threat. Scientists had been trying to master manipulation of the human mind for centuries, using everything from drugs to conditioning to propaganda bombardment - and only that last one had ever really 'worked', unpredictable as it was.

"Still..." The eccentric scientist sighed, disappointed and a bit disturbed. "I can't really give you anything... Concrete, since Lazerian was crazy - or smart enough - to avoid directly writing down what his goal was with this whole project - besides a vague mention of immortality..."

"That..." Serena took a deep breath, turning towards the window, the gentle pattering of rain against the glass caressing her ears as she gave it a bit of thought. A bad, suspicious feeling was welling up inside of her, growing in intensity the more she thought of it like a crawling creeper vine slowly enveloping her mind as it planted it's awkward, nervous seeds in her stomach.

"That doesn't make any sense!" The vampire exclaimed, her expression disturbed and a bit irate. "Why the hell would he go through so much smoke and mirrors just to hide that he was working on." She shrugged her shoulders. "Mind control experiments?... The company probably already has a team doing exactly that." She sardonically mused, her eyes lidding a bit in irritation.

"I'll have to check the project records, but we might be." Gabriel replied, and Serena just looked a bit uncomfortable at that. She was only half joking, after all.

"And... Er..." The vampire took another deep breath as she continued. "This kind of seems... Disconnected from the whole immortality thing, too. Controlling someone else's brain doesn't really make you immortal..."

"I don't think we're on the right track with this, either..." Lisa piped in, sounding a bit disappointed. "Was there anything else in Lazerian's notes about it?"

"Well, he went on and on about the human brain." Gabriel added. "Mostly about the challenges in keeping it... Preserved."

"So, he was trying to keep his brain, er... Preserved?" Serena asked, and immediately her imagination started conjuring up images of brains and jars and tanks, hooked up to cables and wires and antennas that gave off flickers of lightning. "That's... Err..." She took a deep breath, her tone a bit awkward. "One way of going about making yourself immortal, I guess..."

"No, I think he was being a bit more literal than that." Gabriel corrected her, a small grin coming on his face as Serena began to idly wonder if they were on the same page. "He was trying to keep the neural pathways in brains that were already dead from degrading. Apparently formaldehyde and methyl alcohol-based embalming fluids weren't working so hot and the only 'workable' solution he could find was to just keep the 'test subjects' cold enough that decomposition just wouldn't happen in the first place."

Lisa looked a bit confused, but Serena just raised an eyebrow, a slightly antsy look coming onto her face as the gears were turning in her head and she began to make the connection. "That still doesn't make a lot of sense..." Lisa mused aloud. "I mean, if he was trying to make himself immortal, wouldn't he be trying to preserve a living brain instead of a dead one-"

"But it does, remember?!" Serena cut her off, her tone a bit antsy and agitated. "Whatever the hell he was working on didn't work on 'living brains', so, he's probably prototyping his system by testing it on dead ones!" Lisa's eyes went wide, and even Gabriel looked a bit intrigued.

However, their expressions both changed to disappointment when Serena sheepishly added, "Whatever the hell that system is," with a sigh. Unfortunately, they still weren't any closer to figuring out what Lazerian - or Thanatos, if they really were the same person - was up to. "I guess we'll just have to..." Serena took a deep breath, as she turned back towards the monitor, the gentle sound of the rain battering outside just making her a bit more jumpy. "Figure it out..."

"Figure out what?" Lisa asked, and the vampire just shrugged her shoulders.

"Everything, I guess!" Serena replied, her tone harsh and on edge, still a bit frazzled from it all. "If there's a connection between Lazerian and Thanatos, what exactly he's DOING, and what the hell's the deal with that... Mind control stuff-"

"If it IS mind control." Gabriel added, and Serena just sighed.

"Yeah, IF." The vampire replied, still a bit short of patience, her brow furrowing a bit. "Anyways, I guess the first step should probably be to cross-reference the server's IP address."

"Wait..." Lisa piped in, raising an eyebrow. "You got it?"

"I mean, it's more like the worm got it." Serena replied, in between altering her monitors with a word of power, the images of Lazerian's lecture fading out and the monitor itself glowing a bit as it gradually began to lose its shape, turning into a formless, luminescent protoplasmic mass that Serena's virtual hands were readily moulding into its new shape as she muttered a mantra under her breath, the mass of code beginning to change shape and eventually taking the form of a large, perfect ball of blue crystal that elegantly caught the parlour room's warm light and hovered about a foot above the ground in front of her. "Anyways, I'll get the triangulation program started-"

"Why didn't you do that before we got here?" The spy asked, and the vampire just locked up, a shocked, nonplussed look on her face that swiftly turned awkward and irritated as Serena slowly turned to look at her.

"Because I couldn't get my mind off Thanatos' stupid lecture, that's why." She sharply growled, before turning back over towards the triangulation program she'd created and, with a word of command she summoned the IP Address data to her hand, it taking the form of a small, white globe of light, which she slowly inserted into the crystal, the blue, polished surface rippling like the surface of a lake as it dissolved into the program.

With another command, and a wave of her hand over the crystal's surface, a swirling vortex of light began to form within the centre of the crystal, projecting it's maelstrom onto the walls and against it's user, Serena's eyes still resolutely closed as she focused her will into executing the program, a string of inaudible commands of power escaping her lips, as her co-workers watched the light-show with varying levels of anticipation, though, Gabriel was significantly more... Bewildered than Lisa was.

"What's she..."

"I think she's feeding the data on Thanatos' IP address the worm gathered into a program that can triangulate the address into a tangible location in the real world based on it's index. Every server's got one, and that index indicates a general location-" Lisa longwindedly explained. "-and then, I think the program Serena's using will further narrow the location down and get a specific place by comparing packet delay to other servers in the near vicinity - The Matrix operates on a peer-to-peer network, so-"

"No, not..." Gabriel just looked a bit awkward at the explanation. "I meant..." He extended a finger at the crystal ball currently filling the parlour room with swirling eldritch light. "The... Program."

"What about it?" The spy asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Isn't it a bit... Flashy?" The scientist asked, a slightly bewildered smile on his face. "I mean, I don't really know how you guys did it in cybersecurity but the programs we'd use in R&D weren't really this... Well..." He just laughed a bit. "They don't light up as much."

"I... Err..." Lisa's eyes drifted down towards the... Well, the spy wasn't even sure what to call it. 'An ensemble?' Whatever it was, it looked like he'd be more at home smoking ambrosia in a tent in the desert, and the red-haired spy found it impossible to suppress a smile. "Gabriel, I don't think you have the right to call anything 'flashy'." It took a few moments for the eccentric scientist to figure it out, but once he took a look down at his T-shirt, a wry grin started to slowly creep onto his face-

"What the hell?!..."

The two of them both turned over towards Serena, eyes wide - though, neither Lisa or Gabriel looked quite as shocked as the black-haired computer hacker, staring into the crystal ball interface of her program with her mouth agape.

"Did you find it?" Gabriel asked, his tone casual and nonchalant on the surface, though, right underneath there was a subtle current of worry.

"What's the matter?" Lisa's nervous tone was more overt and obvious, and the both of them found themselves slowly getting off the couch and approaching her.

Serena just took a deep breath, calming her nerves and taking a step back. "Take a look..." She said, pointing into the polished crystal surface of the program and, as her companions saw the output data, they looked more... Confused than anything else.

"Err..." Lisa just stammered a bit, unsure of what to make of it.

"Wait a second..." Gabriel just pointed into the crystal ball, raising an eyebrow. His tone still light and playful but with an undercurrent of worry laying right underneath, like the undertow beneath a frozen river's surface. "Isn't that?-"

"Lazerian's old apartment." Serena completed his sentence with a groan. The program had taken the IP address, triangulated it based off the server's latency and its peer-to-peer connections with other servers in the vicinity, getting a set of longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates to represent a specific position on the globe, which were then displayed as a user-convenient dot on a glowing white map of St. Petersburg, suspended in the crystal ball's polished surface.

Right on 1204 Esplanade Drive, smack dab in the middle of Claycroft, a little indicator light hovered and flickered right above a luminescent representation of The Santa Monica Apartments. Serena just stood there, a frazzled and nervous expression on her face as a million paranoid possibilities running through her head.

"I... What?!" Lisa looked a bit more doubtful. "This can't be right, can it?"

"His apartment was cleaned out, but, well..." Gabriel shrugged his shoulders. "We didn't really search the whole building, did we? Just Lazerian's old unit."

"I think we'd better ask Mrs. Rosalyn a few questions." Serena piped up, taking another step back and away from the crystal ball-shaped program, her expression looked contemplative and taciturn, but her virtual eyes betrayed a very nervous, wracking anxiety at the whole affair. "Whatever the hell's going on here, I'm sure it's nothing good-"

*\*BRRRRRIIIING!\** The conversation was rather immediately cut off by a loud, ringing noise, and Serena's eyes went wide - though, she was more curious than anything else. *\*BRRRRRIIIIIING!\**

"Huh?" Gabriel raised an eyebrow, and, in response, the vampire just uttered a quick word of command under her breath, and booted up a communication program, taking the form of an old-school red-shelled telephone handset materializing in her hand.

"I'm getting a call." Serena explained, and she hit a button on the back of the handset and placed the device up to her ear, asking, "Err... Good evening, who's this?-"

"I'VE GOT ONE!" Came an excited, hauntingly familiar voice as a video-screen suddenly flickered into existence in front of her, the vampire flinching back a bit, an awkward smile and a very nonplussed look of surprise on her virtual face. "Serena, you and your little friends had better get over here as quickly as you can-"

"Er... Who..." The vampire just laughed nervously to herself as she got a look at the... Person on the other end of the videophone's line. "Who's... calling?"

For lack of a better word, she was being rung up by a cartoon character - and considering what the vampire's avatar looked like, that was really saying something. The avatar of the person calling her was a virtual simulacra of a very overtly well-endowed blonde heiress in an extremely ornate, frill-covered red ballroom dress, complete with hair styled into a pair of curly 'drills' that flanked her head like pigtails, and, as Serena utterly failed to recognize her, a sardonic, slightly disappointed smile on her face.

"Oh, come on dear." The 'princess' - as Serena would probably have described her - just laughed and made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "I know I like to 'dress up' a bit over the net, but don't tell me you don't recognize me!..."

"I... Wait..." Serena took a deep breath, a look of shock coming onto the vampire's face as the gears in her head began to slowly turn as she made the connection. It was the voice. It was hauntingly familiar, but very different - like it'd been shifted back a few decades or so, but once she'd recognized it, the resemblance to, "MRS. ROSALYN!?" was undeniable, and, with that exclamation, her two co-workers just looked very weirded out - Lisa more than Gabriel, since the eccentric scientist was finding it a bit funny.

"Oh, what gave it away?" The apartment's manager sarcastically responded, a colossal, smug, self-satisfied smile on her avatar's face. "Actually, don't answer." She added, clearing her throat and switching gears harshly enough that Serena could practically hear an audible \*CLUNK!\* "Just get over here as soon as possible. I've got one of them lurking in my lobby right now."

"One of..." Serena raised an eyebrow, a nervous, tense look of anticipation coming on her face. "Who?"

"One of the weirdos I was telling you about!" The manager elaborated. "You know, the kind who've been lurking in and around the building, meeting up with other weirdos? I've got one right here. He's just sitting in the lobby - probably waiting for someone - and if you want to pump him for information, you'd better get here, quick."

"Got it." Serena responded without even a mote of hesitation on her breath, her tone growing serious and grave enough that even Lisa and Gabriel were beginning to look a bit worried. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Judging by the small, warm grin on Mrs. Rosalyn's virtual expression, she appreciated the gesture."

"Good." She replied. "I'll make sure to have some cocoa ready for you and your friends when you get there, alright?" With that, Mrs. Rosalyn hung up, and the videoscreen vanished into the ether with a few trails of smoke. With a quick command of dismissal, the handset Serena was holding went the same way, and the vampire just needed to take a few deep breaths to calm her nerves.

"So..." Lisa asked, finally breaking the tense silence. "What did Mrs. Rosalyn call you for?"

"She found one of those weirdos she was telling us about waiting in her lobby." The vampire quickly explained. "We've gotta head over there now-ish. Between this and the server's location, I think something fishy's happening at The Santa Monica..."

"And if it's just a coincidence?" The red-haired spy asked, still holding out a tiny bit of hope. The black-haired programmer just took a deep breath and anxiously laughed, as she reflexively scratched up the back of her neck.

"Then we'll burn that bridge when we get to it." Serena responded, sounding equal parts apprehensive and, to her horror, almost perversely excited, for reasons that were eluding even her. Maybe it was the prospect of trouble. That was her job now, wasn't it?... "Lets' all go and meet up outside the apartment complex, alright?" She just laughed nervously again, the prospect of riding out to meet danger was equal parts exciting and pants-shittingly terrifying, especially considering what horrors Lazerian - or Thanatos, whatever - may be up to...

"Well, lets' be quick then." Gabriel joked, feeling the tension thick in the virtual air. "It's a bit rude to keep a lady waiting, you know?"

"I've gotta say..." Serena mused, peering out from the alleyway she, Lisa, and Gabriel had used as a hiding spot of sorts, into the glass doors of the Santa Monica Apartments, a pair of folding theatre binoculars on loan from Gabriel held her up to her eyes. "If Mrs. Rosalyn hadn't told us about this guy, I wouldn't have suspected a thing."

The three co-conspirators were more or less on the same page. Their mark was a younger-looking man - in his early twenties, at the very least, and had an air of almost... Aggressive ordinariness to him as he just sat quietly on the lobby's bench, idly reading from a dataslate.

He was dressed a bit shabbily, in a cheap-looking faux wool coat and jeans, a red scarf hanging loosely around his neck, and possession of a chestnut brown haircut that looked like it'd been clean and businesslike once, but had been allowed to grow out into a messier state approaching mulletdom. He certainly didn't look like he was up to anything sinister, but, Serena had called Mrs. Rosalyn on her cell and gotten the confirmation. This was the weirdo they were looking for.

The vampire just took a deep breath, condensation hanging in the chilly, late-November air in front of her. The alleged weirdo really did just look like everyone else, but she supposed - or, honestly for the second time this week, hoped - Mrs. Rosalyn just knew with her landlady's instinct who belonged here and who didn't. Still... She just took the binoculars down from her eyes and shook her head. It was enough to give her some small doubts.

Here she was, skulking in the alleyways in the rough part of town in the dead of night, peering through the glass at their target, punctuated by the occasional car going by as the powder snow drifted down around them - which made the whole party thankful Lisa had suggested dressing for inclement weather. All in all, it made her feel like a crook. Or... She shuddered at the memory. A murderous, predatory cutthroat like that Euler character she'd had a very painful run-in with a few weeks back.

"Is this..." Lisa raised her concerns, peering through the binoculars Serena had passed to her, the spy looking very, very confused. "Is she serious? THAT's the guy?"

"Looks like it."

"I thought..." She pulled her eyes out of the lenses and turned back towards Serena. "He'd look more... You know."

"Menacing?"

"I was thinking 'Creepy.'" Serena replied.

"Same difference, right?"

"I mean..." The vampire just took another deep breath that hung in the air for a few moments. "I guess so..." She sounded - and looked - visibly a bit reluctant. The possibility of what they might be getting into - especially if they were right - weighing down on her like a leaden cloak.

"Hey, we came all this way, right?" Gabriel tried to reassure the two girls, as Serena wordlessly handed the binoculars over to him. "Even if he's not our guy, we've still gotta snoop around the apartment complex looking for Lazerian's server so we might as well ask him if he knows anything while we're here."

"Right..." Serena took a deep breath, watching a burst of condensation hang in the cold, bitter, late fall's air in front of her. "Let's just bite the bullet and get on with it... How do you guys wanna do it?"

"I think you might be overthinking it a bit, Serena." Gabriel responded, folding the binoculars back up and, on the verge of returning them to his long, cozy looking tweed jacket - which to the vampire's eye made him look like some demented banker - before pausing and handing them over to Lisa and letting the spy have a good look as well. "He's... Kinda spaced out - we could probably just walk in and grab him if he tries to run."

"That's it?..."

"I mean, unless anything goes really wrong, that should be it." The eccentric scientist responded.

"Alright, give me a sec, I'll start thinking about plan B-"

"Guys." Lisa interrupted, worry on her tone as she removed the binoculars from her bespectacled eyes. "I think he's starting to notice something's wrong."

"What?..." Serena mused, then - acting on instinct - took the binoculars from her red-haired companion and peered back into the lobby, a nervous expression crossing her face as she began to understand what Lisa was talking about. The man in the lobby was beginning to look a bit... Tense. Alert, even. He wasn't even pretending to pay attention to his dataslate, and kept looking around, like he'd had a nagging feeling someone was watching him - which, by Serena's count, at least two parties were.

"All... Right..." The vampire took another deep breath, as she folded the binoculars back up and handed them back over to Gabriel. "I think we'd better go and get him before he figures out what's going on."

Of the three of them, only Lisa had any training as a spy - and she was still a bit of a rookie, currently acting as more of a collector of information and intelligence than a direct infiltrator. Still, all three of them made a valiant attempt to look as casual and collected as three people emerging from a shadowy alleyway could be. The intrepid trio nonchalantly cruised down the sidewalk and across the road - even actually going out of their way to go to a crosswalk instead of just jaywalking like anyone else would have.

Soon enough, they found themselves walking right up to the glassy doors of the Santa Monica Apartments and casually stepped into the warm, cream-colored lobby, taking off gloves and loosening scarves and trying to look like a trio of tenants coming home from the bar or something at the crack of midnight, as, all the while, the man just stared at them with a mixture of slight suspicion and idle curiosity, and Serena found an uncomfortable feeling settling in her gut as she wondered what form the man's fight or flight reaction would take, and what he would be capable of. He didn't really look like he had a gun, but under that coat of his... She just took a deep breath, You couldn't be that certain.

There was a few awkward seconds that hung in the air as the two parties just eyed each other up before, Gabriel, taking the initiative in making sure they could all go home some time this century, just cleared his throat and stepped forwards, cracking a warm, reassuring smile. "Good evening, sir..." He said in his best 'customer support voice', which to Serena just sounded a bit too enthusiastic and slightly doped up. "We're with... One sec..."

He needed that 'one sec' to pull out his company ID and flash it,. Of course, if one looked closely, they'd see it was a research department ID and not a corporate security one, but Doctor McGarahann wasn't one to let little trivialities like that stop him. Nor the fact that the man sitting on the bench's eyes went wide and his expression suddenly tensed up, giving Serena a sudden really bad feeling. "We're with Bathrette Beautronics on an investigation, could we ask you a few questions-"

Serena wasn't really sure what to expect. She wasn't a cop, and despite claiming to have the instinct wasn't a detective either. At her core, she was just a programmer whom fate had decided to throw several curveballs directly into her temple. So, it came as a bit of a shock to her that the man lashed out as quickly as he did.

Faster than her eyes could follow, he dropped his dataslate down onto the carpeted floor and sprang up off the bench, eyes wide with shock and panic and his fists rapidly lashing out towards his would-be assailants. Despite her augmentations, Gabriel's instincts were, as it turned out, a bit better than hers, and he moved out of the way quickly enough that the man's clumsily aimed punch struck Serena right in the jaw instead.

"I KNEW IT!" He screamed out in abject terror as he just came out swinging. "I KNEW IT WAS TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE - YOU DAMN GOONS AREN'T GONNA GET ME-"

\*WHAM!\*

In sharp contrast to what her assailant and Lisa were expecting, that punch did little more than just piss Serena off. Had this been a few weeks ago, a blow like that would probably have knocked the anemic, out of shape programmer to the floor, but she was a very different person now. After being implanted with a blood-drinking super soldier augmentation and forced through 'boot camp from hell', a measly little punch to the jaw could barely faze her, and she quickly struck back with a jab so hard the man's head turned nearly ninety degrees to the left, throwing him right back down onto the bench. Of course, that's when all hell broke loose.

The man was down, but nowhere near out yet. On the defensive, the increasingly panicked assailant began lashing out with his legs with alarming urgency, fighting like a cornered beast and kicking anything that got in range, all the while screaming like he was being chased by the devil himself.

Serena tried to drag things back under control, acting on what little leadership instincts she possessed, the vampire yelled out, "GRAB HIM!" Though, when trying to follow her instructions, the markedly less combat-capable Lisa just took a jackhammer-like kick to the gut and was thrown down onto the carpet, having neither the nanite augmentations or militarized physique of her black-haired compatriot.

Thankfully, for the both of them, Gabriel was on the ball once again, using the brief lull in the man's attentions to clobber him over the head with the flat edge of his sturdy, metal folding binoculars. It probably wasn't the way the manufacturer intended for them to be used, but, judging by the gormless, stunned expression that came onto the man's face, it was a damned effective one.

The force of the blow sent their victim careening down towards the carpet, and Serena used the lull in the stunned man's concentrations to quickly restrain him, pinning him down on his stomach with his arms around his back. Thankfully for her poor head, the man had managed to stop screaming, but he was thrashing and struggling like he was in the grasp of the organ repo men. It might've ordinarily been enough to throw off a normal girl, but Serena was anything but normal, and his continued efforts to wrest his freedom only served to piss her off. "Cut that out!" She harshly reprimanded him. "We just wanna ask you a few questions-"

"Yeah!" The panicked man in Serena's grasp turned around to look at her, a look in his eyes that was simultaneously indignant and terrified, like a cornered beast. "That's how it always starts, doesn't it! I've been through this before, it's all questions and stuff until the probes come out!"

"I..." Serena just looked somewhere between confused and disturbed. "What?!"

"Don't worry, dear, don't worry." Came a warm, matronly voice from the manager's office. As the rest of the team was pulling themselves together, Gabriel putting his binoculars away and Lisa picking her glasses up off the floor as she rose, the landlady finally came out with a warm, but very disappointed look on her face. "We're really not going to hurt you, but we just want to know what you're up to."

It was a tone Serena felt was more suited to disciplining a naughty young boy who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, but their captive clearly didn't see it that way. His eyes went wide in terror, and he tried fruitlessly to escape again while muttering, "Oh God, oh man... You bastards really are gonna torture me, aren't you?!-"

"Well, technically speaking, we're not authorized to use torture this mission." Gabriel helpfully piped up as he adjusted his spectacles, which just made Serena grimly wonder if there was ever a situation where her bosses would have okayed it.

"Yeah, they always say that, too!"

"Just calm down." Serena groaned, tightening her grip for good measure as a flash of choler shot up her neck. This guy was REALLY getting on her nerves now, and... She took a deep breath. She was getting a very weird feeling from him. There was something odd, almost familiar about him, and her inability to shake that feeling was creating waves of perturbation in her gut. Serena, she decided, really, really didn't like this mission. "Like my... Colleague said. We're investigators. We just want to talk."

"I want my phone call-"

"We're not with The Mounties, if that's what you're wondering." Gabriel piped up with a slightly sardonic, almost sharp tone. Serena could tell even his boundless optimism and patience were starting to wear a bit thin with this one, and she couldn't blame him in the slightest. "We're not arresting you, and if we were, you definitely wouldn't be getting a phone call."

"Look." Serena added with an irritated sigh. "Whatever you think we're gonna do to you, it's not happening. We just wanna ask a few questions and be on our-"

"Hold on a sec..." The man cut her off, his tone growing momentarily more calm, which just made Serena more puzzled than anything. "I don't know how, but you sound kinda familiar, lady."

"W-what?!" Serena's expression went straight to shocked, and her compatriots looked on in a mixture of confusion and intrigue. "You think I'm familiar?"

"Yeah..." The man responded, calming down a bit to think it over - as well as he could with both his arms pinned behind his back. "Have we met before?"

"Not to my knowledge..." The vampire looked away as an uncomfortable expression came over her face. If it was just her, she could probably dismiss that hunch of idle paranoia, but, as many great detectives have said over the years, once is happenstance, twice is a pattern. But... She turned back to get a better look at her shabby-looking captive. Where the hell did she know him from?... The vampire took a deep breath. Somehow, she got the impression she wasn't gonna like the answer.

Serena took a very close look at his face, as he scanned hers'. It'd have probably made the both of them uncomfortable if this situation wasn't already weighing heavily on their respective minds. Below his pseudo-mullet the man actually had a very refined, scholarly look to him, but other than that he was fairly unremarkable. His eyes, his face, his silhouette were all unrecognizable to her, and Serena just found herself focusing on the one thing she found familiar about him. His voice.

She knew it from somewhere. Definitely from the net - Nobody usually bothers to change their voice online, after all. Serena could practically hear the gears in her head click as she tried to add it up, recalling past memories of the information superhighway, trying to put a virtual face to the voice and figure out just who she was talking to-

"SANGUINA?!" The man responded with a look of abject terror and surprise on his face, that Serena soon found mirrored on her own, as Gabriel, Lisa, and Mrs. Rosalyn just shot them both a bunch of funny looks.

"THOTH?!" The vampire found herself replying, simultaneously horrified and very, very frustrated at the stupid goddamn coincidences that seemed to define her life these days.

No wonder they'd recognized each other - this was the man behind the net cultist she'd been sort of cozying up to in an attempt to infiltrate Lazerian's - or Thanatos' - cult. If pressed, Serena could probably come up with a worse person to meet here, but right now she couldn't think of any, and Thoth, faced with the revelation, seemed to snap, just lowly laughing maniacally to himself, only punctuated by Gabriel's snickering.

"Sanguina?..." The eccentric scientist piped in, stroking his chin with a teasing grin plastered on his face. "I mean," He smiled and shrugged his shoulders while also shrugging off Serena's death glare. "It fits pretty well, doesn't it?"

"Not the freaking time, Gabriel." The vampire harshly rebuked her compatriot through clenched teeth, and turned her attentions back over towards 'Thoth'. The cultist was currently busy hyperventilating and struggling to break free of Serena's iron grasp. "I think the cat's out of the bag." She said, taking a deep breath. "This is the same guy I met to get access to Thanatos' server, and we tracked the server to this building."

Mrs. Rosalyn's eyes went wide. "Hmm?..." She asked, before looking more confused than anything else. "Wait, what server are you kids talking about?"

"I'll..." Gabriel just laughed a bit. "Just fill the landlady in on what's going on."

"Yeah..." Serena just took a deep breath, as Thoth just muttered something unintelligible beneath her. "I don't think it's a coincidence. He's HERE."

"Well..." Lisa just squatted down a bit to look the very terrified looking Thoth in the eyes, the spy's expression still sour and resentful from being kicked to the floor. "I think we'd better start questioning our captive, then."

"I..." Thoth just let loose a burst of manic, but bitter and almost mournful laughter. "I knew it... You were too good to be true, Sanguina. You weren't interested in what I had to say-"

"I'm sorry to have abused your trust like this," Serena half-lied. "But, if it makes you feel better, we're pretty sure Thanatos is up to some shady business. We've also been looking into disappearances in the area and we think he's responsible, too. If you can help us, it might save-"

"I'M NOT TELLING YOU OR ANY OF YOUR ASSHOLE FRIENDS A DAMN THING, GOT IT?!" Thoth cut her off with an outburst of paranoid madness and resentful anger, manically struggling to escape Serena's grasp all the while practically frothing at the mouth and hurling obscenities. "I KNEW THIS HOBBY OF MINE WOULD GET ME INTO SHIT LIKE THIS, SO-"

"What freaking hobby?!" Serena irritably snapped, twisting her grip even tighter, her patience wearing thinner and thinner by the minute.

"Couldn't you tell?!" The cultist snapped back. "I'm a scholar. A seeker of lore. A devotee of information. A student of the unknown and a lover of the forbidden-"

"A crazy doomsday cultist." Lisa unhelpfully added in.

"Yeah!" Thoth enthusiastically replied, which just made Serena feel that he wasn't really listening to anyone but himself. "For all of human history power has always been stuck in the hands of the elites. Until now! The technology of the modern age enables the layman to create his own destiny! To have autonomy in a world that seeks to snuff that spirit out and reduce you to a cog in the corporate machine!-" Serena just took a deep breath. In spite of how irritating he was, she could sympathize with wanting to be more than just a puppet dancing on company strings.

"Modern technology gives everyday people the power to strike out at those who would seek to control you!" Thoth continued rambling on. through technological wonders and terrors long thought impossible!-"

"I mean, I don't really mean to rush, but..." Lisa snatched a quick look at her digital wristwatch for emphasis, her tone thick with irritated sarcasm. "We really don't have all night to be going over your life story, Mr. Thoth."

"Yadda yadda yadda..." The cultist just shot her a mean, resentful glare as he mentally cut his story down a bit. "My hobby is looking into the type of stuff that governments and powerful corporations would rather I didn't. You know, cracking secret mainframes, summoning rogue artificial intelligences, making insanely powerful doomsday attack programs-"

"Well, I really hate to disappoint..." Serena responded with a heavy-lidded glare, while clutching Thoth' wrist a bit tighter, both for emphasis and to relieve her stress. "But that's not what we're here for. We just wanna know about-"

"NOT HAPPENING!" The cultist angrily cut her off. "I know you're just trying to get me to lower my guard, but it's not working! Like I said, I'm a scholar of the forbidden! I know dozens of ways to resist torture! I've studied the works of O'Brien, Ludovico-"

"We're NOT going to freaking torture you!"

"ENOUGH OF YOUR DAMN LIES, SANGUINA!" Thoth just bitterly yelled back. "DO YOUR WORST."

Serena just clenched her teeth, and squeezed her grip even harder, before catching a slightly disapproving look over from Gabriel where he and Mrs. Rosalyn were talking about the events of the last few days. Okay... She took a deep breath. Force definitely wasn't the answer here. Maybe she just needed to... Rethink her approach. "Can't you just..." She took in another breath of air, trying to calm her nerves. "Calm down and listen for a few seconds?... Please?..." The vampire tried to force a warm, amicable smile. "Look, even if it was for the mission, I heard you out, I chased off those trolls, I came to the cult meeting with you... Can't you just do this for me?..."

Evidently, that was the wrong answer, and Thoth just madly flailed and writhed, trying to break Serena's grasp, all the while hurling insults and obscenities that the vampire just mentally tuned out, as, on instinct, she went right back to the forceful approach, grasping her scruffy captive's wrists almost hard enough to break him. Serena was quite used to people being worse online than in the real world, but someone who was more obnoxious in the flesh was a new experience to her she wasn't really in the mood to prolong.

"Gabriel!..." Serena called out, half irritated and half worried, and all defeated. "This isn't working!" The vampire knew when she was out of her depth, and, the eccentric scientist, as irritating as he was, felt like an encouraging anchor in a sea of chaos, especially as he turned over to her, that trademark earnest, playful smile on his face.

"Geez, he's really wound up." The scientist commented, and the vampire just groaned and shot him a funny look as she struggled to keep her captive restrained.

"Duh." She replied. "I'm out of ideas. How do we get this guy to calm down long enough that we can get a straight answer out of him?"

"Well..." Gabriel crouched down to get a better look at Thoth, with Serena helpfully switching one of her hands to grab the back of his head. "We don't really have the two or so hours to spare getting this guy some fresh air to mellow out, and I'm afraid I left my stash at home."

Serena's expression turned heavy-lidded, but more confused and concerned than anything else. "Your..."

"... Stash?" Lisa finished her sentence, the red-haired spy matching her black-haired companion's expression, though, hers' was more on the confused side of things, not knowing Gabriel well enough that she needed a double-take at that.

"I KNEW IT!" Thoth piped up, knocking Serena right back into the realm of irritation as she reflexively twisted him harder. "OUT COMES THE GLITTERDUST, HUH?!"

"Close but no cigar." The scientist responded, and Serena finally noticed out of the corner of her eye that Mrs. Rosalyn was watching the whole thing with a very contemplative, almost disturbed look on her face as the vampire wondered exactly what Gabriel had told her. "I prefer the more organic stuff, but it's kind of a moot point, so... Wait a second..."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow, stroked his chin, and put an uneasy look on Serena's face. The normally eccentric scientist's expression turned a touch serious, and he took a quick look around for any prying eyes before leaning into Serena's ear and asking, "Hey, are you thirsty?"

"W-what?!..." She stammered a bit, wondering if she heard right, wondering if he meant what she thought he meant, feeling her heart rate pick up and a lead weight sink in her stomach as Lisa and Mrs. Rosalyn just looked on, a bit confused, but not daring to step any closer and intrude on their whispered conversation. Whether out of respect or trepidation, Serena frankly didn't want to know.

"Your blood has some... Interesting effects, remember?" Gabriel whispered in response, and Serena needed to take a deep breath to calm her nerves. That brought back some... Unpleasant memories, as well as a stabbing, buzzing phantom pain in her throat she struggled to not reflexively clutch. It was on a night a bit like this one when she'd been attacked, and for the first time, 'resupplied' off a live victim, and discovered her blood's... Odd properties.

It was an issue Gabriel and his junior techs never really thought about until it reared its ugly head. The powerful cocktail of hormones, painkillers, steroids, and other drugs that her nanites synthesized directly into her bloodstream gave her superhuman speed, strength, endurance, and kept her upright. Of course, the nanites also corrected her neural pathways so Serena wasn't, to use the vernacular, tripping balls twenty four hours a day, but, when her bloodstream was exposed to another person's - by, say for example, drinking from them - those drugs in her blood induced extremely potent, narcotic effects in her victims, getting them extremely, euphorically high.

It was an issue she'd been able to elegantly sidestep by avoiding feeding on 'live' victims, instead preferring the 'cruelty-free' approach of those plain, gray sachets of mysteriously sourced blood in her fridge. The thought of... Repeating all that just made Serena's stomach tie itself up in knots, and she expressed her apprehension with an awkward, anxious, "Do I have tooooooo?..."

"I mean, technically speaking," Gabriel adjusted his tie as he whispered back, "No, you don't, but I think it might be our only option if we want to resolve this quickly, and, besides..." A coy, playful, almost mischievous smile came onto the eccentric scientist's face, as Serena somehow got even paler. "Isn't this one of your fantasies?"

"Gabriel, I don't think there could be a worse time for this." Serena sharply rebuked him, though, that just seemed to make his smile even wider - and irritate the vampire even more.

"Besides..." Both of their gazes turned back towards the cultist Serena quite literally had her hands full keeping restrained. "Isn't he getting a bit annoying?"

Serena just groaned, as she felt a headache coming on from listening to the frothing, screaming maniac in her arms, somehow still full of vigour, calling them idiots and morons and bitches and dozens more insults she hadn't expected to hear outside of the matrix, and just daring them to start torturing him.

The vampire was beginning to find Thoth to be the most intolerably irritating thing she'd ever seen or heard in her whole life, and though she started off firmly against... That, he was quickly making her opinions rapidly shift and her reservations dissolve as though they'd been immersed in acid.

Even in mixed company, in spite of the need for secrecy and how abominable the urge was, she was beginning to find it very difficult to restrain herself from just sinking her fangs into his neck to shut him up, especially with a migraine beginning to bloom. It could only be worse, Serena morosely mused, if she were on her period right now.

"I..." She took a deep breath, briefly looking within and finding herself just a smidgen horrified at how... Easily the decision was starting to come to her, but introspection could wait. They had a job to do, and she desperately needed some peace and quiet. NOW. "I... Think you're right, Gabriel."

"Right about?..." Lisa raised an inquisitive, concerned eyebrow, and Serena had to fumble a bit to think of something to tell her, an awkward look onto the vampire's face as she just laughed a bit, rather unconvincingly if the weird look Lisa had on her face was any indication.

"Right about Thoth being too tense." Serena replied, and Lisa rolled her eyes. The vampire was really hoping that was a good sign. "I don't think this is the..." She took another look down at the man she was currently keeping pinned to the olivine-carpeted floor, surrounded by her co-conspirators like some maddened gang of crooks. "Best way to question somebody."

"Gee?" Thoth snarkily responded, taking a short break from the string of obscenities to catch his breath. "They teach you that at corporate spook academy?"

"I think maybe I should just talk to him one-on-one." The dark-haired commando continued, deftly lifting herself and Thoth - who's arms remained securely pinned behind his back - back onto two feet with grace and an uncanny amount of force. "Maybe he'll be a bit more responsive if we could get some time... Alone."

Serena rather intentionally hung a bit of an ominous emphasis on the 'alone' part, which she was hoping would scare the cultist enough that she wouldn't have to... Directly interface with him, but all it really did was win her a weird look from Lisa and a pair of slightly amused looks from Mrs Rosalyn and Gabriel. Suppressing her irritation, Serena just turned her head over towards the landlady and asked, "Do you have like, a broom closet or something I could take him into?"

"Just down that hallway, dear." Mrs. Rosalyn pointed over towards a doorway perpendicular to the elevator as nonchalantly as if she were giving directions to the lavatory. "First door on the left."

"Thanks." The vampire responded, as she slowly led her soon-to-be victim slowly over towards the doorway, keeping his struggling contained and giving him a swift kick in the shins when he started trying to stamp on her shoes. "I'll come back out as soon as he tells me anything." She added, putting a peculiar bit of emphasis on the 'as' part, which just made Lisa look at her even weirder.

"Err..." The moment Serena and Thoth were through the first floor doorway, the spy turned over towards Gabriel with a confused, bit inquisitive look on her face. "What's Serena going to do with him?..."

"Well, you know?..." Gabriel just laughed a bit, and adjusted his glasses. "I think she's going to... Scare him a bit. You know she's really into horror stories, right?"

"Oh!" Mrs. Rosalyn interjected, with a warm, playful smile on her face. "I suppose she's going to use her 'feminine charms' on him, eh?"

Lisa just paused right in her tracks, taking a few minutes to picture the gloomy, moody, cynical leather-clad girl she'd been assigned as a partner, who cut her hair short enough that she could be mistaken for a dude at a distance if you were looking at her from behind. The spy just took a deep breath and asked. "Does she even have those?"

"I'm fairly certain she's got at least two." Gabriel nonchalantly responded, and Lisa just looked away, an awkward, slightly vexed look on her bespectacled face. She hadn't really considered B-cups to be 'small' before, but now Gabriel's stupid comment was making her feel inadequate...

"Okay..." Serena took a deep breath as she slid the broom closet's lock into position. She wasn't sure why anyone would install a lock on the inside, but it was all the more convenient for her. After all, she really, really didn't want anyone seeing this. "Thoth, I know we've had kind of a... Rocky start here..."

"Oh, what kind of rocky start?" The slightly scruffy, brown-haired cultist just leaned up against the opposite wall, a sour look on his shadow-covered face. "Where you lied to get my trust so you could do some stupid investigation into the cult I was trying to get into, or the part where you and the rest of your spy goons tackled me to the floor?" It was at least an improvement from how he was in the lobby, Serena wearily admitted to herself.

"The former, but, I wanna say I think we could still be friends..." The vampire responded, a slightly irritated, but reluctant tone and expression that was beginning to visibly weird him out. "Look, I was... Half lying... Okay, maybe three-quarters, but the point is I thought we got along pretty well."

"Wasn't that an act?"

"Just being nice comes naturally, I guess." That hung awkwardly in the air for a few seconds as Serena started weighing up herself whether or not it was another blatant lie, before she just groaned again and responded, "But, like I was saying, we got along pretty well, and..." She took a step closer towards him, black shadows casting on her face and a resolute, slightly pained look on her face. "I really, REALLY don't want to do this."

"Do what?"

"You won't have to know." Serena replied, and Thoth just rolled his eyes, not exactly encouraging her. "Look, I'm warning you, I'm kind of a... Well..." She just anxiously ruffled up the back of her neck. "A... Dangerous person. If you just tell me what you know now, I won't have to... Hurt you."

\*Pfsh.\* The cultist just crossed his arms, and blew a mocking burst of air through his teeth. "I already told you." He responded. "I'm a man of culture and higher knowledge. I can resist any form of torture or pain you can inflict."

"It's not going to be painful." Serena responded. "It'll hurt, but you won't feel any pain."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It'll make sense if I show you, and I'm hoping it won't come to that." The vampire groaned, a heavy-lidded expression on her face, her patience visibly thinning. "Please, just tell me what you know, and... And you can leave here in one piece."

"Ha." Thoth sprung out defiantly from the wall a bit, standing up fully - the two of them standing face to face, eye to eye, and gave her a resolute, mocking look in her red eyes, though, deep within them, Serena could see a tiny hint of something. Uncertainty? Fear? Inquisitiveness? "Do your worst." He added, and the vampire just groaned, an irritated look coming on her face. Apparently, whatever it was wasn't sufficient to keep him from making a very stupid decision.

"Fine." The vampire responded, pushing him right back up against the wall as easily as he would a child, a look of surprise coming onto his face - despite how she'd kept him pinned for a while, he hadn't gotten a... Direct show of strength yet. "Hold still - this will only take a second-"

"Go to..." Thoth was about to reply, but then Serena reached out with both hands, firmly grasping at his shoulders, pinning him to the broom closet wall as she drew in closer and closer, the look in her red eyes turning less annoyed and more... Predatory, like a snarling she-wolf who'd just caught the scent of fresh meat. "Hell?..." He added, struggling to move against her deceptively powerful grasp, growing more and more worried, before Serena finally opened her mouth, and he got a very up-close and personal look at a pair of elongated fangs sitting in her mouth, and his eyes went wide as the well-read man of culture and knowledge realized just who he was dealing with.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!-" The cultist tried to scream, but found his moment of terror cut painfully short when, faster than he could react, Serena buried her fangs in his neck, and a feeling of warmth and vigour started to course through her body as she drained him, her victim going from tense to limp as she began to feed, the look of abject terror on his face slowly transforming to a blissful, euphoric, almost orgasmic smile as she drank into his life's blood, and he began to moan in blissful pleasure...

By the time Serena wandered back into the lobby less than half a minute later, Thoth was visibly out of it, all dazed and looking half asleep, with heavily lidded eyes and a massive, dreamy smile plastered on his face. It was bad enough that Serena needed to carry him in with his arm draped over her shoulders, all the while she was breathing tensely and heavily with a reserved, almost shocked look on her face. The vampire was really, really hoping that Thoth's collar was high enough to obscure the pair of puncture marks she'd left.

As it was, though, she could barely stand to look at him. Not because she was disgusted or angry - more than anything else, Serena felt... Afraid.

That wasn't to say it was an unpleasant experience - far from it. She'd entered the broom closet tired and irate, and came out of it absolutely... Flushed with energy, vigour and warmth. It all coursed through her veins like a living fire, and she felt... Good. Amazing, even, and that's what scared her. 'Resupplying' off a living person was something she'd only done once before, and she'd been under so much stress she couldn't really think about it properly. With a clearer head, Serena realized to her horror, feeding off the living felt... Good.

She took a quick look at Thoth's blissful, dreamlike face before quickly pulling her gaze away. She loathed to admit it, but it really was night and day. The 'dead' blood Bathrette sent her just made her feel like an animal. It was really more like medicine. An unpleasant, cold, thick substance that left an uncomfortable ferrous tang in the mouth. The living blood was worlds apart - it was probably the most pleasurable thing she'd ever had. It was like dining on the ambrosia of the gods, or drinking from the holy grail. It made her feel powerful, vigorous, brimming with energy and... Alive. Dear god, she realized, she never really felt... Alive before this. Even the finest wine or juiciest steak or ritziest cigars couldn't compare. Serena just shivered in fear and... Dark, wicked excitement.

A forbidden rush of thrill and adrenaline came over her, something every rational part of her head was screaming at her to forget about. It was terrifying her, yet, at the same time... Serena chanced one more quick look over at Thoth, still half asleep with a euphoric smile on her face, and needed to force all her willpower to control herself.

She really wasn't liking the... Possibility creeping up on her. Just the thought of wanting... More made Serena disgusted and afraid of herself. It'd taken every inch of self-control to just take a bit, not a drop more than necessary-

"Err..." Lisa piped up, and Serena's eyes shot wide open and her face went paler than usual. She'd been wrapped up so tightly in her own little world and her own problems that it'd completely slipped her mind that she was now back in the lobby, and back with her slightly weirded out colleagues. "Serena..." The spy pointed over towards the cultist, a slightly concerned look on the redhead's face, and the vampire covertly took a sigh of relief. Thoth was thankfully so busy looking like an ambrosia junkie in the midst of a pipe dream that it took all the attention away from her. "What the hell did you drug him with?!"

"Well... Y'know..." The vampire just laughed nervously, cracking an awkward smile. "A girl's gotta have a few secrets, you know?..." That... Did little to really answer Lisa's question or dissuade her suspicions, and Serena got a really, really bad feeling from the inquisitive look the red-haired spy was giving her. Somehow, she wondered, was it really a good idea to tell someone who's vocation was information that she was keeping a secret?

Thankfully, Lisa said nothing more, and Serena just took a deep breath as she led Thoth over to the lobby's bench and placed him down... Then straightened the drooping cultist back up and put his back against the wall, even getting his dataslate back into his hands - though he was clearly struggling to hold it.

"Oh..." The cultist finally piped up, drifting back to lucidity with a stupid, gormless smile on his face, all the while Serena just nervously fidgeted. "Hi Sanguina..." He dreamily slurred.

"Err..." Serena just paused awkward for a second, unsure of exactly how to continue this, all the while her compatriots were giving her funny looks. "Hi Thoth?... Do you feel... better?..."

"I feel WOOOOOONDERFUUUUUUUUL!!!!" The cultist dreamily responded with a big, stupid smile on his face, and Lisa just looked even more awkward and concerned. Gabriel and Mrs. Rosalyn, meanwhile, just looked merely awkward. "I don't even remember why I was mad at you..."

"I'm sure it wasn't important." Serena deftly responded, leaning in towards him with a cheery, amicable smile on her face. Like they really were good friends, and not monster and victim. "Anyways, do you wanna talk?"

"Talk about what, Sanguina?..." He replied, each word delivered in an odd, drawn out, hazy tone, somewhere between deathly tired and zonked out of his gourd.

"About what you're doing here and about if Thanatos' cult is behind the disappearances happening in the area." The vampire asked, her tone sunny and warm, even if she was being as blunt as a sledgehammer.

"Oh, I dunno..." Thoth just giddily giggled in a way that was making everyone involved a tiny bit uncomfortable. "I don't think I'm supposed to tell you about that stuff..."

"Pretty please?..." Serena tried to look as... Well, she was fairly certain looking cute was an order too tall for even her, but she made an effort to be as disarming as possible, with closed eyes, a warm smile, a friendly, nonchalant tone, and even cocking her head to the side a bit. "Since we're friends and all..."

"Yeah..." The cultist just giggled again. Her efforts were making Lisa and Mrs. Rosalyn look at her funny and Gabriel snickered a bit, but they seemed to be... Working. "We're friends, aren't we?"

"We're pretty good friends." Serena re-affirmed with the most disarming, friendly smile she could muster, really hoping she didn't look too tense or hungry. "So could you tell me what you're doing here and what Thanatos and his cult are up to?..."

"Well..." Thoth yawned with a big, dreamy, dopey smile on his face, and Serena's heart sank a bit, wondering if she'd... Dosed him right. Not only was this sort of thing an inexact science at best, but she'd had to concentrate so hard on repressing that - the vampire shuddered a bit - monstrous instinct to take it all that she hadn't really thought too hard about... Exactly how much TO take. "I don't really know too much about what Thanatos and his guys have been up to, but, hey, remember when you came to that cult meeting with me?..."

"Yeah?..." Serena nervously responded, hoping as hard as she could that her victim wouldn't fall asleep in the middle of this interrogation. "What about?..." She asked, before her eyes flashed wide open, a tense look coming onto her face. "Didn't Thanatos say you guys were gonna?..."

"Yeah, 'speak privately' after the lecture was over." The cultist flashed a proud, determined smile - or as proud and determined as he could possibly look half-awake like this. "We didn't talk too much about his immortality project, but he did say that he was pretty impressed with how well I was taking in the subject matter - and how I was able to quickly find a recruit for the cult..."

"Err-."

"Wait..." Lisa raised an eyebrow, and gestured over to Serena. "He's talking about you, right?"

"I think so..." The vampire just sighed. "Yeah."

"I think so too." Thoth dreamily added. "So, after the meeting he and I went over to a private area of the server, and, well..." He yawned again, another flash of concern coming across Serena's face. "Like I said, he invited me to come down to his laboratory and see if I was 'worthy' of joining his inner circle..."

"Wait..." Serena raised an eyebrow, and leaned in, a sudden sense of urgency coming onto her face, swiftly mirrored on the faces of her comrades as they realized it too. "You came... Here." The vampire continued. "To his laboratory..."

"Well, I'm not really too sure about that, Sanguina..." He replied, which just made her look even more confused. "I mean, it COULD be here, but it also couldn't."

"What do you mean?"

"This is just where Thanatos told me to meet up with his, uh, guy." The cultist elaborated, with another deep, contented yawn, like a relaxing kitty-cat. "His agent or something. I think he's one of Thanatos' lab assistants or whatever..."

The black-haired commando and the red-haired spy found themselves slowly coming in a bit closer, a look of inquisitive interest and tense discovery coming onto their faces as they were getting closer and closer to solving the puzzle. "The point is, he's supposed to meet with me here and take me over to where Thanatos' lab is."

"That would make a lot of sense..." Mrs. Rosalyn piped up, thumb and forefinger on her chin and an unusually contemplative expression on the normally playful and warm older lady's face. "It certainly explains what those weirdos were meeting up about, though, it still doesn't explain why the hell they picked my building of all places."

"I'm not really sure either..." Thoth admitted. "But it's probably convenient for... Him and his guys... Somehow."

"We can figure that out later." Serena cut in, a sudden look of urgency coming onto the vampire's face. "Thoth, when exactly is the guy coming?..."

"Uh... Well... Do you have the time?" The cultist groggily asked, and Lisa quickly picked his dataslate up from where he'd dropped it a second time, reading off a time that was well beyond when any sane person would have gone to bed. "Well..." The cultist turned over towards his black-haired 'friend.' "The guy SAID he'd be here about five minutes from now, but..." Thoth just giggled a bit in a way Serena was finding very disturbing. "You kinda know how it is."

The vampire just let loose an irritated sigh. "Thirty minutes." Serena responded. "Got it... Now, err..." She took a deep breath, calming her nerves, and, to the amusement of her co-conspirators, put on her best 'nice Serena' smile and asked, "Think you can avoid falling asleep for that long?"

"Well..." As if to punctuate the point, Thoth let loose a very deep, tired-sounding yawn of someone who was probably going to be happily snoozing away well before any rogues or scoundrels from Thanatos' lab showed up. "I dunno, Sanguina... I feel pretty tired."

"Well," Mrs. Rosalyn piped up, "Do try to stay awake, dear." She said, taking a bit of a note out of Serena's playbook, though, the vampire cynically - and self-loathingly- mused that the landlady was probably better at it. "I've got some X-caff in the back for you if you'd like..."

At the merest mention of her favourite brand of coffee, Serena instantly perked up, going from worn and rather irritable-looking to immediately in better spirits, though, rather awkward as she asked, "How much, exactly?..."

"I've gotta say..." Serena mused aloud, she and her team relaxing in beanbags in Mrs Rosalyn's office, taking a sip from her third cup of X-caff tonight, feeling a bit better - and a bit wired. "This is a pretty impressive setup you've got here, miss."

"Oh, shucks, dear." Mrs. Rosalyn just cracked a warm smile and bashfully dismissed the praise with a wave of the hand." Serena probably should have been expecting something high tech when the landlady said she'd been a 'real console cowgirl' but she was still pretty taken aback. The whole office was a total hacker's lair, all dimly lit by dozens of soft purple and pink neon lights and accented by criss-crossing wires all over the ceiling. "It took a while to set everything up," The landlady explained, and Serena believed it. "The whole building's routed through my personal matrix server, and I've got some real nasty ICE keeping it all secure."

There were dozens of monitors lining the walls, connected to an army of closed-circuit cameras keeping an eye on every damn corner of the apartment, for the gang's viewing pleasure. Aside from that, there were computer parts, diskettes and cyberdecks in varying states of assembly strewn all over the workbenches, a few dataslates kept on shelves like old-century books. The walls were lined with dozens of control panels and consoles that, as the landlady explained, allowed her to control almost every part of the building - lights, shutters, alarms, et al - without even needing to slap on a pair of trodes. There was also rather persistent smell of shortening in the air as well, and Serena wondered if that had anything to do with the miniature kitchen setup lining the far-side wall...

Of course, cookies were about the last thing on anyone's mind at the moment. The whole team - Mrs. Rosalyn included - were attentively watching the monitors, watching Thoth gradually fall asleep in the lobby, and keeping vigilant for the first sight of trouble and weirdos, and eventually Gabriel piped up, "Hey, Serena."

The vampire took another sip of her X-caff. "Yeah?"

The eccentric scientist turned over towards her, an encouraging smile on his face to cushion the slight concern on his tone. "We should probably figure out a plan."

"I think it'll be simple enough..." The vampire responded as calmly as she could, scrolling her eyes across the surveillance monitors. "When we see the guy on camera meet up with Thoth," She pointed over towards the monitor showing the lobby, where the woollen-coat clad cultist was letting loose a very deep yawn. "We grab him, pull the same questioning routine and hope I don't have to, er..." She tugged at her scarf. "'Drug' him, too."

"No duh." Gabriel nonchalantly responded, adjusting his glasses a bit. "But that's not what I was talking about."

Serena raised an eyebrow, finding an anxious chill going up her spine despite the leather jacket, scarf, the turtleneck she was wearing underneath, and her third cup of coffee. "Huh?"

"After we 'question' Thanatos' agent, what's the plan?" The eccentric scientist asked, though, Serena noted this time he was actually a bit... On the level. More restrained than he usually was, and the vampire wondered if the tension was starting to get to him, too. She pried her eyes away from the monitors and back over to her companion's playful smile, and just groaned, looking back away. If he was, she mused, he knew to how avoid showing it.

"I mean..." She took a deep breath to try and calm her nerves, and, when that failed, she opted for another sip of coffee. "Gabriel, I don't KNOW." She flatly admitted, a pinch of sourness coming onto her tone that just made the eccentric scientist laugh a bit awkwardly and reflexively ruffle up the back of his neck. "Aside from his server being... Here, we don't know a thing about Thanatos' hideout, or whatever goons or security systems - or anything worse - he's got down there to sic on us, and we won't know until-"

"Serena..." Lisa piped up, the red-haired spy's tone flat and dire, as she pointed over towards one of the screens as the vampire's eyes went wide. Mrs. Rosalyn looked nonplussed and Gabriel looked shocked as they all looked towards it, getting a good look at the man casually sauntering through the ground floor as though he belonged. "I think that's him."

The vampire just took another breath to calm her nerves as she got a better look at... Trouble, that's what he was. She felt alarmed and concerned and had a million questions, but what immediately struck her was the man's appearance.

He wasn't dressed like a thug or a cutthroat or even a company goon. He was wearing a labcoat, a vest, and slacks. He couldn't more obviously scream "scientist" if he'd had it written on his vest in sequins, but his messy black hair and coke-bottle glasses spelled it out well enough already. She tried opening her mouth to say something - something about him felt very, very wrong, and Serena just couldn't put her finger on-

"How the hell did he get in here, anyways?!" Lisa added, and Serena's eyes went wide as she realized it. The scientist had just... Appeared out of nowhere on the monitors, hadn't he?

"I..." Mrs. Rosalyn leaned in, a very concerned look on her face. "I couldn't tell you - the cameras were watching all the entrances and exits. I don't know how in the world we could have missed-"

"We can figure this out later!" Serena quickly threw herself up off the beanbag chair, rising triumphantly to two feet, determination - and nervousness, and tension - dripping in her tone and plastered on her face. "He's almost in the lobby," The vampire pointed towards the monitors to drive her point home. "And he might run like hell run like hell as soon as anything bad happens, so..."

"Lets'." Gabriel responded, getting out of his seat as well and adjusting his glasses with a playful grin on his face, and it only intensified as Serena downed the rest of her coffee like some sort of primitive war ritual in a way that made Lisa reflexively flinch. The party stacked up on the door to the lobby, waiting patiently. The vampire opening her jacket and feeling for the gunbelt she wore. Lisa defogged her glasses with her scarf. Gabriel just sort of cracked a sardonic, slightly nervous grin that just said, without words, 'lets' not screw this up.' Serena took a deep breath. She really, really hoped it would all go swimmingly.

The next five seconds they'd spent crowded up against the door as Mrs. Rosalyn watched the monitors were probably the most tense she'd ever experienced. All the ways this mission could possibly go pear-shaped at the eleventh hour crawling up the back of her neck, a heavy, uncomfortably feeling in her stomach-

"NOW!" Mrs. Rosalyn yelled out, and, throwing cynicism and paranoia to the wind, Serena took point and burst through the door like a SWAT team, her teammates trailing close behind her into the lobby where Thoth was just staring off into space with a doopy grin, the mug of coffee in his hand doing very little to stave off his vampire-induced tiredness. That, and Thanatos' scientist, who was just staring at the drugged-up cultist, utterly bewildered until the intrepid trio burst onto the scene, anyways. Now, he was starting to look very alert, and very on edge, and it just made Serena hesitate for a moment, wondering if they both knew what the man's fight or flight reflex decided on.

"Okay!" Serena firmly proclaimed, taking a deep breath, banishing her hesitation, trying to think positive and just focus on... Getting this done. "Look, I think we both know what me and my colleagues are here for, and I don't want anyone getting hurt."

"I don't think we're on the same page, missy." The scientist spoke up, his tone harsh and sarcastic and a wicked smile on his face. "I HOPE we don't 'both know' what you and your little friends are here for." His demeanour was all cocksure and self-satisfied in a way that, in spite of her trepidation, sent waves of Choler shooting up Serena's throat.

"And why's that?" The dark-haired commando sourly replied as she took a step towards him. At once, she felt irritated and... Hesitant. She struggled to really describe him - 'Weirdo', as Mrs. Rosalyn would've put it, was pretty apt - but there was something... Off about him. Thoth was weird, but this guy... Serena took in a deep breath of air. This guy just looked sinister. He had the same sort of... Evil gleam behind those coke bottle glasses as she'd seen in that Euler character, and found herself locking up a bit. For people like them, morality was more of an optional guideline than a code.

"Because..." The menacing scientist let loose a low, wicked laugh. "If you just want my wallet or a bit of the old ultraviolence, then today's your lucky day. If you... Well..." He paused for emphasis, turning his gaze momentarily at Serena's victim, who looked like he was glad to see him, but not sure why. "If it has to do with him, or where I'm taking him, then today's the worst day of your life."

"And why's that?" Serena responded, taking another step forwards, trying to hide the trepidation she was feeling with a veneer of empty bravado.

"Because then..." The scientist just laughed again. "Then I'd just have to kill you all-"

"GRAB HIM!" Serena shouted as she surged forwards, the vampire wasting no time at all on monologues or melodrama and just springing into action. She could see a hint when it was practically dangling over her head covered in glitter, after all. Her companions following closely behind, Serena, determined to seize the advantage and end this fight before it started, pulled her balled fist back and threw forwards a magnum punch that flew forwards with the force of a rocket...

Which her opponent rather elegantly dodged, a smug grin coming onto his face as he pulled his head back in a zen-like fashion. Serena's eyes went wide, and instinct took over as she reached out with her other hand while pulling the dominant one back, only for a look of alarm to flash on her face as she realized a bit too late that her assailant was now grabbing her by the wrist.

Thankfully, he'd misjudged the vampire's nanite-enhanced strength and, far from immobilizing her, Serena just clenched her teeth and kept pulling her arm back, a brief look of surprise on the wicked scientist's face before it was replaced with an evil, cocky grin that sent a chill up Serena's spine. With his free hand, her assailant quickly reached into his labcoat, and a look of alarm came onto the vampire's face when he'd decided that bare knuckle fisticuffs with a girl wasn't exactly fair, and produced a large, polished butterfly knife he elegantly flicked open with one hand. Serena's eyes immediately looked dreadful and alert, and she found herself clenching her teeth and really regretting not having drawn her gun.

The Dark-haired commando's mind shot into panic mode as the razor-sharp edge of the knife glistened in the warm orange light of the apartment's lobby. She tried to manoeuvre around and get the knife out of the man's hand, but, to her horror and alarm, she'd played right into his hand - she'd inadvertently dragged the scientist closer with her arm, and by the time she realized what was going on and reached out with her free hand, it-

\*SCHNIK\*

The vampire's red eyes flashed wide open as the knife's large blade found itself buried right up to the hilt in her gut, effortlessly going through her jacket, sweater, and shirt and spilling out her nanite-infused blood onto the olivine carpet below. She clenched her teeth as hard as she could and fought down the most awful, all-consuming urge to howl out in agony, the horrific, visceral pain wracking her whole body and drowning out almost all other stimuli. It was harsh enough to nearly force her down to her knees, and, out what felt like in the distance she could feel a trio of voices yelling out, "SERENA!", but she could barely hear them, like she was deep underwater, and the scientist just gloated, cracking another evil, sadistic smile and laughing to himself, revelling in the pain and suffering...

Though, he didn't get to celebrate for too long, the wicked scientist quickly noticed that, rather than collapse or scream in pain like he was used to people doing when stabbed, the vampire was just grinding her teeth and glaring at him through hateful, violent, bestial red eyes as choler and frustration and a black, gnawing emptiness began to writhe within her, and her victim began to go a bit pale, as though he realized something was wrong. "What the f-"

"WHAM!\* Came a thunderbolt-like punch from Serena's free arm, propelled by all her pain, resentment and sheer, perfect hatred. Her blow crashed directly into the scientist's jaw like a cruise missile and threw him backwards onto the carpet, effortlessly breaking his grip on both her arm and the knife, still embedded in her gut like a dandy Halloween decoration.

Still, Serena was far from done. Hopped up on bestial, barely controlled anger, she ignored basically everything a paramedic would've told her and viscerally tore the knife out of her body, sending out another cascade of crimson arcing in the air in front of her. Her teeth clenched in simultaneous rage and agony, she threw the knife down onto the carpet and started savagely kicking her assailant while he was down. It definitely wasn't fair or nice, she'd later muse, but all pretensions of fairness in this fight vanished the moment her opponent pulled a knife, so, in a sense, he was getting what he deserved.

Soon enough, however, the red mist faded from her eyes, and Serena awkwardly noticed her companions had gotten in on the beatings while she was distracted with slaking her own infernal wrath.

Far from just standing around doing nothing, the moment she'd been stabbed was the moment all hell broke loose, and her injury seemed to galvanize her colleagues into action. Gabriel, Lisa, even Mrs. Rosalyn had rushed in and started wailing on the bastard. Deprived of his weapon and now outnumbered, he stood little chance against their vengeful onslaught, and Serena felt... Proud. Proud, and grateful to have such dependable and valiant comrades at her back, but also...

Serena doubled over and clenched her teeth, clutching her stomach and feeling the warm ichor oozing between her naked fingers. She was also feeling a very distinct sense of sharp, ripping agony from the wound that'd been inflicted, fire and pain wracking her whole body as she tried to focus herself and not black out from the pain. Quickly enough, however, she realized she didn't need to bother.

A familiar, burning sensation filled her whole body, like her nerves were being stabbed with white-hot needles. It was especially concentrated in her abdomen, where Serena could feel the wound slowly being knitted back together, skin being regrown and intestinal walls mending in a way that was making her skin crawl and her knees feel weak. The flow of blood out onto the carpet soon trickled down into just a few drops like a leaky tap, and then... Nothing, letting Serena take a few deep breaths of relief. It was still taking some getting used to, being able to survive an injury that would at best, send a regular human to the hospital, but... She just tried to force on a smile through clenched teeth. It was pretty damn handy, so she ought to be grateful for it, she mused.

Of course, that good feeling didn't quite last for very long, and soon enough, Serena went paler than usual as her eyes went wide, her heart thumping heavily in her chest as a familiar, abominable feeling crawled up on her like a spider jaunting up the back of her neck. It was a hollow, clawing sensation, like a painful black hunger of the soul, and it was leaving her suddenly weak and dizzy. Of course... She bitterly mused. Not only did she lose a lot of blood being stabbed - and tearing the knife out definitely didn't help - but the nanites did a lot of work patching her up, and they used a lot of fuel doing it... Serena just took a deep breath, her skin suddenly feeling a bit cold and clammy in spite of the layers she was wearing. She needed blood, and she needed it bad. It was that horrifyingly simple.

Her vision was beginning to blur around the edges, and she could feel her fangs buzzing in her mouth. The struggle to keep her... Urge under control burning at her psyche like she was rubbing her soul with sandpaper, and she could feel the rational part of her mind... Eroding under the stress. She felt so horribly... Hollow, a sensation like something was digging at her soul, and unless she wanted to lose control again, or, worse, just inelegantly die of exsanguination, she needed to... Resupply, as soon as possible.

Thinking as quickly as she could, Serena turned towards the door, contemplating temporarily leaving her companions behind while wondering where in the world she was going to find a hapless victims to ambush and drink at this hour. She ruled that out very quickly, since, well, she had no idea and didn't want to leave it to dumb luck, and also because she didn't like the implication that she was turning into some kind of predatory nocturnal monster. What else was there, though? Serena just focused on the glass double doors, anxiously fidgeting as she weighed up what her options were - all none of them, all the while her black, horrifying hunger gnawed away at her soul-

"Huh..." Thoth slurred, innocently watching his would-be co-conspirator catch a savage beating with a dopey, innocent smile on his face, like a particularly dull schoolboy watching pretty flowers sway in the wind. Serena began to turn her head over towards him, her mind practically ablaze with revulsion, every inch of her conscience horrified with what she was contemplating. 'You've taken advantage of that poor boy enough already,' it was telling her, but Serena's body felt horribly weak and darkly hollow. "I wonder if they're having fun..." The addled knowledge-seeker mused aloud, as Serena just took a deep sigh, feeling a massive pang of guilt from what she was about to do as she grabbed his wrist.

"Oh..." A warm, innocent smile that just made Serena feel even worse came onto the cultist's face as the vampire dragged him back towards the hallway, all the while her companions were busy giving the would-be knife wielding maniac a lesson in picking his battles. "Hi Sanguina... Are we going somewhere?"

"Y-yeah..." Serena guiltily responded, finding herself unable to even look her victim in the eye. It was, after all, necessary for her survival - the buzzing, hollow, gnawing hunger inside her soul made that very clear. Surely, he could spare just a bit more, right?

She tried to put on her best 'nice Serena smile'. even while she was finding it difficult to ignore the nagging voice at the back of her mind, telling her she was a horrible person for betraying the cultist's trust like this. "It won't hurt at all, I promise." At the very least, she cynically mused, that was true.

"Well..." Gabriel took a deep breath as he adjusted his glasses, the eccentric scientist taking a few steps back and reclining against the cream-painted lobby walls, surveying the whole scene with an expression on his face somewhere between disappointed and bewildered. "This is a bit unfortunate."

"Yeah..." Serena offhandedly responded, not really listening. The vampire was reclining on the wall right next to him, paying attention to little and focused more on the idly fiddling with the butterfly knife she'd 'acquired,' spinning it around in her hand and trying to pull a few tricks that she'd seen in movies. It was definitely an... Interesting weapon, and it was helping keep her mind off the... Events that'd taken place only about a minute prior.

For one, it was pretty damn big. The knife wasn't quite short-sword sized, but Serena wondered how the hell the bruise-covered man currently bound with duct tape 'sitting' on the bench had been able to conceal it so well. What she'd originally thought to a polished steel surface on the handle was actually a coat of iridescent, silvery blue paint, though, the double-sided, razor-sharp blade - still covered in her nanite-infused blood - was just solid, functional steel. In spite of the moving parts, the knife felt very sturdy and solid in the hand, and -

"AH!"

Serena quickly suckled her index finger where she'd cut herself, artly concealing how quickly the small wound patched itself up. It was also razor sharp, to boot. Considering all the... Her it had to go through, that seemed like a no-brainer, but the vampire still found herself a bit shocked at how... Readily it had cut through her body. The two edges made this thing a bit dangerous for tricks, she idly mused. "Y-yeah..." She awkwardly added, just holding the blade in her hand and momentarily looking towards her ponytailed colleague. "It kinda sucks, doesn't it?"

"I'll say..." Mrs Rosalyn to her left, just disappointingly sighed. "We got a bit too rough with this little carpetbagger." She said, gesturing over towards The scientist who'd stabbed Serena with the knife she now held.

Even though the vampire still felt a sense of pride in her choice of company, she felt maybe Mrs. Rosalyn had a point - the guy looked so badly roughed up that if you'd said a pack of Monty's Mounties brought him in for 'questioning' Serena would have believed it. He'd been propped up on the bench, right next to where Thoth was loudly snoring away after having been 'tapped' twice in one night, and even though he was completely knocked out, he was still bound and gagged with an entire roll of duct tape for good measure. "And now he's not gonna be telling us a damn thing."

"And..." Lisa added, still busy working her way through the duct tape bindings in order to rifle through the man's labcoat, producing a mountain of rather suspicious-looking gadgets and knick-knacks that now littered the floor. "Our only other lead probably couldn't tell us anything else." The red-haired spy took a quick look over at Thoth, dreamily snoozing away, and Serena just found herself looking awkwardly towards the floor. "Even if he was awake."

"Yeah..." Serena needed to take a deep breath. It was a bit of an... Awkward spot. "I think we should just leave him be for now." The vampire had... Made an effort to only take as much as she needed to heal, but, twice so soon was probably a bit too much for the poor cultist to handle. He'd gone from mostly out of it to completely out of it, trapped in a blissful pipe dream and occasionally emitting soft moans of pleasure and ecstasy, to Serena's guilty chagrin. She wanted to focus on this as little as possible, and her red eyes drifted down towards the butterfly knife once again idly spinning in her hands, in defiance of previous, painfully established lessons. It was still mostly covered in her blood, and Serena's gaze narrowed, not really paying much attention to anything. She supposed, if it was her knife now, she'd better clean it off before the blade started to tarnish or something...

"Anyways," Lisa continued. "I think we've got a more urgent problem here..." The red-haired spy, finished with frisking the gang's battering victim, turned around to face her black-haired colleague with a very worried look on her face. "Serena, are you?-"

There was a brief, awkward pause as she heard her name, and the black-haired vampire's eyes went wide as she snapped right back into the real world and realized that, while she was zoning out, she'd began licking her own blood right off the knife's blade.

She locked up for a few moments, but, Serena just took a deep breath, retracted her tongue, and quickly closed and stowed the blade back into her coat. Everyone present just felt a bit too awkward to really question her on that. Except Gabriel, but Serena shut his snickering up with a very harsh death glare.

Lisa just took a deep breath. "Serena, are you okay?" She finally completed her sentence, her expression very confused, concerned, and to the vampire's horror, very curious. The redhead slowly approached her, fixated on her abdomen, and, before Serena could reflexively pull back, she put a hand on her coat - right where the knife had gone in.

There was a bit of dried, crusted-on blood on the leather, but other than that... The redhead's eyes went wide, and she needed to adjust her glasses. Serena was pretty much pristine otherwise. Lisa put a whole finger in the incision, making the vampire very uncomfortable, and looked shocked when she touched nothing but Serena's toned, pristine stomach underneath all the layers.

"Err..." She just stammered, though, the disquiet Lisa was feeling utterly paled in comparison with the panic and nervousness Serena was trying as hard as she could to suppress, and even Gabriel and Mrs Rosalyn were looking worried, though, for markedly different reasons. "I know my eyesight isn't that good, but... Didn't you just get stabbed?"

There was a long, awkward pause, hanging thickly in the air like graveyard mist, before the vampire just loudly coughed, as though attempting to steal a few more moments of time in which to think, before finally just giving up and sheepishly admitting, "Yes..."

"But... I..." Lisa just put her index finger to her chin as she looked back down at Serena's abdomen, trying to figure out exactly what the Sam hell was going on, all the while Serena just looked towards the floor, nervous and awkward, really hoping she wouldn't figure it out. "It healed back up..."

"Well..." The vampire just nervously laughed, hiding all the alarm bells ringing in her head with an anxious, earnest expression. If after everything she'd survived so far, Lisa somehow managed to sniff out her... Condition, then...

Serena just sighed. She had to admit, she'd probably find herself completely paralyzed. She had absolutely zero clue how the hell she could save her own hide then. "I... Er-"

"I just gave her an experimental medication." Gabriel butted in, a confident, playful expression on the eccentric scientist's face as he adjusted his glasses again. Lisa just looked confused and and Serena just took a deep sigh of relief and tried her best to look like this was her plan all along.

"It's a little pill some of the lab boys have been cooking up." Gabriel continued spinning his web of lies. "A little mixture of nanobots and healing drugs that can quickly patch up any injuries a growing girl could get into." He just cracked a wry, playful smile, and Serena just sighed, finding it difficult to suppress her own. He could be really irritating, but, she had to admit, she appreciated him, even if him talking about 'nanobots' just felt like tempting fate. "Convenient, huh?"

"Y-yeah..." Serena just awkwardly laughed, as Gabriel gave her a sort of knowing, almost slightly scolding smile, saying 'what would you do without me?' without even needing words. "Science can do some really cool things these days..." She added, her tone dripping with irritation she was trying her best to hide.

The spy just looked... Confused, though - and Serena was really hoping this was a good sign - markedly less concerned. "But... Err..." Lisa slowly began to turn around, and with it, everyone's eyes were drawn right back to the dreamy-faced cultist still noisily snoozing away on the lobby bench. "What were you doing with him?..."

"Uh-"

"Maybe..." Gabriel cut her off with a playful laugh - probably the only time in Serena's life she ever actually appreciated that, and it still reflexively made her a bit mad. "She just needed some company for it, that's all..."

"O... Kay..." Lisa looked really weirded out, but to Serena's relief, the suspicion in her eyes seemed to die down for the time being, and the vampire was able to calm down and take a few deep breaths. Finally, with the panic and choler and irritation suppressed, and Gabriel took everyone's minds off the mystery of how she was perfectly fine after being stabbed, she could... Concentrate.

"Let's get back on track..." The vampire pushed herself off the wall and slowly walked over towards the man who'd stabbed her, a suspicious, almost nervous expression on her face as she sized him up, a niggling little detail, once momentarily forgotten in the action and the tension, now rising to the surface like a bloated corpse appearing in a lake. "How the hell did he get in here, anyways?!"

"That's... A good question." Lisa replied, and gradually the whole atmosphere in the lobby shifted. The fight now behind them and tempers cooling, everyone else realized something was very wrong, and all four pairs of eyes were now squarely focused on the battered and duct-taped scientist. The question had first popped up when they'd seen him arrive, though, it had to be thrown on the backburner as they sprung into action. Now, it was returning to the forefront like a suspicious neighbour knocking at your door in the dead of night. The whole party - Serena especially - were beginning to look a bit worried at the implications that rose.

"I..." Mrs. Rosalyn just took a quick look around the lobby, absolutely baffled. "Couldn't tell you - I've got cameras watching all the exits."

"It's possible he just came in from somewhere we didn't notice..." Gabriel added, stroking his chin. "Like, a vent or a sewer tunnel or something." The eccentric scientist suggested.

"Is there anywhere you don't have cameras set up?" Serena asked, though, the vampire was beginning to look more distant and contemplative, a wild theory of her own starting to gradually come into her mind that was scaring her to the core. "I think, if Gabriel was right," She suggested, really, really hoping he was. "Then this guy probably could have used a blind spot or something in the security system to slip in."

"Serena, dear," Mrs. Rosalyn rolled her eyes, though, she had a playful smile on her face. "Do I look like a wet-behind-the-ears college graduate? The system doesn't have any blind spots. There's a few old rooms in the sub-basement that I didn't bother to put cameras in, but that's about it."

"Doesn't that count as a blind spot, though?" Gabriel helpfully - and sarcastically - pointed out, though, as usual everyone just completely ignored him, Serena in particular looking suddenly alert and attentive - and just a tiny bit worried - as she realized what that meant.

"You've got rooms in this building without any cameras?" The vampire hurriedly and anxiously asked.

"Oh, sure I do." The landlady nonchalantly responded, shrugging her shoulders. But the sub-basement is so damn old nobody even uses it anymore. There's only one entrance to it, and I've got a camera on that. Believe me, Serena." She flashed a wry smile. "When I was setting the system up, I checked every damn inch of it and there's no sewer entrance or ventilation duct our little intruder could have used."

"I think we should check anyways." Serena flatly responded, really hoping that what she was thinking wasn't the case. "I mean, if you had the right equipment, you might just be able to tunnel in or something..."

The landlady just laughed a bit and shrugged her shoulders. "Be my guest, Dear." She responded. "And let me know if you find anything down there. For the time being..." Mrs. Rosalyn just shrugged her shoulders and sighed, turning her attention back over towards the battered scientist and the sleeping cultist in the middle of a pipe dream on her lobby's bench. "I guess I'll look after these two..."

"What..." Lisa asked, bewildered.

"The..." Gabriel added, a bit surprised.

"Hell." Serena concluded, really, really irritated and very nervous. The metallic, ominous staircase in front of them, descending down into the darkness was something completely beyond even her craziest, most paranoid assumptions.

"What is it?" Mrs. Rosalyn asked from the other end of Serena's cell phone, and with a nervous, resigned sigh, The vampire recounted exactly how they'd even found this hidden passageway...

Like the landlady said, the sub-basement was only accessible from a single staircase in the laundry room, and when Serena and her colleagues stepped through, it was like they'd been transported to another time period. The rest of the apartment block was very functional. It wasn't the glistening marble floors and extremely neat, artistically stark design like in Bathrette's HQ, but it was reasonably modern and made practical use of modern materials. It was neat and tidy and well-lit, and none of those terms could apply to the sub-basement they'd found.

Down a creaky wooden staircase, the intrepid trio arrived in a place that looked like it hadn't seen any human contact since The Crash. The sub-basement was defined by a harsh, austere cement floor and musty, faded red brickwork. There were a few harsh, incandescent bulbs mounted in the ceilings of the various corridors and chambers for illumination - though many of them were either broken or just weren't hooked up anymore. Places that may have once been storerooms or offices were completely deserted except for the dust and petrified wooden columns that held up this place time forgot.

Lisa had a theory The Santa Monica Apartments were simply built over the ruins of... Something else, and Serena definitely believed it. The whole place had a distinctly 'abandoned' feel, right down to the overpowering musty scent that permeated the whole structure. Gabriel, trying to lighten the mood a bit, joked how it smelled like an old library, but to Serena's more pessimistic nose, it felt more like a crypt.

The staircase hadn't taken long to find, and Serena and Lisa both felt like it'd been added fairly recently. Probably, the vampire mused, right around when Lazerian disappeared. They'd found it in one of the further-off rooms, which may have originally been a lounge or something, but, deserted as it was, they couldn't tell. The trio immediately noticed something was off - for one, this room was a whole lot less musty than the others, and Lisa's sharp, bespectacled gaze noticed a section of wall that was a lot less worn and weathered than the rest of it...

Serena just took a deep breath and an awkward, cynical smile crossed her face when she'd seen it. Of course, it was obvious! The bricks were practically still red! Though, once they'd figured out how to open the world's most ineptly concealed secret door - by pushing it open - none of them were really prepared for what lay beyond.

The vampire had been expecting some sort of cultist hideout ripped straight from fiction, or something more like what she'd found in that Matrix server - some sinister, shadowy antechamber, covered in spiderwebs and occult glyphs, with a score of jabbering cultists hanging out in the rafters with machine guns and dynamite. Or, more optimistically, a tunnel down into the sewers where they could continue the search. What they'd actually found was... More pedestrian, and also infinitely more disheartening.

"It looks like-..." Serena mused, an odd, disquieted look coming onto the vampire's face.

"-The stairwells at The Castle." Lisa finished. It was an apt description. Visually, this place couldn't have clashed any harder with the musty faded brickwork of the sub-basement it led into. Serena and the party were looking down into a long, metallic stairwell, with black-painted diamond steel stairs and landings and austere, gray unpainted walls held up by segmented I-beams. An array of soft, white glowing-bulbs turned on when Serena put a single probing foot into the chamber, and the vampire felt like she was stepping out of a musty, neglected crypt into a crashed alien spaceship...

"It looks new." Gabriel piped up, leaning in and adjusting his spectacles, a more reserved, contemplative look coming onto the normally playful and eccentric scientists' face that made Serena look a bit worried. "I'm not an expert, but everything - the paint, the screws, the lights - all look pristine. There isn't a bit of wear or weather on any of it."

"So, how long ago did Lazerian - or whoever else could have built this -" Serena added, though she was rather cynically sure it was a pointless gesture when the picture was becoming increasingly clear. "-build it?"

Gabriel just shrugged his shoulders, which Serena didn't find very encouraging. "Could have been a week or a month ago, for all I know." He replied. "I'm just saying this all looks brand new."

"Like you said, Serena, It could probably have been around the time he disappeared." Lisa added. "Or even a bit earlier, depending on how far back his plans go."

"Well..." The vampire took a deep, resigned breath, turning her head back over towards the doorway, into the ominous, metallic switchback staircase below. It might've been just paranoia or an overactive imagination, but Serena was fairly certain she could feel the distant humming of machinery and computer equipment deep below. "One thing's for sure." She sourly added. "We're probably going to have to go in."

"Are you sure, dear?" Mrs. Rosalyn said over the phone. "You don't want to call the police or anything?" She asked, and Serena looked a bit shocked. The landlady had struck her as an expert in keeping cool and calm, and seemed to have taken Gabriel's explanation of what had been going on in stride, and had deftly been helping them out, but this whole situation was starting to rattle her too, wasn't it?..."

"N-no, we're good." The vampire took a deep breath, forcing a smile that she thought looked confident, but to her two co-workers probably looked pained and anxious. "This is our job, you know?" She said, and Lisa and Gabriel just exchanged an uncomfortable-looking glance. "and, well..."

She let out a nervous, awkward bit of laughter as she reflexively ruffled up the back of her short hairdo. "I know this is kinda stupid to say now, but we ARE kind of on a SECRET mission..." She added, catching a half-teasing, half-scolding look from Gabriel in the process. "So... Please don't tell anyone about this. Like, anything about it. Or get the cops involved."

"Got it." The landlady nonchalantly replied, and Serena let forth another massive sigh of relief, a heavy burden having just been lifted from her shoulders.

"Your secrets are safe with me, Serena." She jokingly added, and the vampire just awkwardly fidgeted at the merest mention of secrets and felt suddenly like Lisa was staring a hole into her, even though the red-haired spy was really just staring down into the stairwell and unbuttoning her capelet coat, revealing her own gunbelt and issued sidearm.

"Thanks..." The vampire eventually replied, before adding, "Oh, and if we're not back in... I dunno, an hour-"

"Make it two." Gabriel piped in. "These sorts of things always run a bit long."

"Two hours," Serena corrected.

"What sort of things?..." Lisa cut in, the rather nervous-looking spy raising a concerned eyebrow. "What do you think we'll find... Down there."

"Probably crazy cultists with machine guns." Serena cynically answered, going back to her imagination and quickly putting a gloved finger over her cell's microphone to avoid the two conversations she was having getting intermingled.

"Plus whatever crazy experiment Lazerian has been cooking up in there." Gabriel helpfully added, which just made both girls look even more worried and nervous."

"Well..." Lisa found herself adjusting her own spectacles, and Serena wondered if she'd picked that up from hanging around a certain eccentric scientist for too long. (If she hadn't began to appreciate his company, she probably would have wise-assedly said any length was too long.)

"I mean, we've found what's - probably - his lab. Should we call for like, a Special Asset Protection Agent or somebody to clear it out?..." That suggestion just earned the red-haired spy an irritated glare from the dark-haired commando, and she just awkwardly laughed it off. "S-sorry." She added. "I guess I'm just a bit too used to thinking we're still in the same department."

"Anyways..." Serena took her finger off the cell's speaker, and said, "So, like I was saying, Ma'am. If we're not back in two hours..." The vampire took a deep breath, feeling a strong reluctance and anxiousness welling inside of her, clenching her teeth, looking visibly pained and awkward as she finally managed to force out, "Can you call my boss and tell him where we are?" She asked, and Lisa and Gabriel looked genuinely a bit shocked at that. "Just... Call Bathrette's headquarters, ask for..."

She quickly paused, wondering whether to call her actual boss, or... Well, her not-actual boss she seemed to be taking a lot of orders from anyways. Commander Sikorski would definitely be able to rescue them if they got in a jam and fix any problems they might have, but... The vampire just pictured some of her more menacing, chromed-up, heavy-weapon toting colleagues in the Special Asset Protection Squad, as well as the charred ruin that would follow, and just sighed. "Ask for Mr. Van Steyr, Department of Special Projects, and say I asked you to call him..."

"Will do, dear." The landlady responded, though, Serena could feel a sort of barely palatable tension in her voice - maybe she'd let in a bit more than she'd wanted to in her own tone. "Good luck..."

The vampire just took a deep, tense sigh as she hung up the phone, slowly returning the cell back into her coat as she tried to focus her mind away from... That, and onto the task ahead. Serena just shook her head, finding a bout of awkward, anxious laughter coming over her. The sacrifices she made for this team...

\*clang, clang, clang, clang, clang...\*

Three pairs of shoes - well, two pairs of boots and one pair of shoes - clanged against the steel steps as the intrepid trio tensely descended into the bowels of the Earth, deeper into Lazerian's base - and by now, Serena was absolutely certain this was it. Her program had traced Thanatos' server to the Santa Monica Apartments, and there was that whole business with Thoth and that goon who'd stabbed her - she hadn't gotten his name, and he was too busy getting seven kinds of snot beaten out of him to tell her. She took a deep breath, as her party cleared a landing and turned around in the switchback staircase. They were getting close, and it was making her real nervous - and this whole place wasn't exactly helping the vampire keep her composure.

Part of it was how the lights worked. In what she was assuming to be an effort to save power, the whole staircase wasn't lit up at once - an ingenious series of sensors could switch each array of bulbs on and off as someone went up and down, illuminating the landing they were on, and the ones above and below them. It just made Serena feel like she was stuck in a dark forest, with only a single sputtering torch for illumination, and the oppressive darkness closing in on all sides. It was not a comfortable feeling, especially as the staircase took them deeper and deeper underground.

"How..." Lisa took a deep breath, the normally more level-headed spy beginning to catch a bit of the vampire's anxiousness. "How deep does this go?..."

"Well, we've cleared about twelve flights of stairs so far," Gabriel responded.

"You kept count?" Serena asked, a bit bewildered.

"I said 'about.'" The eccentric scientist replied, and the vampire just groaned. "So, assuming every flight of stairs is nine meters tall."

"Assuming?" The vampire asked, and the scientist just shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"I don't exactly have a tape measure here, and even if I did, Serena..." He just laughed a bit, adjusting his glasses as they went deeper and deeper. "Would you really want me stopping to take measurements?"

"Point taken."

"So," Gabriel cleared his throat, as he continued. "Assuming every flight is nine metres tall, we should be about... Carry the three... We've already gone about a hundred and eight metres underground."

That just made both the girls' eyes go wide in surprise, and suddenly stop dead in their tracks, the flickering lights pausing with them, and the darkness settling oppressively above and below them. "We're not even done, yet." Gabriel added.

There was a long, awkward pause as they just stood still, a few steps away from clearing the next landing. "How..." Lisa took another deep breath, anxiously running a hand through her vibrant red hair. "How the hell did he even build this?!..."

"I think..." Serena finally opened her coat and took her firearm out, liberating it from the gunbelt that was feeling very awkward and heavy on her waist. It was a standard-issue handgun she'd gotten from the Security Department's quartermaster a few nights ago, and she was still getting used to it's presence. "We should worry about that after we're done here."

Her gun was a large, smooth, heavy, and solid matte-black autoloader with a large, elegant, well-defined slide. There were a pair of no-nonsense polymer grips on the handle, and a safety catch right above the trigger which Serena, after a brief moment of contemplation, quickly turned off. The markings stamped into the slide identified it as a Beretta P49, and she wasn't exactly a firearms nerd, but Serena was vaguely certain they operated somewhere out of Italy.

More markings designated it's calibre as 10mm, the favourite of lawmen, gangsters, and jumped up company thugs the world over. When Serena pressed a gloved finger against the magazine release, it slid out smoothly into her hand, showing ten large but agile copper-jacketed rounds nested inside, visible through a transparent panel - and of course, there was still one in the chamber.

More than enough to kill any living thing on the planet... Hopefully. The vampire just took a deep breath, sliding her weapon back into the gunbelt and adjusting it a bit to make drawing a bit quicker.

"Do you think we're really gonna need to..." Lisa piped up, following Serena's example a bit, taking out her own sidearm - another P49 - and visually inspecting it, a nervous look on the spy's face that matched the way Serena was feeling inside. "Shoot anyone?"

"I'm really hoping he'll come quietly." The vampire irritably admitted. For all her augmented abilities and commando training, Serena's marksmanship was one of the things that she hadn't exactly been able to fix. She could barely hit the broad side of a barn from inside it, and her scores on the shooting range were bad enough that even Gabriel had gotten sick of teasing her about putting more rounds into the ceiling than the target. She just took a deep sigh, and as stubbornly as she could, forced herself once more down the staircase, into the darkness and whatever danger lay below, her companions following - reluctantly - close behind. "If we run into anything," She sarcastically mused. "I just hope we can punch it or stab it."

"Let's hope so, Serena." Gabriel cracked a wry smile. " 'Cause you couldn't out-shoot a mannequin." That just earned him a weary groan and a death glare from the dark-haired commando, a sour, disappointed feeling welling up inside her at the inaccuracy of her earlier assessment.

"Oh, you're one to talk." Serena found herself harshly riposting, finding herself a bit surprised at how much choler and irritation was bleeding into her tone. "You're not even a part of the security department, 'ya egghead." She couldn't help but feel... Tense, and Gabriel's witticisms were not helping her mood.

"Well, that's true." The eccentric scientist just adjusted his glasses, his expression all playful and teasing, and while it was definitely helping Serena keep her mind from nervously contemplating the dangers that lay ahead of her, he was still obnoxiously irritating. "I'm mostly here to keep an eye on you guys and lend a hand if you need anything."

"Because Vincent thinks we can't handle ourselves."

Gabriel just laughed a bit and flashed a very self-satisfied smile. "Is he wrong?" He asked, and Serena just groaned and shook her head. Dammit, she walked right into that one.

"Well, like I said." The vampire just took a deep, choleric breath. "You're just a civy, Gabriel."

"Ow." He made a very mocking, exaggerated pantomime of recoiling back at Serena's harsh 'insult.' "Serena, you wound me!"

"I mean," She groaned and crossed her arms. "You're giving me so much shit over my marksmanship, but did you even bring a weapon in the first place?"

"Well, now that you mention it..." Gabriel just laughed a bit, and Serena's eyes went wide as he pulled out a small, silvery, elegantly curved autoloading pocket pistol from his labcoat. "I didn't get issued a gun, but it would be pretty stupid to go into the lion's den empty handed, wouldn't it?" Again, not being a gun nut she couldn't identify the model by name, but she was fairly certain it belonged in a twentieth century spy movie. "You don't need to worry about me, Serena." He flashed a smug, playful smile as he stowed his pistol back in his labcoat, and Serena just sighed, crossing her arms and shooting him a weary, annoyed look again.

"I wasn't worried about you." The vampire harshly responded, taking a deep breath and diverting her focus back down the stairs, down into the darkness, where Lazerian, his goons - and whatever they were working on - were probably lurking, waiting in ambush, ready to... She just shook her head. It'd probably be better not to focus on the many horrifying ways she and her companions could be killed down here.

"Well, that's good..." The eccentric scientist finally responded, and once again, the staircase fell silent, only the sounds of three pairs of feet rapping against the steel stairs, and the soft clicking as the lights turned on and off, the aegis of illumination shifting to match their descent, and the encroaching darkness above and below her a grim reminder of how deep they were going. On a bit of a whim, Serena decided to momentarily crane her neck back and look up, and found herself feeling the sudden onset of vertigo, in spite of how she couldn't see more than a few feet into the darkness. "Because we're gonna have a lot more to worry about than your aim."

Serena quickly pulled her gaze back down and briefly over her shoulder to give Gabriel another harsh glare, before pulling away just as fast, shaking her head and continuing down into the depths, focusing on what lay ahead.

Once again, she reached inside of her coat, clasping a hand around the handle of her pistol still in its holster. The awkward, cumbersome weight was still getting used to, but... The dark-haired commando just cracked a wry, cynical smile. It felt reassuring somehow. The pistol was about the only thing she had to protect herself with, unless, well... Serena shook her head. It was really irritating how Gabriel was right all the time, but unless she was feeling a bit lead-deficient and wanted to try charging blood-crazed cultists with her new butterfly knife, this gun would be all the difference between life and death.

The vampire found herself gripping her weapon harder, nervously laughing to herself. Hopefully, she mused, Lazerian's goons would indulge her and stand close enough for her to actually hit. It wasn't a comforting thought by any metric, but it was about all Serena could do to keep her mind off the horrifying possibilities of what lay ahead of her, as her party made their way further down, and down, and down...

"I dunno if I should be..." Serena took a deep breath, gripping her pistol tightly with both hands, her two compatriots - weapons drawn - right behind her, flanking either side of the dark-haired commando, all three of them looking very... Disoriented and weirded out. "Disappointed or worried."

She took a step through the portal, exiting the stairwell and entering a pleasantly decorated hub area, lit by stark, but warm fluorescent lights overhead. The black painted stairs gave way to black floor tiles so polished the group could see their nervous, edgy-looking faces in them, and the austere steel walls were painted with a single stripe of blue paint at around chest height. There were even a few couches and potted ferns to give the place a bit more flavour, and a few paintings that Serena was fairly certain you could order in bulk.

All in all, it looked fairly lived in and gave the vampire the impression less of a mad scientist's doom hideout and more of an office lobby, though, the persistent humming of computers and the strange, subtle coldness that permeated the whole space would have immediately clued in a casual observer that something was off. Besides being deep underground, obviously.

"I think we should be a bit grateful." Gabriel helpfully cut in, and it just made Serena look extremely awkward.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," The eccentric scientist adjusted his spectacles a bit, cracking a wiry smile. "It's alot nicer than the occult den of evil you were expecting, right?" He asked, and Serena just crossed her arms once more - pistol still in hand - and turned away, trying her hardest not to look embarrassed.

"It... Lisa took a step forwards, turning her head to take it all in, casting her bespectacled eyes over the three main corridors that branched out from this central 'hub' area - which would give them a lot to explore, Serena mused. "Reminds me a bit of Bathrette's headquarters, actually."

"It's more of a dead ringer for the Special Projects' department specifically." Gabriel replied, stroking his chin, and, briefly, Serena's eyes went wide - it was true. She'd just been there a few days ago, after all.

It was a touch more menacing and, when you stripped the slightly menacing homeyness away, it had an atmosphere somewhere between a crashed spaceship and a military bunker, but all in all it really was a lot like the Special Projects wing of Bathrette's R&D Department. They had the same sort of vaguely sinister feeling, but in a pedestrian way, like a popular public cemetery. "I guess someone got a bit homesick." The eccentric scientist joked.

"I guess..." Serena just took a deep breath to calm her nerves and made a momentary inspection of her weapon one more time. "This... Probably confirms it." She proclaimed. "This has to be Lazerian's hideout..." What she didn't say, but everyone knew, was that they'd better be ready for trouble. Serena found herself remembering an old bit of advice from her dad. A beast is always the most dangerous when it's cornered. A bit of an odd thing to tell a six-year old girl, thinking about it, but somehow it stuck.

"So." Gabriel turned over his shoulder and gave the vampire an amicable, but nonetheless serious look. "What's the plan?... Or do we just go in guns-blazing-"

"That's all I can think of." The vampire irritably irritably, taking a second to pause before adding, "Oh, right. If we see Lazerian, the bosses want us to take him alive, remember?"

"You think he'll let you take him alive?"

"He'd freaking better." Serena groaned, "Vincent and Sikorski would probably chew me out if we filled him with lead, or if he cut his throat or something, now, come on-"

"Er... Serena..." Lisa piped in, and, as the two of them turned to face her - then towards where she was pointing - Serena and Gabriel's eyes went wide and their expressions both turned suddenly attentive and dire. Staring right back at them, mounted in the corner of the lobby's ceiling, was a white-shelled security camera staring right at them, with a blinking red diode right under the camera lens.

The vampire, ever quick to react, found the barrel of her sidearm swiftly pointing towards it, but, after a brief second of hesitation, she found herself just bolting down the left-hand side corridor, springing into action, her companions bewildered but Gabriel, quick on the uptake, just grabbed Lisa by the lapel of her coat and went off in hot pursuit after her.

"Did you think of something!?" The eccentric scientist - half-jokingly - called out towards the other end of the gray, black and blue-coloured hideout hallway, and Serena, realizing her compatriots were ordinary mortal humans and, as such, couldn't run as fast or for as long as she could, slowed down a great deal for them to catch up, while sighing irritably.

"No, I didn't!" She reluctantly admitted, which just made Gabriel look a bit awkward and Lisa - who was now running under her own power and visibly not-very grateful for the 'assist', just looked a bit frazzled.

"But they know we're here!" Serena added, panic and vexation on her voice. "and we need to act fast!"

"So we're gonna look for him!?"

"Hopefully we can also find a security office or something to turn the cameras first." Serena responded, the former cybersecurity technician finding it a bit galling to be on the wrong side of a security network for once. "But, uh..." She added, briefly giving it a second of thought and stroking her short, black hair with her free hand. "If we find any of his cultists, maybe give them a second to turn themselves in before you start shooting."

"Got it." The eccentric scientist austerely responded, and, the hunt was on. Acting as quickly as they could, Serena, Lisa, and Gabriel began to conduct a thorough sweep through the Lazerian's base, crashing in through doorways and slicing the pie around corners just like they'd been taught - or, rather, Serena was the one demonstrating all these breaching manoeuvres that she was expecting her compatriots to copy, with varying levels of success.

Unfortunately, what they'd found only added to the their worries and tension. Rather than the laboratories and test chambers and specimen tanks Serena was expecting, the rooms that they'd searched so far were... Very pedestrian.

There were a few dorm rooms with suspiciously fresh linens, a break room that was abandoned so recently that there were still smouldering cigarettes in the ashtray, a laundry room with some unflattering, nerdy clothes in a hamper, a few broom closets that just made Serena feel guilty and awkward at the horrifyingly pleasurable memories they provoked, an even a bathroom, complete with an inviting-looking shower. All of it was deserted, with not even a single hint of Lazerian, let alone his goons, which was really wiggling her out.

Really, the... Tranquility especially was putting Serena on edge. She knew deep in her heart she should be thinking positively - the lack of opposition would make it easier to search, but her brain was screaming at her that it was all wrong. She'd been expecting jabbering cultists to practically burst out of the walls brandishing machine guns, and the lack of them just made her clench her teeth and badly crave nicotine.

The other shoe was about to drop, and she was absolutely sure of it. It was all making her so tightly wound that it took every inch of restraint - and a bit of encouragement from Gabriel - to keep her from blasting every single security camera they came across with a full metal jacket 10mm round. Mostly because she didn't want to run out of ammunition before they even came across a single cultist. Still, she told the rest of her team to be on high alert, and switch the safeties of their own weapons off.

Soon, they came across... Well, it wasn't a menacing place or anywhere Lazerian might've been hiding, but what looked to her a bit like the canteen back in The Castle. There was a bar area separating the kitchen and the dining area, through which she could see a whole array of ovens, stoves, sinks, cupboards and even two refrigerators. The dining area was filled up with tables and chairs that could have been taken directly from her old high school, and an old coffee machine, which unfortunately didn't work - Serena checked.

They didn't find much else in the kitchen, either. Serena's imagination was conjuring up images of passwalls into secret rooms and escape tunnels, but all they discovered was some stale carb-wafers and soy crisps, as well as a bottle of Worcestershire sauce in the pantry. The intrepid trio were in the process of debating what direction they should continue their search when, something odd happened.

Serena couldn't exactly put her finger on it, but a sort of odd feeling started brewing in her gut. A cloying, writhing, suspicious feeling, her nerves beginning to flush with anxiousness and trepidation. She quickly silenced her comrades' discussion to get a bit of space to think, which turned out to be a very good idea, as once everyone stopped talking, the trio gradually realized, to their shock, that somewhere far off, over the persistent murmuring of computer equipment, they could hear the distant sounds of several pairs of footsteps against tile out in the hallway. Serena's eyes went wide, and a string of unladylike profanity left her lips when she'd realize two things.

One. She'd just led her team into what was essentially a corner with some stale snacks in the pantry. Two, from the way the sound was getting gradually louder, the footsteps and the people they belonged to - and Serena wasn't expecting a welcoming party - were getting closer and closer.

"What-?" Lisa tried whispering, though, taking after Gabriel a bit, Serena just pulled the red-haired spy down with her free hand, taking cover behind the bar and taking a deep breath, checking to make sure her weapon was still loaded and ready to fire, and clenching her teeth in anticipation and nervousness.

"Trouble, it sounds like..." Gabriel explained with a whisper, catching the vampire's train of thought a bit. He was trying to put on a bit of a jokey, jovial expression to relieve the tension, but found himself a bit shocked that his usual positivity wasn't coming out - the normally eccentric scientist's tone was suddenly very serious and dripping with tension. Serena probably would have been more worried if she wasn't busy trying to figure out how the hell they were all going to not die.

"Everyone, just... Be quiet." The vampire just whispered, reflexively checking the magazine of her weapon once again. "With any luck, they won't know we're here, and-"

Gabriel just took a deep breath, and, for the first time the vampire had seen, he actually just looked genuinely disappointed as he pointed over towards the security camera mounted on the kitchen ceiling, silently watching their every move with its baleful, red-diode accented gaze. "I think we're out of luck there."

"Okay..." Serena took in a tense, nervous breath of air." Change of plans, then..." The vampire responded, shuffling a bit over towards the other edge of the bar - near where they entered the kitchen area in the first place. "We're probably going to have to fight our way out, so-"

"Well... Well... Well..." A new voice boomed out over from the other side of the bar, all smarmy and cocksure just like the idiot who'd stabbed her, and, even as she froze a scant few inches from the edge of cover Serena found herself wondering if that was just a requirement Lazerian had, all the while she clenched her teeth and tightened her grip on her weapon. "Looks like we've got ourselves a little pair of intruders-"

"Trio." Another voice piped up, and Serena used the rather brief, but tense lull in the action to turn back over towards her companions and make a gesture across her lips as though she was sealing a zipper.

"Yeah, I know, it's three intruders." The first voice from earlier replied, now sounding a bit irritated and disappointed, and Serena took a deep breath and took the faintest glance out from around the corner, steeling her nerves and trying as hard as she could not to gasp or swear or make a damn peep. "But 'pair' just flows better, and-"

"Look, who freaking cares about all that." The third cultist piped up, and he sounded simultaneously impatient and very detached and uncaring about the whole situation. All three of them were dressed rather similarly to the 'representative' who'd stabbed her earlier, in labcoats that seemed to be the uniform around here, but they were all putting their own spins on it.

One of them, a blond with long, scruffy hair, swapped out the vest and slacks for a black metal band's T-shirt and a pair of jeans. Another had neat black hair and looked bit wiry, and a lot more, well, oddly preppy, with his labcoat tied around his waist and a sweater in lieu of a vest. The third just looked like he'd rolled out of bed, with dark-brown bed-head and bags under his eyes, and he was missing the vest and tie, but his labcoat, dress shirt, and slacks were all there, if wrinkled to hell and back.

Overall, they didn't exactly look like much of a threat, but the firearms they were all packing told a different story. The blondy had a large-framed revolver, the preppy one had a vintage looking autoloader with wooden grips, and the tired one was waving around a sawn-off double barreled shotgun to emphasize his point in a way that'd have the range safety officer back at Bathrette HQ blow a gasket, while saying, "Lets' just kill them and be done with it, I've got a bad hangover."

"Fine, Fine." The first cultist - the blond one - irritably replied, and Serena's eyes went wide, her stomach tying itself up in knots and a bead of sweat rolling down her forehead as they made their approach towards the bar, fanning out their weapons, ready to catch them. "Nothing fancy, go for center of mass shots." He continued on, their footsteps forlornly ringing inside her ears like funeral bells, as she gripped her weapon even tighter. "The Professor won't be happy if we damage their brains before he can experiment on their cadavers-"

**\*BANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANG!**

The gunshots rang out through the dining room and the muzzle flash from her weapon lit the slightly dingy room up like a firework, and Serena found herself almost alarmed at how quickly she'd sprung into action at hearing that.

She was already feeling a bit tense, but hearing THAT just threw her into a frenzy like a cornered beast, and, quicker than anyone could respond, she poked herself and her handgun over the side of the bar, drew a bead on the cultist closest to her - the one with the shotgun - and she just jerked the trigger as fast as she could, her gun discharging as quickly as the mechanism would allow, each bullet throwing a flash of recoil up her arm, the whole volley thundering deftly towards her would-be assailant.

Of course, even as close as the cultist was, Between the maddened terror and adrenaline coursing through her veins and her already poor marksmanship, most of her shots missed, but enough copper-jacketed 10mm rounds hit the mark that the tired-looking cultist with the shotgun was thrown down to the ground, a blooming shower of crimson exploding out of his back where the bullets hit home, shimmering and cascading in the air as the cultist let loose a wet, gurgling rattle from his throat, weakly attempting to clutch his wounds before going limp, and all hell broke loose.

Well, Serena was expecting all hell to break loose, but really, things seemed to hold still for a moment, the other two cultists turning towards the crumpled form of their compatriot on the ground, painting the tiles red where he lay, and she was expecting them to snap into action. Like, duck into cover, call for backup, suppress their position, or - worst of all - throw a grenade, but the remaining two cultists just locked up, staring fixedly at the man Serena just shot before the preppy one yelled out, "THEY JUST KILLED TOMMY!" and their resolve immediately crumpled.

Not being experienced thugs or lawmen or highly trained company commandos, the two remaining cultists just made what would normally be a fatal mistake. When the intruders put up more resistance than they'd been expecting, they just lowered their weapons and ran like the devil himself was on their tail.

Serena, still completely rattled, found herself locking up for just a second before snapping right back into action and pressing her advantage. However, when she drew a bead on the fleeing cultists, her eyes went wide as she pulled the trigger and found nothing but the clicking sound of an empty chamber in her ears. A horrified, embarrassed look came onto her face as she realized she'd dumped her entire magazine into one guy-

**\*BANG!\***

Luckily for her, Gabriel was also quick to snap into action, springing out up and over the bar and taking a snap-shot at the fleeing cultists. Judging by the sharp yelp of pain the blond cultist gave off as they ran out the doorway and back into the halls, he could actually hit a moving target at ten paces with his spy pistol.

Things went... Uncomfortably still after that. Serena quickly reloaded her weapon, suddenly finding the two spare magazines - now one - she'd tucked into her coat uncomfortably inadequate. After that, however, she wasn't really too sure what to do. Her mind felt scrambled and unfocused, like an egg that'd been swung around in a centrifuge and subsequently hurled against a brick wall. She'd slowly peeled herself out of cover, standing up, stretching out a bit, and, her weapon still tightly gripped in her hand, and slowly made her way over to the crumpled form of the man she'd shot.

An uncomfortable, almost nauseous feeling churned in her gut as she saw the slowly widening puddle of blood emerging out from underneath him. Cautiously, She leaned down and prodded the side of his temple with the muzzle of her firearm, eliciting no reaction other than his limp head bobbing down into the side. She stuck a finger right under his nose, and a chill went down her spine when she couldn't feel a thing. He really was dead. She'd just killed somebody.

It would have been a difficult thing to wrap her head around even if her mind were clear, and right now it wasn't. The thought just made Serena disgusted, and almost a bit nauseous. It wasn't like with Euler, who possibly survived, or that coke-bottle glasses cultist, who was just beaten to hell. This one was actually dead, by her own hand, and it just made her head spin, the vampire anxiously breathing in and out very rapidly.

She needed to take a second to turn her head away from the rapidly cooling cadaver, the smell of blood ringing in her nose, and the worst part was that there was something in the very depths of her psyche that was finding it... Almost appealing. She'd just killed somebody and she'd found it... Strangely liberating.

Every part of her psyche was ringing with alarm bells and signals that she'd just done a bad thing, and Serena found herself torn and disgusted. It was her job, wasn't it? Being an agent of the Special Asset Protection Squad involved killing people from time to time, right? They were a commando unit, weren't they?... Besides, this was clear-cut self-defense! He had a shotgun, for crying out loud!

It was either him or them, and, when Serena seriously asked herself that important question, whether she'd risk her friends or her own life to try and capture this cultist alive. She didn't even give him a chance to surrender, though, she had to admit if she tried she and her friends would probably have gotten filled with lead. She hadn't felt a single bit of hesitation in the moment, especially after that talk of... Experimenting on their cadavers. It was... Justified, wasn't it?

Serena just tried to calm herself down, taking a page out of Gabriel's book and try to look at it positively... Or, as positively as you could frame killing a man. The vampire found herself laughing a bit under her breath - absolutely not a good sign, she thought, but she really just felt so... Shaken up.

Her father had once told her that you were never quite the same after killing somebody, but, other than the profound sense of disquiet she felt, Serena didn't feel any different, and she wasn't sure whether to be reassured or worried about it.

"Hey-hey! Nice!" Gabriel gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder, and the frazzled and rattled vampire damn near reflexively clocked him right in the jaw. It wasn't out of irritation - mostly - she just felt really... On edge. Especially now that she could really process the situation she'd found herself in.

She'd finally found the cultists - or, well, she technically already did when she ran into coke-bottles up in the lobby - and they weren't the jabbering, frenzied, machine-gun wielding lunatics in robes she'd been expecting, they were...

Well, they looked to her for all the world like a bunch of cruel and callous scientists who turned tail and ran the moment they came across someone capable of fighting back, but it didn't change how they were still trying to kill her and her companions. The other shoe dropped. They'd finally ran into danger, and now they had to get to the bottom of this, and bring in 'The Professor', whoever he was - although at this point Serena would be shocked if it wasn't Lazerian.

"I didn't think you had it in you!" The eccentric scientist continued, which just replaced the anxiousness and trepidation Serena was feeling with irritation, as she stood back up and quickly turned over to look at him, with a sour expression on her face.

"Had WHAT in me?" She curtly replied. "You didn't think I could kill anyone?"

"I mean, I didn't think you could shoot straight." Gabriel jokingly replied, which just made Serena groan. There was a short pause as he looked past her over at the bullet holes lining the wall behind her, which only worsened the vampire's mood. "Mostly. We'll make a gunslinger out of you yet, Serena."

The vampire didn't really have a response to that beyond crossing her arms and looking away, a pouty look on her face that was quickly shattered when Lisa finally came up behind them with an important detail the vampire and the scientist both overlooked.

"Hey." The spy piped up, knocking Serena out of her reverie as the awkward realization crept up on her. "They're getting away." She finished, and the Vampire snapped right back into action, standing up straight with a determined, slightly anxious look on her face.

"Right!" Serena took a deep breath to steel her nerves, and confidently - if apprehensively bolted for the door, her pistol loaded and at the ready, with an awkward sort of smile on her face as she tried to boost her own spirits like she'd seen Gabriel doing, with mixed success.

She took a deep breath, and shouted, "Lets' go!" trying to encourage her colleagues, but mostly herself. She got a bad feeling from all of this, but somehow felt a... Strange sense of duty. She had to find and break up whatever Lazerian was up to, she felt it in her blood. That talk of 'experimenting on their cadavers' was really shaking her up something bad, she admitted to herself.

Besides, if she was right, there would need to be a lot more killing done before the day was over, and if she wanted to break down and go all clutching-her-head and muttering 'what have I done?' then... She just sighed, the smile she put on going all cynical and harsh. That was just gonna have to wait. She had a job to do, after all.

"How are we going to track them down?" Gabriel asked, coming up right behind her with little complaint or little surprise at how fast The vampire had sprung into action, even with Lisa looking just a bit shocked right behind him. Serena blazed through the doorway, her companions right behind her and she found her eyes drifting towards the floor. An irritated, but warm grin came onto her face, as she realized once again just how often Gabriel had her back.

"I don't think." She pointed over towards the droplets of blood, rapidly drying and staining the tiles beneath them, the dark, visceral, reddish brown trail like morbid breadcrumbs in a maze. "It's gonna be that hard."

The macabre guide-line left behind by the fleeing cultists was easy enough to follow, and Serena and her party found themselves barreling through the stark, sinister halls of Thanatos' hideout in hot pursuit of their fleeing adversaries, getting deeper and deeper into the belly of the beast and whatever horrors lay in its menacing, Stygian depths... Well, Serena just hoped that wherever the cultists were leading them was the bases' inner sanctum... She just sharply exhaled, shaking her head once again. Where else would they be heading to? Somehow, she doubted a wounded man would be capable of climbing twenty-something flights of stairs.

She just groaned, and took a deep breath of that oddly stale, slightly frigid air to calm her nerves. Her legs felt like they were made of lead, and were acting on autopilot. Her mind felt frazzled and a feeling of nervousness and trepidation permeated her whole body like she'd been stuck full of pins. As they got closer and closer, the vampire pressing steadily onward without the luxury of being able to think about it or reconsider, the spectre of what they might find weighing on her mind like a dense, cloying black fog.

Briefly, she considered that this might be above her paygrade. She bitterly considered the possibility that maybe Lisa was right. It might be better to wait a bit and call for backup, but... Serena just clenched her teeth. No. That wasn't an option.

It wasn't JUST that she was a bit leery at the prospect of telling her bosses that she was in over her head, but also how... Disturbing this all was. She didn't like what Lazerian - or Thanatos, but did it really matter at this point? - was up to. Not a single bit, and the ramblings about eternal life and experimenting on cadavers just filled her with... Disgust. Black bile welled up inside her at the thought of allowing these twisted experiments to continue. It was her job, she realized, but it also felt like a duty, and this duty also felt like a time-sensitive issue. The sooner they got this over with, the better.

"So... Er..." Serena just found herself laughing nervously bit, reflexively checking her weapon and making sure the safety was off and ready to go. They were still running directly into certain mortal danger, and even the most prideful sense of duty couldn't fully distract her from that. "What do you think we'll find at the end of this?"

"Probably the scientists from earlier." Lisa responded, and Serena looked a bit surprised. Her co-worker sounded composed enough, but a quick look over her shoulder revealed a faint glimmer of nervousness and tension on the red-haired spy's otherwise collected demeanor.

As much as she was trying to hide it, this was starting to get to her too, and Serena felt... Strangely empathetic. It was also a bit grimly reassuring to know she wasn't the only one who felt disturbed by this. Yet, in spite of that, she was dutifully keeping up with the rest of them, weapons drawn, sprinting directly into the mouth of hell, and Serena felt a strange sense of respect coming over her.

"And the 'professor' they were talking about." Gabriel helpfully piped in, even doing the finger quote gesture in the air with one hand - the other still held his spy pistol. Serena just groaned, and had a bit of an awkward, forced smile on her face.

"No duh." The vampire replied, needing to take a deep breath and compose himself. "I meant, what specific... I dunno, 'horrors' do you think we'll find?"

" 'Horrors'?" The eccentric scientist replied, a playful smile on his face, and Serena just sharply exhaled and turned away, a shameful grin curling up at the corners of her mouth. "I think you've been reading too many of those books, Serena."

The vampire just shrugged her shoulders and huffed exaggeratedly. "You know what I mean. Like, if he has any weird, crazy weapon or something he can sic on us."

"Well..." Lisa added, putting an index finger on her chin as a contemplative expression came on the spy's face. "You WERE in one of his lectures, weren't you?"

"I mean, I was." Serena shrugged her shoulders, looking a bit disappointed. "But, besides those crazy experiments he was talking about, I didn't exactly get a good insight as to what sort of trump cards he could have up his sleeve." A wry, cynical grin crossed her face as she added, "Unless he managed to make himself immortal in the meantime."

"Unless he did." Gabriel piped in, his tone playful, yet optimistic and strangely uplifting in that way Serena had come to expect of him.

"Then, honestly I think all he can really do is try and shoot at us." The worst part about it, the vampire mused, is he sounded genuinely, earnestly, completely positive when he said that. Like it was supposed to be reassuring.

Maybe it was the tension in the air that got more and more intense as they got closer and closer to the end of the trail of spilt blood. But somehow, that just made Serena break out into a fit of tense, manic laughter. "He might have some more goons in reserve to try and kill us," Gabriel added, only half-ignoring her sudden sanguine outburst with a smile that was somewhere on the border of playful and genuinely nervous. "But that's all I can think of."

The vampire needed to take a deep breath, a stupid, embarrassed grin on her face as she tried to compose herself. Only Gabriel, she mused, could find something positive at the prospect of a horde of cultists ready to shoot them. She got the impression he could find the silver lining in a cloud of poison gas.

"What about that thing he was working on, though?" Lisa added, visibly not quite as reassured as Serena was. "The... Well." The spy shrugged her shoulders. "The modified trodes."

"I'm not really sure..." Gabriel admitted, stroking his chin with a free hand. "Serena, didn't he mention he was having a bit of trouble getting it to work?"

"Yeah..." The vampire admitted, finding a sudden feeling of trepidation crawling up on her like the cold steel blade of a jackknife gently sliding up the back of her neck, her eyes going just a tiny bit wide with a sudden sense of disquiet. "He said he couldn't get it to work on a 'living brain', and I'm not sure if I want to know what that means."

"Well, then we should be just fine!" Gabriel laughed, which, didn't quite have the reassuring effect on the two girls the way he was likely hoping it would. "After all, we're all alive, aren't we?" He said, giving Serena an impish, knowing expression and not-so-subtly jabbing her in the ribs, only succeeding in making the vampire more tense and on-edge, and she shot him a very curt, irritated glare that said, without words, 'cut that out.'

Finally, the trail of blood droplets came to an end, and the intrepid trio found themselves standing in front of the heavy airlock door leading into what Serena was assuming to be the bunker's deepest level. They'd long since passed the domestic accommodations and utilities, and Serena could see through half-opened doors that they'd ventured into the realms of mad science and forbidden knowledge, catching brief glimpses of computer equipment and strange apparatuses barely visible in the darkness, only hammering home that they were getting closer and closer to confronting the wickedness at the heart of it all.

Separating them from said wickedness, for the time being, was the aforementioned heavy, imposing sliding steel door mounted into the wall. Judging by the way the trail of blood went into it, through here it was doubtlessly where the cultists sought refuge, and... Serena just cleared her throat. Where the man behind everything would, in all likelihood, be waiting for them. The door was as tall as the hall itself, and had a set of thick hazard stripes painted on and bore the words 'MAIN LABORATORY AIRLOCK' printed onto it with gold, luminescent block capitals. The vampire took in a deep breath of air, and swallowed it down with a nervous, tense expression on her face. This had to be the place.

"So..." The black-haired commando scanned her red eyes across the door and the control panel mounted in the wall beside it. Even for a computer expert like her, the controls looked incomprehensible and obliquely overcomplicated. Dozens of buttons of different sizes dotted the console, and two different screens displayed a sprawling, spaghetti-layering entanglement of text and images that seemed completely ridiculous for what was, in her mind at least, a fairly simple mechanism. 'Exactly why couldn't there just be one button that cycled the airlock?' Was the question that rattled in her head like a loose bolt.

"How do we get in?" Was, however, the more practical question she spoke aloud. No use whining about not being accommodated, she figured.

"I mean..." Lisa just shrugged her shoulders and took a deep breath. "If either of us had a cyberdeck, we could probably just hack our way inside."

Serena just sighed, and shook her head. "If I'd known we'd be getting into something like this." She exasperatedly replied. "I'd probably have brought mine."

"That might not be entirely necessary, actually." Gabriel piped in, and the two girls turned to face him as he fiddled with the controls, figuring out through trial and error what button had what function. All he found out how to do so far was make the terminal display 'Dinner and a movie first, buddy.'

"I don't think this thing's encrypted at all." He added.

"Huh?" Both girls responded at once, looking a bit confused - though Serena's expression was more on the slightly moody side.

"Well, this is a SECRET bunker, isn't it?" Gabriel replied, still messing around with the console and having figured out how to turn the hallway lights on and off, as well as turn the air from 'slightly chilly' to 'it's a good thing we all brought winter jackets, isn't it?'

"The entrance was already hidden behind a fake wall in a basement nobody went into or knew existed for like, a decade, and we didn't need an access card or a password to get inside in the first place."

"Yeah..." Serena found herself stroking her chin, just as the terminal made a rather loud buzzing noise as Gabriel evidently hit a button he probably shouldn't have. "I guess so..."

"So, my thinking is, unless there's a lockdown - which it doesn't look like there is - we probably don't actually need any credentials to access this airlock, and, as soon as I can find the right button-"

The terminal beeped again, but this time, it was a more... Reassuring beep. As reassuring as you could possibly get, Serena mused. That impression was helped by how 'Cycling airlock, please wait' flashed on the terminal's two screens. Gabriel just turned back towards the two girls with a cocksure, mischievous smile on his face, adjusted his necktie, and proclaimed himself an 'Ace Hacker.'

The actual hacker among them just playfully jabbed him in the ribs, warning him not to get too cocky as an irritated, but endearing smile crossed her face. She turned her red eyes back over towards the massive sliding door, the faint hissing of gas from the other side ringing in her ears, the small dose of joviality and amusement Gabriel had created beginning to erode as the airlock began to cycle, and her heart stirred nervously in her chest.

The possibility of whatever awaited them beyond crept right back into her head like a sinister, loathsome tarantula, and she was really, really hoping Gabriel's earlier assessment was right. Hell - a small, nervous grin crossed her face. If Lazerian had more goons in the waiting, they were probably just as soft as the last two.

The thirty seconds or so it took for the airlock to finish cycling were tense and silent, nary a word being exchanged between the three of them. There was a lot of last-minute gear checking, and Serena took one more quick look at the butterfly knife she was stowing in her jacket. It was a bit surreal, she mused, that the polished, elegant, razor-sharp blade had once been messily carving her an unwanted new orifice with which to bleed out onto the carpet, and now she was completely fine. The only proof she'd even been stabbed in the first place were the tears in her clothing, and the vampire just sighed. It was something about her... Condition she'd just need to get used to.

Finally, the doors slid open with an audible hiss, and a pale, wispy fog filtered out into the hallway, revealing a small, rectangular chamber ahead, dimly lit with a single red bulb. The floors and ceiling were grates that revealed a series of wires and pipes beneath and above, and two sturdy looking reinforced metal walls enclosed the chamber on both sides. Of course, there was also one more heavy airlock door at the other end of the hall. The final barrier separating them from whatever technological horrors were lurking at the heart of Lazerian's lair.

"Well..." Serena just laughed nervously a bit. "Lets go, huh?..."

As confidently as they could manage, the trio slowly stepped into the airlock, ready to face whatever lay beyond. Serena's expression just looked horrifyingly tightly wound, the vampire feeling for all the world like she'd just stepped through a portal into, well, some strange, horrifying other dimension. That feeling only intensified when Gabriel found the button to cycle the airlock, and the heavy steel door slammed shut behind them, and a dire, nervous look came onto Serena's face. No turning back now, she realized.

The first thing the vampire noticed as the airlock began to hiss with the circulation of gas, was that the temperature was rapidly dropping. Outside - once Gabriel got the air conditioner back under control - it'd been almost pleasantly cool, but now it was getting cold - really cold.

It wasn't the natural sort of Saint Petersburg cold, either. This was a horribly stiffening, stifling artificial cold, created by technological means that could suck the heat out of a room completely. It was the sort of cold humans weren't meant to tread into, fundamentally incompatible with life itself. Even with all the gloves and layers she was wearing, Serena began to shiver. The airlock was beginning to feel like a meat locker. Or, the vampire mused, like a cadaver store.

The second thing she noticed was that the reinforced walls weren't one solid piece of metal. Now that she'd been able to get a close look, there was a small panel in the left-hand wall, barely visible in the dim red light. As the airlock cycled, it soon popped open to reveal a camera-like apparatus on the end of a robotic arm. Serena, already tense and nervous and contemplating the worst possibilities, nearly blew it apart with her pistol - and she would have, had Gabriel not been quick enough on the uptake to grab her wrist before her panic attack took hold. It earned him a dirty look, but privately, she was a bit grateful for it. No need to waste ammunition on paranoia, right?

The camera-thing was clearly unarmed, but Serena really didn't like the way it was sizing them up. She wasn't an expert on these sorts of devices, but from the antenna and the weird circular array under the lens, she was fairly certain it wasn't just monitoring them, it was scanning for something. Weapons? Explosives? Devices? Unclean thoughts?

Serena wasn't quite expecting to hear "Vital signs confirmed." In a feminine robotic monotone. "Have a nice day." The device said, retreating back into the wall, and the vampire's stomach started to bundle up and turn itself in knots. So, it was scanning to see if they were alive or not... That was giving her a very, very bad feeling.

Finally, hissing stopped as the airlock finished cycling. Slowly, the thick, imposing airlock doors slid open, revealing the deepest chamber of this hideout, and Serena just paused, gripping her weapon tightly and seeing her breath hang in the air, an uncomfortable, tense look on her face. She wasn't even sure what she was seeing.

The main laboratory was a large, circular split-level chamber that was divided right down the middle. The lower level was the one connected to the airlock - and where Serena and her companions were - and it was dominated by a large network of tables arranged in a semicircular formation.

The vampire didn't exactly have the time to do a count-up, but she made a rough estimate of about fifty tables in total, divided into two sections with a large clearing in between right where the airlock was. All of them were topped with white shrouds covering... Something up, and while Serena didn't want to think about it, she got the very uncomfortable impression she knew what was underneath.

The upper level was accessible by two small flights of stairs at either the far left and right hand sides of the lab, separated from the lower by both a large metal railing and by a suite of bulky computer terminals and mainframes that created an impromptu wall of metal and silicon. Serena got the impression it was where the more technical side of whatever work done here was, er, done. Over the computers she could barely see whiteboards and posters on the far-side wall, and a sliding door that she guessed was a broom closet or something. The whole room had an ethereal feel to it, with its pale color palette, stark fluorescent lights, and the persistent thin, rolling white mist pumping out of the air vents-

\*AR-HEM!\*

A loud, rough, guttural throat clearing rang out from the other side of the wall of computer equipment, snapping Serena out of her reverie and immediately tightening her grip on her sidearm. She took a deep, nervous breath, and, acting on more instinct than sense, took a step forwards, her pistol trained on the source of the noise, and barked "COME OUT WHERE I CAN SEE YOU!" as aggressively as she could.

As hard as she was trying, though, it clearly wasn't enough. Serena's heart sank as a fit of harsh, throaty laughter erupted from the far side of the computer-wall. "So, THESE are the crack special agents the board of directors sent after me." It said, and Serena's eyes went wide. In spite of the freezing temperatures a bead of sweat ran down her neck. She would have known that voice anywhere.

It was rough, gnarled, harsh as sandpaper, and dripping with barely concealed wrath and disdain. It was also horrifyingly familiar, and she knew damn well she'd heard it before. It left her hands shaking as an anxious breath escaped her lips, hanging in the frigid air. He was also scaring the hell out of her, and she had an awful feeling she knew why.

"Quick question." Gabriel, completely undaunted, piped up with a curious expression on his face. "Why do you think we're a corporate security team?"

"You're not just ANY corporate security team, son." The man cut him off, his tone at once impatient and strangely amicable. "You're with Bathrette. They wouldn't let anyone outside the company deal with the skeletons in their closet." He just let out a howling burst of vicious laughter again, poking his head out from behind the terminal, revealing a head of thinning white hair and a long droopy mustache, and Serena actually flinched, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open in shock.

"YOU!" She just yelled out, extending her free hand's index finger towards him, and the gnarled old man just cracked a horrible, malevolent smile.

"You know eachother?!..." Lisa asked, very, very confused.

"Professor... Do you know this girl?" One of the cultists - the preppy one nervously popped his head out from behind the computers, his tone very tense and agitated. Probably, the vampire mused, because she'd killed one of his colleagues and Gabriel wounded the other.

"He's the old man!... From..." Serena took a deep breath. "From the day I passed out in the lobby." The vampire explained, visibly uncomfortable and nauseous at the memory. "And he's..."

"Doctor Hendrick Adolphus Lazerian, I presume." Gabriel finished her sentence, a smug, playful look on his face, and Serena just took a deep breath of that horribly frigid air hanging in the chamber. They'd found their man.

The face looking down on them from behind the wall of computers was a dead ringer for the file photo - and Serena's own memory. Though, the vampire felt the photographer had failed to capture his grizzled, menacing demeanor properly. He was dressed in a dense, heavy fur-lined coat and had a very bewildered, but amused expression on his face - like the perversity of the universe was somehow funny to him.

"The very same." Lazerian introduced himself, violently clearing his throat and standing fully upright, powerful and sturdier and more indomitable than any man of his advanced age had any right to be, the pistol Serena was pointing towards him fazing the mad scientist about as much as a water gun. "The man who will conquer the boundary between life and death, and tread on the toes of God himself!..." He defiantly raised a fist into the air, getting a bit into it before catching himself and clearing his throat. "But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself, aren't I?"

"And, are we right to presume you live a matrix double life as the cult leader, 'Thanatos?'" Gabriel added, and Lazerian just smiled and nodded.

"It is one of my many identities. Much of my work is simply too complicated to do alone." He explained, gesturing over towards preppy and blondy pulled up off the floor - who was now looking a bit pale and out of it - at his sides. Serena felt the two of them looked more like a pair of scared schoolboys rather than assistants to a God-defying mad scientist.

"Yet, paradoxically," Lazerian continued, "It is the kind of scientific work that requires nothing less than total mastery of many disciplines and fields, and an utter perfectionist sense of detail. As you can imagine..." Lazerian let loose another throaty laugh. "Good help is VERY hard to find, but The Matrix gives me a long list of... Candidates to interview. Of course..."

He just gave a disappointed sigh and turned over towards his two scared-looking henchmen, shaking his head. "I selected my men for their mastery of science, not combat abilities, so it's no surprise you made it this far."

"And you're not much of a fighter, either!" Serena presumptuously proclaimed, taking a long-shot guess as she took another step forwards, trying to puff up her chest a bit. Trying to look more like the fearless commando her bosses were expecting instead of the nervous girl she really was. "So come quietly and we won't have to resort to violence, Doctor."

Once again, pointing a gun towards Lazerian seemed to have about as much effect on his resolve as a stiff breeze, and he just softly laughed to himself and shook his head. "When we last met, young lady-"

"Serena." She piped in, blustering a bit, but cracking a small, tense grin. "You 'ought to know my name, at least."

"If we're going to be enemies from now on, I suppose I should... Serena." Lazerian matched her smile with a large, toothy, vicious grin, and, though she tried not to let it show, her heart sank in her chest. "When we last met," He continued, "You didn't strike me much as the type to resort to violence. Really..." Lazerian just laughed again. "I can't quite put my finger on why, but you and I felt almost like... Kindred spirits in a way." Serena just found her blood turning to ice. She really didn't want to know why he got that impression. "I haven't the faintest clue why you of all people were sent after, me, but..." He flashed another wry grin. "I'll chalk it up to fate."

"I don't really think that's it." Serena replied, really more to say anything and a stubborn refusal to let any silence hang in the air.

"It has to be." Lazerian responded. "Because of all the agents Bathrette has, I kinda like you, kid." He casually pointed at Serena, who looked and felt very uncomfortable at that. "And I wouldn't extend the courtesy I'm about to give you to anyone else. Do you remember what I told you, that day we met?"

"I haven't been able to forget..." The vampire just laughed mournfully to herself. She'd initially dismissed it as the ramblings of an old man, but her mind had been very quickly brought around to that way of thinking. Through nightmarish surgeries and complications, through despair and triumph, through certain death and total hopelessness, she'd realized all too late just how right he'd been. "You told me the most valuable thing you can have is your life."

Lazerian just flashed the warmest smile he was capable of, which still looked like he was taking solemn satisfaction in drowning a bag of cats. "Good." He responded. "That should put it into context how kingly the courtesy I'm extending to you and your friends is.

The mad scientist cleared his throat and his expression took a complete one-eighty, going from amicable to hellishly vicious in the span of a second. His tone was flat and grim as he said, "I'm not a fighter. I don't even have a weapon, but believe me, if you don't get off my property this second I will kill you."

It felt like a lead weight settled in Serena's stomach and she locked up again, her fight or flight reaction burning in her veins like a powerful acid. Lisa and Gabriel just looked confused - she didn't blame them, they didn't have the context she did. The vampire knew damn well he meant it, and, though she couldn't figure out how, she knew damn well just by looking into his vicious, demonic glare that he wasn't bluffing. He had the means to kill all of them, and was just itching to do so.

The vampire looked all around the lab, trying to find other cultists or kill-drones hiding somewhere, maybe ready to burst out from that door in the back, but, her red eyes found nothing, and somehow, she doubted that was what he could send at her. Lazerian himself said his men weren't fighters, and their combat performance confirmed it.

She knew it was a bad idea, but, well... Serena took a deep breath. She didn't really have any other options. Lazerian was scaring the hell out of her, but so was the prospect of going back to her bosses and telling them that she'd let him go. Besides - she clenched her teeth, feeling a bit sick to her stomach. There was still the matter of whatever horrifying experiments he was cooking up down here, and scared as she was, her disgust still overpowered that fear. She wasn't just gonna let him walk all over her.

Serena took one last step forwards and, banishing the reluctance and nervousness in her heart, gripped her pistol tightly and resoundingly declared, "You're right. I'm not really a fighter either, but I'm not backing down from this, and I'm not letting you... 'Defy God' or whatever the hell you're doing down here. Come quietly or I'll shoot you."

Lazerian shook his head and a deep, guttural, irritated growl escaped his lips. "I'm very disappointed in you, Serena." He responded. "I'd hoped you and I were truly kindred spirits, but you truly embody everything wrong with this reactionary, technophobic world!" The vampire just gave him a funny look, as he cleared his throat and adjusted his tie.

"Still, after coming all this way, you don't even know what I've been doing?... You'd be quite disappointed to leave without any answers, wouldn't you?" He let loose another burst of low, sinister laughter, and Serena grabbed her handgun tighter. "As a man of science, I suppose it's my duty to indulge your curiosity, even if it'll be the last thing you ever learn."

Serena, whose hint-detection sense hadn't dulled in the slightest since she last called upon it, sprang right into action, violently jerking the trigger and letting loose a snap-shot, sending a 10mm bullet blazing from the barrel of her Beretta, the flash burning brightly in the bitterly cold mist with its fiery orange glow. Of course, she completely missed the mark, but only about half of that was her poor marksmanship.

The second she'd even had her finger on the trigger, Lazerian - who was faster than any man of his age had any right to be - ducked right back down behind a computer terminal, dragging his cultists down with him, leaving her bullet to seriously wound the air he was standing in and embed itself into the whiteboard behind them, turning a one into a zero and seriously messing up one of the equations.

"How unladylike of you." Lazerian sarcastically responded, which amused Gabriel, bewildered Lisa, and made Serena even angrier. She loosed another bullet into the computer console he was hiding behind, but, unfortunately, the case was clearly sturdy enough to deflect handgun rounds, and she made a mental note to find the manufacturer and commission a case for her own cyberdeck. If she survived.

"GRAB HIM!" Serena shouted, panic and adrenaline washing over her as she broke into a sprint, running for the stairs towards the upper level of the lab. As quickly as she'd began, though, she found herself freezing in her tracks, going all deer in the headlights, as those finely tuned human instincts, honed over millions of years kicked in. Out of the corner of her red eyes she'd caught movement, and raised her weapon again.

She snapped her head towards the source of it, and her face went even paler as every single alarm bell in her mind was going off at once. Proving Lazerian right, a string of horribly unladylike curses escaped her mouth as, on every single one of the tables, underneath every every elegant white shroud, something was beginning to stir, and a haunting cacophony of evil, throaty laughter erupted from the console Lazerian had hidden behind.

"I must confess, though, immortality IS my noble goal..." The mad scientist mused aloud, as one by one, the shrouds covering each table began to fall to the floor as the things they concealed began to rise. "I have been yet unable to meet it, but I have made SOME headway." Each of the tables were gradually vacated, as Serena backed up towards her companions, her red eyes going wide with fear. A cold sweat broke out all over her in spite of her layers of clothes, and her heart was pounding hard enough to burst right out of her chest as she found herself locking eyes with a row after row of pale men and women who'd risen off their slabs, now lined up in front of them with military precision.

"These...." Lazerian continued - and he'd probably have gestured towards them if he wasn't in danger of being shot. The figures were unmistakably human, but... Wrong. Horrifyingly wrong. They were all visually identical, for one. Their heads were shaved bald and they were all dressed in wispy white gowns, with skin so pale that at a glance they looked like polished marble statues, and even the ones with a darker pallor still looked faded and bizarrely desaturated. They all had hollow, vacant expressions, and Serena found disgust and panic welling up inside of her as she recognized the thick bands of metal literally nailed into their skulls. Trode helmets - or, well, the things Lazerian had built based off that technology. The vampire found herself hyperventilating and her companions both looked very, very disturbed.

"These are the men and women I have 'resurrected!'" The mad scientist declared, stressing that last part so harshly Serena could practically feel the finger quotes. Or, she would have felt them if she weren't visibly panicking right now. "Feel free to get acquainted, but don't rush. After all." Another bout of evil laughter erupted from behind the console. "You will be joining them... For all eternity!"

Serena's breathing was fast, panicky, and jittery as she looked across the room, finding over two score of corpses staring vacantly back at her. The dead were walking. She couldn't believe it. She felt like she was in a nightmare, but the cold air brushing against her face - and Lisa pinching herself in nervousness - meant that she didn't have the luxury of being able to wake from a bad dream.

The vampire clenched her teeth and clasped her hand around her pistol as she began to step back. It all made... It all made a horrid sort of sense!

The disappearances, the devices they'd found in his lab, his research data, the detail about living brains. Even the scanner that was monitoring their vital signs. It wasn't to keep the living out, she grimly realized. It was to keep the dead in. She took in a deep breath of the frigid, stale air through clenched teeth, her trigger finger beginning to twitch.

This was all insane. It was IMPOSSIBLE, Serena mused. It was completely out of left field, too ridiculous to be reality, yet there it was. A whole horde of the deceased standing in front of her and her companions, impossible to dismiss or dispute, and stone dead as could be. Dr. Lazerian had been creating-

"ZOMBIES!" Lisa yelled out, and the walking corpses forced into an unholy semblance of life through abominations of technology, began to lurch towards them, blank expressions in their dead eyes, but murderous intent clear as day, as throaty, mocking, vicious laughter that could have belonged to the devil himself rang in their ears.

Serena found herself locking up. Her legs felt like they were filled with lead, her stomach was turning itself up in knots, and she had to suppress a powerful urge to double over and violently expel the remnants of the soy-dog she'd eaten on the way here. Which might be her last meal, she fatalistically realized. It was like her brain was refusing to believe what her eyes were seeing. A horde of walking corpses, preserved by the frigid chill and animated by mad science were shambling towards them, arms clumsily hanging outwards in front of them, ready to strike and pummel and kill, and staring into their victims with glossy, glazed over expressions like a pack of deranged sleepwalkers.

Out of the corner of her red eyes, something caught the vampire's attention, and Serena went even paler as she realized it. Three of the cybernetic zombies in particular, part of the left flank. They were three tough looking men, covered in tattoos, and like the rest of them, shaved bald to fit the modified trodes on. Except for whatever reason, Lazerian or his underlings had left the men's top-knots intact, and a horrified feeling of disgust welled up in Serena's stomach as the memory hit her like a baseball bat upside the temple. The detail of the missing gangsters was something that'd fallen to the wayside, but now she'd gotten a very direct answer about their fate... Her eyes went wide in shock. Their fate, and the fate of everyone else who'd disappeared around here.

She could feel bile surging at the back of her throat, as disgust gave way to horrified indignation. Lazerian had killed them - no, worse than that. He'd... Defiled their cadavers, and turned his victims into these... Shambling, robotic zombies!... That were shambling towards them. A bead of sweat rolled down her brow as she snapped out of it. If they didn't stop him now, she realized, he'd only go on to create more of these horrifying abominations... Starting with them. All in his godforsaken pursuit of immortality-

\*BLAM!\*

A vein throbbed on the back of her neck and she sprang into action. Like a blood, disgust, and vengeance-powered killing machine her pistol arm swung out and discharged a copper-jacketed 10mm bullet right between the eyes of a shambling corpse. She probably could have afforded a brief moment of satisfaction at how it crumpled to the ground like a sack of bricks, if it weren't for the rest of the horde fast approaching, and if they didn't take them all down quickly, like Lazerian said, they'd soon be joining them.

\*BLAM! BLAM!\*

"SHOOT THEM! SHOOT THEM!" Serena screamed out, in a blind panic and a blinder rage, her finger madly jerking the trigger in a way that'd have her range instructor very disappointed in her, but she didn't care. There was only one thing on her mind right now.

\*BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!\*

"MAKE THEM DEAD!" She continued, thinking little about her words but feeling reassured when Gabriel and Lisa sprung into action with her on both sides, brandishing their weapons as all three amigos blasted the approaching horde with hot lead. A cacophony of gunshots and Serena's incoherently terrified-stroke-angry screaming mixed with the clinking of brass on the tiles and the occasional thump as a cybernetic zombie hit the floor, stripped of it's unholy semblance of life and reduced to a regular corpse.

"Aren't they already?!" Gabriel replied. Any other time Serena would think he was cracking wise, but a quick look over her shoulder showed his normal overly-positive and optimistic demeanor had... Cracked somewhat. His expression looked genuinely disturbed as he put round after round into the approaching horde of undead with his spy pistol.

"RE-DEAD!" Serena yelled back as she kept jerking the trigger, feeling just a twinge of a strange sort of guilt, but she supposed they couldn't help it. These were poor victims of Lazerian's monstrous ambition, and at the very least, she hoped that with every zombie that hit the ground, one more person could finally rest in peace.

\*click\*

Of course that train of thought only lasted as long as her magazine did, which unfortunately for her, wasn't very long. Thankfully, Serena's instincts were able to take over from there, and hopped up on adrenaline and terror she didn't even stop to think, nearly tearing her coat off just getting the spare mag - her last one - out of her gunbelt. As she slotted the fresh magazine in and racked the slide, Serena swore up and down to any theoretical god of overwhelming firepower - which was oddly cube-shaped in her mind's eye for some reason - that if she survived, she wasn't even going to leave the house without as many spare reloads as she could carry.

"IT'S NOT WORKING!" Lisa called out in a panic, her expression terrified and nervous and she fumbled a bit reloading her firearm, not having the commando training or... however Gabriel learned to be such a good shot, but that was a 'later' question, especially when there was a new issue unfolding in front of her. "THEY'RE NOT DYING!"

To her horror, Serena realized it too. Between the three of them they'd have to had let off at least two baker's dozen rounds already, yet there were only enough fallen zombies to count with one hand, and the blood drinking commando had an awful realization why. She and her companions - falling on instinct - had mainly been going for center of mass shots, which worked great on normal humans, but these zombies were dead already. There were no vitals organs to damage, no amount of blood loss could slow them down, they didn't feel pain or exhaustion or much of anything anymore, and that meant their bullets might as well have been toy darts for all the good they were doing.

The vampire took a deep, tense breath. They were like machines made of cold meat, and the ones in the front row already had enough rounds in them that a human would be dead ten times over. One particular woman looked like if she were alive, she'd have crumpled from a swift punch to the gut, yet had a whole six bullet holes around where her heart would be that only oozed a tiny bit with a slight trickle of blood. None of the zombies' really bled. Their hearts were all sitting lifeless and still in their chests.

The intrepid trio backed up further and further as the zombies got closer and closer, all the way to the airlock door, and Serena's breathing and her heart both picked up in pitch. Nowhere to run.

"THEIR HEADS!" The vampire yelled out, adjusting her aim and feeling recoil shoot up her arm and a small twinge of satisfaction. Her point-blank shot went right between the eyes of the woman she'd picked out earlier and threw the walking corpse onto the ground. "AIM FOR THEIR HEADS!" She elaborated. "THE TRODES ARE CONTROLLING THEIR DEAD BRAINS, SO SHOOT THEM!"

"The trodes or the brains?" Lisa asked, and since it was delivered in a normal tone, Serena almost didn't even hear it over the cacophony of gunshots ringing through the lab.

"What difference does it make?" Gabriel yelled back, who either had better hearing or better perception. "It's like one of those old horror movies! The zombies don't die unless you shoot them in the head!" He tried to crack a smile and keep positive, but Serena could tell from the tense, frazzled look behind his spectacles that he was mostly trying to keep himself from panicking.

"LESS TALKING, MORE KILLING." Serena shouted in her best commando voice, but, to her horror, the revelation came a bit too late - though with how many zombies there were, a pessimist might say their fate had been sealed before the fight even started. There were just too many of them, and even with Serena and her companions dispatching each shambling corpse with one or two bullets to the dome, there were just more of them ready to take the recently re-deceased's place, and they-

\*click!\*

The vampire's red eyes went wide in horror, not even reassured by the zombie - who looked like a jovial, charming young man in life - crumple to the floor with a brand new hole in his skull. That was her last bullet. From her last magazine. The zombies were close enough now she could smell them, and it wasn't even rot, like she'd expected. Just disinfectant. It was something she would have been disgusted at if it weren't for the blind panic taking over her whole psyche at the prospect of fighting a horde of the undead with a handgun that'd just ran out of ammunition.

It was an elegant piece of Italian engineering that felt reassuringly solid and weighty in the hand, but now it was effectively a paperweight that didn't even have the decency to inconvenience the zombie who's head it bounced off like a demented boomerang. The noose tightened around their collective necks, the shambling horde of undead closing in, getting closer and closer and-

**\*WHAM!\***

It felt so surreal, and strangely detached, even as Serena felt the flash of pain shoot up her jaw-

**\*POW!\***

-and in her leg, and in her stomach, and her shoulders and her chest and - she snapped back into reality, her back pressed up against the airlock door and her now empty hands lashing out in vain to try and block attacks from at least six different targets at once, her breathing getting increasingly labored and heavy as her eyes flashed wide with each flash of unreal-feeling pain.

The zombies closed the gap and went from phantasmal, ghostly shuffling to feral violence, pummeling the intrepid trio with their cold fists and legs, the guns of Serena's companions going silent as their magazines went dry, the sounds of gunshots replaced with the hammering of fists on flesh and yelps of pain. The vampire tried her hardest to dodge, but there was nowhere to dodge that wouldn't involve throwing herself into her companions or the wrong end of an undead berserker's fist. The marauding corpses, meanwhile, didn't make so much as a peep and wore the same dead, empty expressions that were more suited for laying peacefully in a coffin, rather than beating a vampire and her friends to death.

"SERENA!..." A pained, weak voice called out from right beside her, but to the vampire it felt so far away. She could barely think over the pain - a zombie's swift hook to the temple knocked the daylights out of her and threw her down onto the ground. Her vision was dizzy and blurry at the edges and she could barely even hear herself, but she could almost feel the agony on Lisa's words and the will she was putting into them, like the spy was using her very last reserves of strength to call out to her. "HELP!... DO!... SOME!... thing..."

The spy's words trailed off and the vampire's eyes shot open again, suddenly sharp and focused in spite of the pain. She was going to die here. They ALL were. They were all gonna die and then that fiend Lazerian would have... His way with their corpses. An image flashed into Serena's mind, of a trio of shambling, dead eyed corpses, with trodes nailed into their skulls. Horrifyingly familiar in what little ways they could be recognized as former employees of Bathrette Beautronics. That was their fate, she realized, and her eyes focused and her expression inured to the fleet of dead cold limbs beating seven kinds of snot out of her. Her heart burned in her chest with fury and disgust and her blood began to boil. That was their fate if she didn't get her ass in gear... Right... NOW!

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!!!!!"

The vampire let loose a monstrous scream that could have come straight from the sulfurous pits of hell. Fighting off crippling pain and exhaustion, she threw off over a dozen zombies currently beating her in a berserk rage as she rose from the floor, unfettered by pain or injury or common sense. Her vision was pale and blurry at the edges and had she been capable of thinking straight, would probably be worried she'd suffered a concussion.

Right now that was the last thing on her mind, as her blood burned inside of her, hatred, and disgust coursing through her veins, and the overpowering fear for her friends' safety, and the simple, sheer bloody minded determination to... LIVE! She couldn't die. Not here. Not when the stakes were the sanctity of her own body, that of her friends' and countless more innocents who would be subject to a fate worse than death if Lazerian's twisted experiments were allowed to continue...

The mad doctor's demonic laughter rang in her ears as that primal, instinctive part of her brain that'd last been used to help her ancestors stove in the skull of a rival tribesman with a rock drove her to reach into her coat, and the atmosphere shifted as she pulled out and flipped open a razor-sharp butterfly knife she'd nearly forgotten she had. The zombies not engaged with her seemed to pause their savage beating of her companions as they turned towards the vampire, a vicious, hungry, vengeful snarl coming onto Serena's maddened face, and a brutal, red haze in her already scarlet eyes. She wasn't quite as unarmed as she'd initially figured.

Registering her as the most threatening thing in the room, the zombie horde charged and all hell broke loose. Far from the desperate panic she was feeling just a few moments ago, Serena turned into a whirlwind of steel, flailing her knife every which way and weaving in through the mass of bodies and limbs, spraying cold, dead blood everywhere the blade went as she cut massive gashes into undead flesh.

Still, as many of the zombies went down, there were still yet more ready to take their place and Serena couldn't quite stab everywhere at once. She took a few punches and kicks and even a few bites, slowing down only slightly to wince at the pain and try to stay focused. She was absolutely burning with adrenaline, and as the vampire gradually managed to clear the red haze from her eyes, she could feel the nanites in her blood practically buzzing with energy. She clenched her teeth as she made another massive swing with her knife arm, sending gore and undead fingers cascading into the air and staining her cheek red. It didn't take a genius to figure out the source of her second wind - the nanites were practically working overdrive to just keep her standing, and... An uncomfortable feeling came over her at the memory. They couldn't keep her going forever.

Still, for the time being it was working. Slash after slash cut into unliving flesh and sprayed blood all over her face and hair and jacket, sending zombies down onto the floor that was increasingly resembling an abattoir. You needed to shoot zombies in the head to kill them, she mused with vigour blazing in her bloodstained cheeks, as she cracked a perverse, yet inwardly panicky smile. But you could also cut them up into enough pieces that it didn't matter so much, after all.

She cut open the neck of someone who looked like he might've been a weedy, inoffensive clerk in life, and quickly wiped the blood out of her eyes as he crumpled to the ground. The tables turned right back around, and she knew it. As her blood burned inside of her veins and the nanites fired up into full steam, her systems overclocked so hard it was turning her already fast knife into a whirling hurricane of death that cut down the undead wherever it went. She felt wet from the blood and cold from the air and, in the back of her head, a tiny bit terrified at what she'd gotten into, but the vampire didn't care. That could wait - surviving took priority.

Her outburst of violence and determination monopolized the zombies attention - out of the corner of her eyes she'd noticed a very battered looking Gabriel and Lisa crawling off somewhere - and she was going to make damn sure that she finished this for them. She may have been flailing her knife around like a lunatic, cutting ribbons out of the living dead, foiling punches and kicks as the blade went, even tearing an unfortunate zombie's whole arm off, but her mind was singularly focused. She was burning with vigour, determination, and righteous anger, and, as more and more zombies were cut into pieces and fell before her, she thought she could see a light at the end of the tunnel!...

She'd turned this whole horrifying situation around, escaped the clutches of the reaper once more, and was currently cutting and slashing and tearing through unliving flesh like a pagan goddess of war. It disturbed her a bit that it felt... Good, but she could worry about losing her mind if she survived this mess in the first place. Her hair was stained and sticky with blood and her jacket was now probably beyond the wit of even the most discerning cleaners, but she was getting close. Already over two dozen zombies lay in pieces at her feet and, she didn't really have time to count but it felt like there was only about a dozen and a half to go-

**\*WHAM!\***

It wasn't the first time one of the zombies managed to sneak a punch in through her whirling cavalcade of death, but it was the first one she'd really felt through the red haze. The undead fist clocked her right in the jaw and the expression in her eyes shifted, like someone pulled a little lever in her head. She'd managed to squeeze a few moments of lucidity in this little rampage, but now the red mist was well and fully banished, and the vampire was made painfully aware of a few important details.

For one, she was slowing down. To an outside observer it wasn't too noticeable for her knife to go to 'ludicrously fast' from 'double-digit percentage of c ' but it was enough. With the decrease in speed, her knife barrier was no longer impenetrable. She still cut and tore through undead flesh like a demented butcher but it no longer fully protected her from their wrath, and soon enough more kicks and punches were passing through that aegis of absurd sharpness, sending flashes of pain wracking through her body and threatening to throw her back down onto the ground.

Far more pressing, however, was the sudden emptiness she was feeling. Not psychologically - it was a very literal emptiness inside of her. Her eyes went wide, as she realized why she was slowing down in the first place. She was beginning to feel a hauntingly familiar sensation as her limbs gradually began to lose their vigour and the fire that burned inside of her began to sputter out, supplanted by an all-consuming black hunger within her, gnawing at her insides, chewing away at her very soul. It was a horrific deficiency that she could feel in every part of her body and mind, and she knew exactly what it was telling her. 'BLOOOOOOOOOOOOD.'

The nanites swimming in her veins had been working overtime to keep her standing, repair her wounds, and power her hurricane of sharpened steel. Like any machines, however, they needed fuel. Unfortunately for Serena, rather than gasoline or uranium or anything sensible, the nanites just took energy from the nearest available source - her blood. They broke it down and 'metabolized' her blood cells for energy, and the more they worked, the more fuel they consumed, and the more blood Serena needed to drink to keep herself going, and she needed some, badly.

Her breathing grew heavy and labored as her knife-hand slowed down, a deep, horrible exhaustion creeping in at the corners of her psyche and a feeling of weakness and uncertainty settling into her legs. She needed blood, NOW, and she had absolutely no idea what to do.

She kept going through the motions, cutting and slashing and tearing huge chunks and extremities off the rapidly dwindling crowd of zombies, not dwindling quickly enough, though. Even with all the blood and dismembered bits flying everywhere, the zombies were still getting blow after blow in and coupled with how she was running on fumes, the vampire's footing was beginning to wobble, a horribly feeling sinking in her stomach as she realized she was about to go down again - and if she did, she wasn't getting back up.

A cold bead of sweat ran down her neck, complimented by a spray of cold, dead blood on her face as she reflexively licked her lips, the cold, ferrous tang on her tongue staving off the... Need a tiny bit. Her vision was getting pale and runny at the edges and she found herself looking all around, reflexively trying to find out where her companions had scampered off to before a disgusted revelation hit her over the head like a sack of bricks, and Serena just shook her head and clenched her teeth as she cut open a zombie's face like a particularly brutal, unpaid lady of the evening. She'd been over this before, hadn't she? The thought of drinking from her friends was... The vampire took a deep breath. Unthinkable.

She'd seen the way Thoth and that Euler character had reacted to being 'tapped', and wanted no part in subjecting her friends to it. Well - a mocking, bitter smile crossed her face as she narrowly dodged a shambling corpse's poorly aimed haymaker - Gabriel would probably enjoy it, the crazy hippie, but she wasn't gonna let him decide that. Besides, she had to keep her condition top-secret, and something told her that taking a drink from either of her colleagues - the red-headed spy in particular - would horribly violate that. Serena just shook her head. It was a line she wasn't going to cross, even in the direst of circumstances.

But all the morality and disgust and personal feelings in the world couldn't make up for the fact that she needed blood. Badly. Even though she'd cut down a good portion of the horde, there were just over a dozen left, and they weren't relenting in the slightest while she was beginning to feel very weak. Her whirlwind slashing had slowed to a halt and she needed to use what little strength she had to make heavy, methodical slashes - more to ward off the shambling corpses than to strike them down.

Her legs were unsteady and ready to topple under her, and that gnawing, black hunger was starting to grind away at her mind like a swarm of maggots eating her very soul. Far from even helping her, the blood splattering her face and the gore strewn on the floor just made the... Craving even worse. She needed it. She needed blood so badly, a compulsion worse than anything she'd ever experienced before, far worse than any hankering for nicotine or caffeine or... Other less decent urges, and she found it nearly impossible to hold herself back from simply jumping onto the nearest corpse and drinking it dry.

The vampire's red eyes widened in shock and horror and... Desperation as she she realized the answer had been staring her in the face the whole time. The answer had also been trying to beat her and her friends to death, and she was cutting it apart with probably the best knife she'd ever owned - how many zombies had she re-killed and the damn thing wasn't even dull? Focusing back onto the important details, she realized that horrible, primal part of her mind was actually telling her something important. The zombies still bled, didn't they?

There was blood absolutely everywhere - on the floor, on her clothes, on her knife, and covering her face like some savage she-barbarian. It was ice cold, utterly bereft of life, painfully stale, and probably more of a violation of nature than usual, but it was blood, wasn't it? It was still hemoglobins and plasma and... She shuddered a bit. The very thought was abhorrent to her - she was contemplating stealing blood from the dead, after all!

**\*WHAM!\***

This time Serena wasn't very quick on the uptake - or lucky, for that matter. A zombie scored a vicious kick to her thigh that nearly sent her crashing down onto the bloodstained ground, pain wracking her whole body as she struggled to stay focused and stay on both feet. It was getting painfully difficult to even swing her knife. Her whole body felt stiff and leaden and felt like she'd been worked over with a baseball bat - especially after another zombie nearly threw her down onto the ground with a savage punch to her jaw. This wasn't the time to be picky or the issue to suddenly be 'too moral' for.

She took a quick look into the crowd of dead, scanning for any sign of weakness. She found one, a zombie who - in life, at least - looked weaker than the others. A young, frail looking girl, probably just out of highschool with her whole life ahead of her, likely just found herself in the wrong place at the wrong time and ended up... Here. Another pale, lifeless figure in the horde of the dead. Serena clenched her teeth and forced her disgust and self-loathing into some dark corner of her mind. Using her very last reserves of strength, Serena threw herself into the weak link in the zombies' offensive line, baying for their blood.

Ignoring the myriad blows the dead threw at her, the vampire charged her chosen victim, narrowly avoiding a punch that probably would have knocked her onto the ground for real by just severing the girl's arm at the shoulder with a wide, harsh slash. Completely running on fumes and now operating only on sheer force of will, limbs that shouldn't have been able to move if not for the black-haired girl's sheer, bloody-minded determination to live at once grabbed the walking cadaver and buried the knife right up to the hilt in it's back for safekeeping.

Both hands freed, Serena held onto the zombie and kept it still, it's face still flat and emotionless, even while the vampire's expression turned maddened and feral with her fangs exposed to the frigid chill. Scant moments away from feeling like she was about to black out, Serena swallowed her bile and disdain and made the plunge, burying both incisors into the dead, alabaster flesh of her victim's neck.

The sensation was unlike anything Serena had ever felt before. In fact, she'd probably describe it as the most revolting thing she'd ever done in her entire life. Rather than go stiff, then limp and pliable as her human victims did, the zombie just writhed and struggled unnaturally in her grasp, further tearing up it's neck and making it harder for Serena to tap the vein. It felt like trying to hold down someone possessed by a demon, and by the time she finally did find a nice juicy artery to drink, the vampire nearly recoiled from shock and disgust when the ichor finally hit her teeth.

The zombie's blood was ice cold, and it felt like she'd just bitten down on a popsicle straight from the freezer. The blood she'd gotten from Bathrette had absolutely nothing on this. Besides being colder than a lawyer's heart, it was coagulated and felt chunky in places, horribly stale and the bitter, ferrous taste it had was so overpowering Serena felt like no amount of cigarettes could burn it away.

She could swear up and down too, that it wasn't her imagination and the blood had the omnipresent, acrid, putrescent taste of death and decay to it. On top of that, with the zombie's heart laying still and lifeless in its chest, there wasn't any pressure, and Serena practically had to squeeze every last drop out of it. The blood of the undead was, without hyperbole, the most disgusting, horrifying thing she'd ever partaken in, and Serena greedily drank down every last drop, like she was drinking wine from the cellar of Dionysus himself.

Coagulated and deathly and disgusting as it was, the blood was still, well, blood. As it flowed into her veins, Serena could feel a fire growing inside of her. It was renewing her, reinvigorating her mind and body, and temporarily sating the horrific black hunger that gnawed at her very soul. As she drank more and more of the vital fluids this girl once needed to live, Serena grew warmer and invigorated in spite of the oppressive, deathly chill of both the blood she was drinking and the mist around her.

Muscles that had been utterly spent felt fresh and renewed. Her legs that had been in serious danger of collapsing under her stood proud with newfound strength. Clumsy undead punches and kicks that once threatened to knock her down were barely fazing the vampire, feeling like the scrabbling of weak, idiot children. She stole the blood out of a dead girl to power her own damned, cancerous body and it felt... Good.

A blazing well of energy burned inside of her, demanding to be unleashed on the injustice and horrors of the world. Serena took a deep breath, and, pushing away her self-loathing, pulled the knife out with one hand and threw the drained corpse to the ground, wiping the acrid, ice-cold remnants of stolen dead blood from her mouth and neck with the sleeve of her coat, leaving a massive, red smear on her face. Time to throw herself back into the fight, she grimly mused.

The zombies still surrounded her, but the tables had well and truly turned. They just weren't the same horde Lazerian had sent at them mere minutes ago. Serena knew they didn't get tired or even really injured unless you cut something off, but between all the bullets her companions had fired and her own whirlwind of death, they'd trimmed - quite literally - their numbers to just under a dozen. Enough to surround her and enough to finish her off if she were a normal human, but as it was... Serena took a deep, vicious breath through clenched teeth. They were just about barely a speed bump.

The stolen vitae fully reinvigorated her and helped to massively speed up the regeneration of her injuries, which was more than she could say for her undead opponents. Whatever programming was in the trodes knew she was the real threat here, and they were all focused on her. Serena just cracked a perverse, feral smile. That just made it easier for her to finally end this nightmare.

The dark-haired vampire lashed out at the approaching semi-horde of undead with her knife - still razor sharp in spite of how much use it got tonight. With the situation now firmly back under her control and the horde mostly diminished, Serena switched from wild flailing of her knife to deliberate, methodical attacks, making massive, heavy killing blows at necks and joints and lighter snap-interceptions against her enemy's blows. With her mind sharply focused and the infernal black hunger no longer banging at her mind demanding blood, Serena was free to give her whole focus towards cutting down the last of the horde, and her mind was free to really contemplate just how... Disgusting this all was.

A flash of choler shot up the back of her throat as she neatly cut up another walking corpse into red chunks littering the floor. Now that her head was clearer and she wasn't in mortal danger, the vampire was able to get a better feel for how disturbing this whole situation was. In his abominable quest for immortality, Lazerian had not only violated one of the fundamental laws of nature, but also... Serena clenched her teeth as a broad slash from her knife carved up a massive, bloody gash into a zombie's torso. He'd also killed all these people.

Not only killed them, but animated their cadavers into horrific simulacra of living beings and sent them against her companions as horrific shock troops. Serena felt bad for whoever these people had been in life as she slashed and gouged and stabbed and cut their bodies apart like a bored mortician, but if anything, she mused, it was a mercy. She risked a quick glance over the shoulder of a shambling corpse as it fell to the floor in three pieces towards the computer equipment on the lab's upper level.

Serena just found herself clenching her teeth, a feeling of guilt and disgust burning in her stomach. Lazerian wouldn't be able to experiment on their cadavers anymore after this, and she felt she owed it to these people to make the mad scientist answer for his crimes against life itself. Not to mention trying to kill her and her friends.

With only six zombies remaining standing - most of them with bits missing, what was once a brutal fight for survival turned into a one-sided slaughter, the odds only getting worse and worse for the undead with each walking corpse Serena returned to the grave with her knife.

One by one the last few zombies fell to the bloodstained ground, and the fear and panic that had dominated her mind when they rose was replaced with a cold, grim determination, and the righteous mandate to punish and pass judgment. Lazerian's time wouldn't need to wait much longer, however, as finally, there was only a single zombie left.

Another top-knot gangster, the walking corpse's expression still glazed over and utterly calm and still determinedly charging her without consideration for it's own unlife. Or the destruction of all it's compatriots, the myriad gore strewn all over the once pristine laboratory floor, or even the razor-sharp blade making a harsh and heavy slash right through it's neck. Serena's savage attack finally severed the formerly dormant nerves and connectors that Lazerian's trode-things were using to control the zombie through it's dead brain. Like a puppet cut free of it's strings, the very last shambling reanimated corpse fell into a heap at Serena's feet, and she was finally able to take a deep sigh of relief.

The danger had been brutally exorcised, but Serena still found her heart beating like crazy in her chest. In the heat of the moment - even as cold as she'd felt - she hadn't been quite aware of just how wired and hopped-up she was until she got a moment to cool down and really analyze everything. Standing distantly in the middle of a field of gore, the vampire just needed a second to take a deep breath and collect her bearings. She'd... Won.

Serena just laughed nervously to herself, her muscles aching like mad and her whole body shaking in numbness and fear. It sounded crazy, but she'd just cut through a whole horde of the living dead to save herself and her friends, and... She just laughed again. She'd... Survived. It felt like she was in a whole world of shit, but she was alive.

She took another deep breath, her mind coming back down to Earth and her focus sharpening. She'd done something that anyone she told wouldn't have been able to believe. She'd conquered the living dead. She'd survived something that should have killed her. Again.

She also had to get her ass back in gear because, as much as she wanted to just stand there, calming down and musing on her victory, she still had a job to do, and - a harsh look came onto her face - justice to mete out. Though, there was something a bit more pressing she had to see to first.

"Gabriel?!" She called out. "Lisa?!" She still completely lost track of her friends in that madness of melee combat. Before anything else, she mused, she wanted to make sure they were still alive. She'd seen them scramble off somewhere out of the corner of her eye, but with all the paranoid worst-case scenarios at the back of her mind, she wanted to make absolutely sure.

"Over here!..." Gabriel weakly called out from somewhere off to her right, and a relieved, almost overjoyed, though slightly uncomfortable smile crossed the vampire's face as she quickly turned over towards one of the mortuary slabs. The bespectacled scientist poking his head out from behind one of them just shot her a rattled, but warm and playful grin, which only looked slightly disquieting with the blood and bruises on his face and the fact that his glasses looked like they'd been repeatedly stomped on - which, considering who'd attacked them, they damn well could have been.

"I dragged Lisa over here while you were-" For emphasis, he just playfully shook the shoulder of the battered-looking red-haired spy right beside him, and Serena felt a bit guilty looking at her. Lisa just looked completely out of it, a distant, thousand-yard stare on her face, and the black-haired commando really couldn't blame her. Nearly being violently killed by a horde of the living dead would probably give anyone shell shock. "Distracting those zombies for us."

At first, Serena didn't even know what to say, she just stood there locking up, before something snapped inside of her and she just forgot about everything else and ran towards her comrades, joyful and spirited and just glad to see them alive and... Well... Alive. That was really the most she could say, since, as Gabriel and Lisa rose from the floor, she nearly recoiled.

The zombies hadn't been any less brutal to her two friends, and they didn't have a swarm of nanobots inside them patching up their injuries on the fly. The eccentric scientist and the spy were both covered in bruises and cuts and a bit sprayed in gore from staying in the splash zone, and Lisa's glasses looked only a bit better than Gabriel's - her frames still had a bit of glass in.

Despite their condition, they both looked very, very surprised and even a bit disturbed at getting a good look at her, and Serena rather awkwardly realized that... Well... There wasn't any way to mince words - she was literally covered head to toe in blood like she'd worked a double shift at a particularly gruesome slaughterhouse, and it was still dripping off her and her knife onto the floor like some demented modern art project.

"It's not mine if that's what you're wondering." Serena said, and Lisa snapped out of her shell-shock to just look at her funny.

"I..." The red-haired spy just paused for a few seconds, and the black-haired commando just suddenly felt really, really uncomfortable as her friend sized her up, Lisa's hazel-green eyes acquiring a very piercing, harsh quality to them, and Serena, who'd just fought off a whole horde of the undead, mind, had to fight back the urge to recoil. "I figured..." She distantly added, more confused than anything else - which Serena was hoping was a good thing.

Of course, there was still the matter of Lazerian, and Serena just took a deep breath. She was about to open her mouth and ask when she was interrupted, for the second time today-

\*AR-HEM!\*

By a cannon-like throat-clearing, and all three pairs of eyes went wide and turned around. In the sliding doorway Serena had assumed was a broom closet, she could see three faces staring down at them through a crack in the door, and she knew all of them immediately. It was Lazerian and his two cultists - who she'd been mentally calling 'Blondy' and 'Preppy'.

By the looks of things, they'd been watching Serena and her friends' battle against the undead with varying reactions. The cultists looked absolutely terrified - especially after Serena noticed them - but Lazerian, on the other hand?... The mad doctor just looked at once, profoundly disappointed and... Curious.

"I have to admit, Serena..." He said, in a tone that was at once furious and congratulatory, with a vicious smile on his gnarled face. "I hadn't expected you to survive this at all, let alone..." A disappointed, yet wicked smile crawled up at the corners of his mouth. "Come out of it completely unharmed. I had fifty of my resurrected assail your party, yet..."

The mad scientist just took a deep breath, and shook his head. "You definitely aren't normal - even by the standards of Bathrette's commando division, aren't you?"

At that, The vampire just sprung into action. She wasn't about to throw her knife - she doubted she could even so much hit the broad side of a barn with it, let alone a crack in a doorway. However, as her red eyes scanned the gore covered room, searching desperately for one of the dropped handguns, a lingering awkward question began to rattle around her head. What would a man as callously evil and self-serving as Dr. Lazerian do if he knew the dark secret of Serena's continued life and newfound superhuman strength?

The vampire spotted a glint of something polished among the red and dove for it, a resolute, but nervous expression on her face. She wasn't exactly willing to find out. Serena quickly snatched up the blood-covered spy pistol from where Gabriel had dropped it prior, and, acting on instinct, made a snap-aimed shot towards the crack in the doorway-

"One sec." Came Gabriel's voice from behind her, and Serena was just more confused than anything until she saw the eccentric scientist's hands elegantly pop in, weaving around her arms as he inserted a fresh magazine into the empty weapon and rack the slide, and a small, grateful smile came onto her face. The vampire adjusted her aim slightly while Gabriel pulled back and-

**\*BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!\***

Unfortunately, the pressure got to her a bit and instead of smoothly squeezing off a few rounds, Serena just anxiously jerked the trigger and her already poor marksmanship suffered for it. Of the five rounds she put down-range, only two landed anywhere near the door itself, and it was a moot point since Lazerian and his cultists had closed it the moment bullets started firing again and presumably made themselves scarce. Whatever that sliding door was made from, it was clearly tougher than Gabriel's .380 spy pistol - the two bullets she got vaguely on target just bounced right off.

An especially unladylike string of expletives escaped her lips as she threw the handgun over to the eccentric scientist behind her - who managed to catch it with only a bit of fumbling - as she broke out into a dead sprint, outright ignoring the stairs and jumping up off the floor, climbing over the railing and computer equipment and dashing towards the sliding door. She quickly identified the little notch in it as it's handle and pulled as hard as she could... Which only managed to strain her already worn out muscles a bit as the door just plain and simply refused to budge.

"Why the hell..." She mused aloud, putting more elbow grease and blood into it, and utterly failing to move the door even a bit. She even tried pulling it in the opposite direction, with a similar lack of results. "WON'T IT MOVE!" She yelled, clenching her teeth and eyes and, for lack of other options, just pulled on it even harder.

"It's probably locked!" Gabriel replied as he ran up the stairs behind her and Lisa trailing close behind, neither of them having the nanite-enhanced upper body strength or sheer bloody minded determination necessary to pull yourself up a two meter sheer surface. Especially when stairs are right there.

Serena just paused, an utterly shocked and bewildered look on her face before she just yelled, "OF ALL THE DOORS TO LOCK IN THIS STUPID PLACE," She pulled on the door again like she was trying to pull the damn thing off it's sliding hinges, more out of frustration than anything else. "WHY THIS ONE?!"

"It might be his escape tunnel!" The eccentric scientist replied, shooting Serena a playful smile that just made her groan. With the immediate threat gone, the two of them were already settling into their usual routine. "Let me see if I can get it open..." He added, and somehow in spite of the fact that she knew he didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell, Serena found herself moving over to let her colleague have a crack at it. Probably just to entertain him, she bitterly mused.

Unfortunately, her assessment was rather spot-on. The most the eccentric scientist could do was fiddle with the buttons on a nearby control panel, which only succeeding in getting 'access denied', or, 'I already said I'm not letting you in, so bugger off' to flash onto the panel's screen. After a while of that, all Gabriel could really do was just sigh in disappointment and turn over towards his dark-haired colleague.

"So, how do you think you could hack this open, Serena?" He somehow managed to sound both sheepish and teasing at once, which she actually found a bit impressive.

"I mean..." The vampire just sighed, and shrugged her shoulders. The terminal Gabriel had been messing with was almost identical to the one that controlled the airlock, except with a single screen that just displayed "LOCKED" in bolt red letters. "There's kind of a limit to what I can do without a cyberdeck." She admitted.

Serena tried a few override commands she'd heard were supposed to work on terminals from this manufacturer, but either they were a load of malarkey or more likely, Lazerian - being ex-cybersecurity - wasn't dumb enough to leave a backdoor in his system. Serena just groaned, turning back over towards Gabriel with a disappointed look on her face. "I think unless you've got a blowtorch in your coat, there's no way we're getting through this."

An uncomfortable silence hung over the zombie lab as the three colleagues just faced each other, none of them really sure what to say, though, there was a lingering, awkward statement hanging in the air none of them - least of all Serena - wanted to say. They may have sniffed out and discovered Lazerian's plot, stormed his hideout and destroyed his zombies, but... Well... The black-haired vampire just groaned as the words thumped in her head like a migraine. They'd... Technically failed in their actual objective, which was to capture the demented scientist and bring him back to The Castle to face the music. If the people he'd killed were hoping for vengeance, Serena bitterly mused, they were just going to have to wait.

She had no clue what was behind that door, but had an uncomfortable feeling that Gabriel was right about it being his escape tunnel. Pretty forethoughtful, Serena bitterly mused, but she supposed you never grew old if you didn't know how to get yourself out of a tight spot. It galled her to admit, but she'd been pretty cunningly outmaneuvered. Lazerian had hedged his bets, peering through a crack in his escape tunnel door to see what would happen, and when Serena had won, he just left, escaping through his tunnel to... Wherever the hell it led so he could start over.

An irritated, but slightly worried look came onto her face. She wasn't looking forwards to having to explain the screw-up to her bosses, but she found herself even more terrified at thinking what else Lazerian, still loose in the

world, would unleash upon it, and just how many more innocents he would sacrifice to his monstrous ambition-

"Serena?..." A nervous sounding voice popped up, and the vampire was forcibly dragged back down to Earth, an awkward look coming onto her face when she realized she'd been anxiously spacing out and devoted a second of thought to muse how crazy her expression might've been - though that train of thought got derailed as she noticed Lisa, who'd been, for the most part, pretty silent since she'd finished fighting off the zombies, just staring at her with a distant, shell-shocked expression, and Serena felt almost guilty, wondering exactly- "Are you... Okay?"

"Well..." She just took another look at herself, laughing awkwardly. Right. With more important stuff on her mind, she'd almost forgotten that she was covered nearly head to toe in ice cold, dead blood. It was all over her face and sticking in her hair, and her clothes... Well... The less said, she bitterly mused, the better. It was going to take a minor miracle and a laundromat that never asked questions to get her favorite jacket wearable in public again. "Y-yeah... I guess." She just tried to laugh it off, tension flowing out of her as she scratched up the back of her neck. "I'm alright. I really freaking need a shower, but-"

She didn't get too far before Lisa more or less totally seized her, wrapping both arms around her torso, an anguished, horribly worried on the spy's face, with what looked like nerve-wracked, anxious tears forming at the corners of Lisa's hazel-green eyes, now that the adrenaline had all faded away. "DAMMIT SERENA, I THOUGHT YOU WERE GONNA DIE!..."

"Err..." The vampire just locked up, an awkward, almost embarrassed look on her face as her friend held her tightly, a nervous laugh escaping from her lips. She wasn't sure how to respond to that, and the playful, teasing look Gabriel was flashing her wasn't helping. "I..." She took a deep breath. "I'll be honest - I thought we were ALL gonna die there."

"But we didn't!" Gabriel added, shooting the vampire a knowing look she did her hardest to ignore.

"Look." Serena just tried to put on a warm, reassuring smile and - not sure what the 'proper' response to an obviously shell-shocked spy is, just lightly put her arms around her, too.

"You don't need to get all mushy on me, alright?" She took a deep breath. "We're all fine. It's over. We... Survived." She felt a bit proud of that.

"Alright... Alright..." The spy finally let her loose, and Serena could seriously feel the tension fade out into the frigid air. Lisa took a few steps back and took a deep breath, a soft, sincere smile coming onto her bespectacled face and some color returning to her cheeks. "T-thanks." She added. "I don't really know how you did that, but I guess..."

The spy just nervously laughed again, but Serena tensed up a bit. Maybe she was just being paranoid, but she could feel something... Else in Lisa's tone. Something darker and more inquisitive - especially with how much emphasis Lisa put on the 'emphasis' part. "That's why you're on the protection squad, right?"

"Right..." The vampire cracked a nervous smile. "All in a day's work, eh?" She struggled to not break eye contact, though she couldn't really stop her gaze from... Drifting a bit, and soon enough, Lisa turned over towards the rest of the lab, too. Lazerian had escaped, but he had left behind all his equipment.

The upper level was absolutely covered in computer terminals, servers and consoles. Parts and tools and devices and cyberdecks and all sorts of strange technological objects crammed the lab's workbenches. Given her experience with Lazerian's creations, Serena felt like absolutely nothing that man made had the enrichment of the human race in mind, but she had a feeling her bosses would like a look at them - and whatever files could be found on his computers as well...

"Yup, all in a day's work!" Gabriel eagerly added, giving Serena a friendly smack on the back that nearly activated the vampire's fight or... Well.. More fight instincts. "But... Well..." He took a deep breath and joined the rest of them in poring over Lazerian's lair - very pointedly keeping his eyes away from the pile of disassembled corpses and gore Serena had left in on the lower level. "I think we should figure out what to do next."

"Well this whole thing just went way above our pay-grade..." The vampire replied, taking a deep breath, letting loose a bit of tension and leaning back against the door she'd failed to pry open. "It might be time to call our bosses down here to have a look at all this stuff, and have them decide what to do with it."

"I think while we're waiting..." Lisa just adjusted her spectacles and took a few steps towards one of Lazerian's computers. An almost shifty, but excited look came onto the spy's face as she crouched the terminal, the screen still displaying some tacky screensaver of flying kitchen appliances. "I'll have a look at his terminals - the brass are probably gonna want a look at this stuff, won't they?" Serena found herself both relieved and a bit antsy to see Lisa falling into what she now knew to be the Spy's 'usual' demeanor.

"I guess unless you want me here," The Gabriel piped in. "I'll head back up to the surface and call in our bosses, and they can sort the rest of this out." He took a deep breath, and turned over to Serena with a warm smile on his face. "And I guess I'll explain everything to them as well."

There was a short, but very awkward pause before Serena just said, "Thanks... I really wasn't looking forwards to that."

"Believe me." The eccentric scientist laughed a bit. "I know. We'll call it a favor for saving our lives."

She just cracked a harsh, sharp smile. "Well, remind me to save your ass more often, then."

"So, what about you, Serena?" Lisa added, briefly turning her attentions away from the terminal she was currently playing with. Given how the turtle-mode graphical user interface it had was currently displaying some sort of desktop environment, she was doing better than either she or Gabriel were doing with the door console... Or, she bitterly mused, it just didn't have a password.

"Well..." The vampire just took a deep breath. Now that the adrenaline and terror of the situation had faded, she just found herself really freaking tired and a bit irritable, too - and it certainly wasn't helping her mood that she was quite literally covered head to toe in blood - and combined with the freezing atmosphere in the lab that was keeping the cadavers from rotting, her face felt like it was about to freeze off.

"You know what?" She growled, leaning back against the escape tunnel door again, a hand digging in her jacket and a look on her face somewhere between exhausted and vexed. "I'll figure that out in a bit. Right now, I just want a smoke-"

Unfortunately for the blood-drinking nicotine addict, her half-pack of nightsticks had - somehow, and she really didn't want to know how - been badly ruined in the fight, all banged up and absolutely soaked with both sweat and blood - but mostly blood, the vile, dead, acrid stuff having somehow made it's way into her coat's pocket. Serena just stared down at the mangled and bloodlogged pack of smokes in her hand with a shocked, disbelieving look on her face.

"Maybe..." Gabriel just laughed a bit, putting a hand on the black-haired girl's shoulder - not caring in the slightest about getting blood on it. "You should wash up first, Serena."

The vampire just groaned, but, she had to admit, it was probably a good idea. After spending so long in what felt like a meat locker on steroids, a nice warm shower sounded like just what she needed right now...

"Aaaaaah..."

Serena found a blissful smile coming onto her face as she massaged the shampoo into her hair, hot water cascading over her body and rinsing away all the blood, gore, grime, blood, filth, viscera, bloody filth, and lets' not forget all the blood she'd been literally bathed in during the process of cutting apart Lazerian's zombie horde. It all felt... Nice. It was comforting - reassuring even, and really reinvigorated her after all that madness and terror. Especially with how ungodly cold it'd been in Lazerian's lab.

She took a deep, relieved breath and took a second to stretch out. It was a simple pleasure, really, but it felt so... Good on her worn and aching muscles, especially when she held her neck right under the shower-head and could practically feel the warmth surging through her whole being and making her body just... Tingle. It felt like far from just warming up her body, these purifying waters were warming and cleaning her soul, and for a little while everything just felt... Right.

Time seemed to go runny at the edges, and the vampire lost track of exactly how long she'd spent cleaning herself off, in Lazerian's shower, and quite frankly, she didn't care. A sly, self-satisfied and almost mischievous look came onto her face as she leaned back and rinsed the shampoo out of her black hair. She really deserved it. Not just anyone could cut down a whole horde of zombies with nothing but a knife, some elbow grease, and sheer will to live.

But the long shower also gave her a lot of time to collect her thoughts, and, as Serena reached for the bottle of conditioner, an ugly, uncomfortable little niggling something crawled back into her mind like an unwelcome guest knocking at her door at night. As much as she could think positively and talk herself into an overly saccharine, optimistic mood, there wasn't any way to skirt around that she'd failed. Very direly.

Despite the heat of the water cascading over her muscles and curves of her body, Serena felt ice-cold as she pictured Lazerian's gaze in her mind, and the madman's throaty, infernal laughter in her ears. Much as she didn't want to admit it, that logical - and slightly paranoid - part of her brain was telling the rest of her to sit down, shut up, and face the truth.

She'd let a deranged, psychopathic, utterly amoral monster slip through her fingers, out into the world, where he'd likely be resuming his crimes against life itself. While Dr. Lazerian was still at large, she realized, not only would he likely sacrifice more people to his murderous mad science, but... The vampire shivered in spite of the warmth and vigorous shower she was under. He might actually... Make more headway into his project. The zombies were bad enough, and Serena really didn't want to think of what other technological horrors would emerge from his deranged mind.

Serena just sighed as she squirted some of the white hair conditioner into her hands and applied it to her ends. Somehow, she cynically mused, she had a feeling she was going to find out. It didn't seem out of the realm of possibility that if Lazerian reared his ugly head, her superiors would send her into the breach once again to deal with him. She tried to think positively about it, but the vampire couldn't really think of anything better than "I might be able to stop him." Which, Serena had to admit, was a pretty good one. The image of an encroaching horde of pale zombies - each one once a person, with a family, a life, people who cared about them... Serena just shuddered, and rinsed the conditioner from her hair. The sooner Lazerian was brought to justice, she mused, the better.

With a vexed, irritated sigh, Serena reached over once more for the bar of soap in its holder - she'd already washed herself three times now, but considering the horrifying mess she'd just been through, the vampire found her perception of 'clean enough' was a bit skewed. One more time she rubbed the peach colored bar all over herself, leaving a layer of soapy suds where it passed.

She scrubbed her face, her chest and abdomen, her arms, back, neck, and legs and the inside of her thighs, and her face a second time for good measure before stepping back into the stream of hot water, the stream cascading against her slightly pale skin, washing away the soap and the very last - possibly imagined - flecks of dirt and blood off her body, leaving Serena all warm and fuzzy inside, with a small, relieved smile on her face. Now, she was probably as clean as she was even going to be.

Finally, the vampire reached over, turned off the faucet and terminated the life-giving stream of hot water. The steam already beginning to fade, Serena opened the glassy shower door and stepped into the bathroom, quickly reaching for a towel to dry herself - and cover herself with.

The bathroom had a small, homely design to it with light blue paint on the walls and a matching shower mat Serena was drying her feet on. One green towel hung on a rack - and the other two were wrapped around her torso and head, respectively - and opposite them were a porcelain toilet she had no use for at the moment, a sink mounted into a floor cabinet with cute little glassy knobs and an ornate stainless steel tap, and a big round mirror in a decorative frame right above it.

Serena quickly checked herself in the mirror, cracking a wily, but irritated grin at how, despite her 'condition', she still could. Aside from just looking like she'd gone way too long without sleep - which she had, there wasn't much different about her. Not a single bruise or blemish or scar adorned her face - and she'd taken her fair share of vicious blows in that fight. Clearly, the nanites had done their work pretty well. The vampire idly mused how she should have found it creepy how quickly her 'battle damage' had been reversed, but in practice... She just laughed, finding herself pretty happy about it. Despite her dress sense, she WAS still a girl, after all.

Like her body, her clothes had all gotten covered in filth, sweat, and blood beyond any usability - and unlike her body, cleaning them wasn't as simple as hopping in the shower and scrubbing herself off... Mostly. Her boots could, but her jacket would probably need to be sent to the cleaners - since she didn't want to risk ruining it - and the rest of her clothes... Well, the jacket had taken the worst of it, and they could just be thrown into a washer-dryer in Lazerian's laundry room next door. Of course, she still needed something to wear in the meantime, and Gabriel's quick thinking elegantly solved that issue - and gave him one more thing she owed him for.

Out of a laundry hamper on the floor, she'd retrieved her weapons, as well as a whole outfit the eccentric scientist had presumably procured out from the a footlocker belonging Lazerian's goons - who likely wouldn't miss it. After toweling off, Serena got dressed in a very drab, but functional outfit consisting of a pair of tan slacks and a white dress shirt, complete with a matching brown leather belt, and even one of the very dense brown winter coats Lazerian's men had been wearing in the 'corpse locker'.

Of course... The vampire sighed, as struggling to get the buttons on her shirt secure over her chest. They were men's clothes, which meant they were bloody tight around the hips and her upper body, but... She groaned. Beggars can't really be choosers, can they?

Her ensemble finished, gun and knife stowed away and her assets packed securely in her newfound shirt, Serena found herself reflexively digging around in her coat pocket, and cursing a bit when she'd remembered that the bloodbath she'd been in had utterly ruined her packet of cigarettes, and that meant indulging her vices was just going to have to wait. There wasn't much else to do besides talk with her colleagues and head on home, anyways. The vampire just took a deep breath, put a hand on the doorknob and turned it, stepping out of the steam-filled bathroom and-

"Serena."

The vampire nearly recoiled in a blind panic, her eyes going wide and a look of awkward shock settling on her face. About the last thing she was expecting - or wanted - to see was Mr. Van Steyr just waiting outside the bathroom door for her with his usual slightly cold, slightly admonishing expression, which proved almost as astonishing as an approaching horde of zombies. All Serena could do was just let loose a girlish, "EEP!"

"I was wondering how long you were going to spend in there." Her boss responded, almost a bit disappointed. The man had a very... Unusual talent, Serena mused. He looked very plain at the outset - almost the very platonic image of your typical obstinate middle-manager.

A neat, professional dark brown haircut and a shabbily tailored black suit with a solid blue neck tie completed the look - though, because of the weather up on the surface he was also wearing a long, gray synth-woolen trench coat - though, it was his eyes that betrayed his true nature. There was a sharp, almost predatory feeling to those deep blue orbs that just made the vampire uneasy whenever she needed to talk with him for an extended period of time. Like the man was silently scrutinizing everything she was doing - beyond even what middle-managers normally got up to.

"Were you..." Serena responded, going from embarrassed and shocked to almost a bit disturbed. "Waiting out there the whole time?"

"No, not the whole time." Mr. Van Steyr replied, shaking his head again. "For about ten minutes at first, then I had to return to the central lab to look over some of the things the techies found, and that kept my hands busy for..." A small, but very sarcastic grin came onto the middle-manager's face in a way that sent a shiver up the vampire's spine. "Most of your R&R session. Anyways..."

He changed the subject with a loud throat-clearing, and turned down the hallway, in the general direction of Lazerian's zombie lab. "If you'll follow me?"

Serena just raised a slightly uncomfortable eyebrow. "What for?"

"Well..." Another small smile came onto the man's face, but it was much warmer and more... Genuine than the last one. "I've got to speak with you and Lisa about something important, but there's also the after-action report."

"Didn't Gabriel already tell you everything?" The vampire asked, as her boss began to make his way down the halls of sinister hidden bunker, and she just found herself following him - a bit like a slightly nervous puppy, really.

"He did, yes." Vincent responded, adjusting his tie. "But I thought you'd want to know what's been going on as well."

"Is everything alright?..." Serena asked, concern obvious on her tone.

"Apart from how the target seems to have slipped through your fingers..." Mr. Van Steyr shot Serena a slightly harsh look, and the vampire's expression just turned nervous and sheepish, and she struggled to look him in the eyes. "This has been an... Interesting opportunity for us." Vincent added, and Serena raised an eyebrow again.

"Interesting how?"

"Well," The middle-manager continued as they rounded a corner, tracking the very same trail of dried blood she and her colleagues used to find Lazerian's inner sanctum, and Serena noticed the first other signs of Bathrette's takeover as she and her boss passed a pair of company guards in peaked caps and pea coats on patrol.

"Our superiors are disappointed with the lack of success in apprehending the target, but there is a silver lining to this whole situation."

"Did Gabriel tell you to say that?"

"As a matter of fact, he was fairly insistent that this was, in actuality, a success." Vincent sardonically responded with a slightly irritated smile. "But I can't exactly argue with results. The board of directors are very..." He continued, clearing his throat. "Interested in the of data and schematics you've been able to recover, and Commander Sikorski sends his regards. He's saying you and Lisa handled the situation pretty well. Minus the whole 'escape' of course." All Serena could really do was loudly and awkwardly cough.

"Still," The middle-manager took a breath of the stale, slightly cold air of Lazerian's bunker. "This certainly could have gone worse." He said, which was as backhanded a compliment she'd ever gotten.

"The... Possibilities of what Dr. Lazerian could have accomplished with - and I can't believe I'm saying this." He sounded weary, annoyed, and bewildered, like someone who'd had his views of what was real and what was just fiction mercilessly stomped into the dirt, and Serena felt very sympathetic. "A horde of zombies-" The middle manager's tone was utterly flat and lifeless "-at his beck and call are... Well..." He just took a deep breath. "Something that I think is best left unsaid. However, that still leaves us in an awkward situation."

"How awkward?"

"When it comes to giving Dr. Lazerian a forced early retirement, we've lost the element of surprise." Vincent explained, and Serena had trouble telling if that was supposed to be a joke or not. "Regardless, we can't have that man running amok in the city, inventing... God knows what and terrorizing the civvies. It makes us look bad." The vampire just shot him a heavy-lidded stare. "Especially," He continued. "With the amount of trade secrets and knowledge of our inner workings in his head. With the revelation of what he's been up to, the board of directors have officially put Dr. Lazerian on our red list."

"What's..." Serena nervously replied, scratching the back of her head instinctively, though, she had a grim feeling she already knew. "That?"

"It's a list of individuals whose very existence is a threat to the company itself." Mr. Van Steyr responded, his tone stern, but collected and calm. "To be liquidated at the earliest convenience. I know I told you to take him alive, but now it's officially off the table."

"O..." Serena took a nervous gulp of air. "Kay..." She wasn't exactly surprised at the company's harsh policy, but the whole situation was hitting uncomfortably close to home. She was already on a razor's edge with her... Condition and the need to keep it under wraps.

The vampire wasn't about to argue in Lazerian's defense - if anything, she harshly mused, the bastard deserved it for killing all those people - but it was... She took a deep breath. An uncomfortable reminder that their circumstances weren't all that different. An awkward, painful grimace of a smile came on her face as she really hoped this wasn't what Lazerian had meant when he'd said they were kindred spirits. "So, shoot first, ask questions never?"

"If you ever see him again, yes." Vincent responded, and Serena found herself a bit torn between terrified of the possibility, and... She frowned, a bit ashamed of herself. Willful that it'd happen, and almost antsy to mete out justice. She had a feeling it would happen, though - you don't just call someone you'll never see again an 'enemy', after all. "For the time being," He continued, "Tracking down Dr. Lazerian will be the purview of the Information Retrieval department-" Serena wondered how Lisa would take that. "-and you will be given more... Typical assignments when they come up."

From what she'd seen so far, though... The vampire took a deep breath, and stretched her arms out, still a bit stiff and sore in spite of the long, hot shower. She doubted anything the Special Asset Protection Squad got up to counted as 'typical'.

With another hissing of gas as the airlock cycled and the heavy blast doors slid out in front of her, Serena found herself in Lazerian's zombie lab for the second time tonight - which was two more times than she'd ever wanted, but this was just her life now, she supposed. The split-level layout and the cold were familiar - even with the heat of the shower still trapped inside her body and the big, fluffy synthetic fur-lined coat, it still seemed to sink into her bones like a nameless, formless evil - but the rest of it was night and day compared to when she'd last found it.

For one, the massive pile of gore and severed limbs had been cleaned up by some presumably overworked and underpaid janitor, the only evidence of the carnage and violation of natural law being a curiously faded reddish brown stain on the black tiles, and Serena got the impression that removing it would be beyond the power of any cleaning solution.

"So..." The vampire took in a deep of the cruelly frigid air as Vincent led her inside. It still had that stifling, stale tang to it, and now had a distinctly ferrous smell to it that was, at once, repulsive and strangely enticing - which just made her wonder in the back of her mind if she was beginning to lose her marbles. "What did your guys find?" She asked.

"Most of the data on the computers is, unfortunately, rubbish." Vincent explained, gesturing over to the upper level of the lab where the largest change Serena could see was a change in management.

Replacing Lazerian and his disciples were a whole army of Bathrette scientists and technicians and forensic analysts scrabbling around, working on terminals, cataloging and divining the various gadgets and machines the mad scientist had constructed - the trode-like devices on a table immediately caught her eye. All in all, it felt almost surreal to see people... Working in a place where just an hour ago she'd been desperately fighting for her life.

"But what we've been able to recover," The middle-manager elaborated, "Is - rather embarrassingly - leaps and bounds ahead of anything we've been able to do with thought interface technology. I'm confident that our scientists-" An awkward smile came onto the vampire's face - she was hoping that didn't mean Gabriel. "-can put the technology to much less-"

"Horrrifying?" Serena suggested.

"I was going to say 'less likely to get us lynched by an angry mob' but that works too." Vincent flatly responded, his tone deadpan with some slight hints of sarcasm. "The rest of it is a rather..." He stroked his chin. "Interesting treasure trove of information - both on Bathrette, and a number of other corporations, as well as certain internet enthusiast groups."

"You mean cults?" The vampire somewhat irritably cut in, and Vincent just groaned shooting the vampire a slightly admonishing look.

"Yes, 'internet cults.' He admitted. "Dr. Lazerian - or, more likely, someone in his employ - has been doing a lot of web espionage. It's something I'm sure the information retrieval boys-

A flash of red came along their vision, and both pairs of eyes suddenly noticed a certain red-haired bespectacled girl emerging from behind one of the terminals as she took a pair of trodes off her head, the usual groggy expression on her face typical of those leaving The Matrix and mentally adjusting to being back in meatspace turning pleasantly surprised as she saw them, and waved them over.

"-And girls," Mr. Van Steyr corrected himself and adjusted his tie. "would be interested in. They'll probably have a field day with everything we find here, but, for the moment we've got something important to take care of..." The two of them just headed over to where Lisa was, walking up the stairs like normal people, and a slightly awkward look came onto Serena's face.

"Now then." Vincent continued, and when they'd finally gotten over to where the red-haired girl was n now standing, the middle-manager quickly repositioned to face both girls at once and cleared his throat, not even giving the two girls any time to make some idle chit-chat before continuing on with his speech. "As I told Ms. Ramneau, in lieu of one... Well... Admittedly serious problem-" Serena just nervously broke eye contact.

"-management are... Satisfied with your performance on this mission." At that, both girls just looked relieved, even if Serena was wondering if that meant backhanded compliments were just company policy.

"Normally, Commander Sikorski and Director Bell would be the ones to present you these, but..." The middle-manager reached a hand into his trenchcoat, and the commando raised an eyebrow.

"Who's Director Bell?"

"He's the director of the Information Retrieval division." Lisa explained, adjusting her glasses a bit. "And my boss."

"We have a lot of bosses, don't we?" Serena sardonically mused, and Vincent loudly cleared his throat to get the girls back on track.

"It comes with the territory of your... Special circumstances." Mr. Van Steyr explained, and Serena suddenly wasn't feeling very humorous anymore. "Now, as I was saying your on-paper superiors have their hands full, so, in their stead, I'm proud to present you two-" He took his hand out of the coat, revealing a pair of small, bluish enameled cases and held them out towards them.

"Your badges. Effective immediately, you two are no longer trainees." He explained, a small smile coming onto his face as both girls' eyes lit up. Lisa looked excited, and Serena was more reserved, though she still felt... Well... She struggled to put her finger on it. Proud, maybe? Of all the ways she could have proven itself... The vampire just laughed a bit to herself. Cutting up a whole horde of zombies was definitely an effective one. "Congratulations... Agents."

There was a bit of confusion over who's box was who's, but after that was resolved Serena was finally able to hold up her badge to eye level. It was a small brass emblem about the size of her palm and in the shape of a shield, with a relief design of a proud looking dragon straight out of a fantasy book. It's wingspan even poked a bit beyond the shield's borders, and it was carrying the cartoon heart-being-pierced-by-an-arrow logo of Bathrette Beautronics in it's claws. The top part of the shield had the words 'BATHRETTE BEAUTRONICS SPECIAL ASSET PROTECTION SQUAD' carved into it with heavy block capitals, and right under the dragon was her own name, 'SERENA-OLIVINE RAMNEAU' carved into the brass.

She probably wouldn't wear the damn thing out in public, but she had to admit, it wasn't as tacky as it could have been. It reminded her of her father's old medals, but way less subtle.

"So..." She found herself asking, slipping the brass dragon-badge into her new coat. "What's this for, anyways?"

"For the most part it's just a badge of office." Vincent explained, as Serena took a quick look at the one Lisa had received. It was pretty similar to hers - same material, shield-shape and everything - but rather than a dragon, her badge had a relief carving of some sort of owl with a cybernetic lens on one of it's eyes and read 'BATHRETTE BEAUTRONICS INFORMATION RETRIEVAL' instead.

"As well as a rite of passage. Everyone in the security department, when they become a full member, gets one. Hell, I've still got mine." The bossman continued, taking out his own badge from his jacket to emphasize the point. In the brief seconds before he put it away, Serena noticed Mr. Van Steyr's badge had the same cyberized-owl motif as Lisa's, and wisely decided not to probe. "In a sense, it's also a way to welcome you fully into our little brotherhood- family." He hastily corrected with a loud cough, which just made the girls look at him funny. Serena just wondered if that really even mattered.

"Now then. Once again." Mr. Van Steyr cracked another carefully calculated, company-standard smile and extended his right hand towards Serena, which, after a brief moment of hesitation, she shook. "Good job."

"So..." Serena took a deep breath, putting the badge in her pocket and feeling just a bit of tension ease out of her as Mr. Van Steyr shook Lisa's hand as a matter of politesse. "What now?"

"Well...' Vincent stroked his chin a bit. "I suppose you're dismissed for the time being, but, since there's still a lot of decryption of Lazerian's systems to be done, and, if you're willing to do a bit of overtime, your expertise in that area-"

"No! No! I'm good!" The vampire, quick on the uptake, shot that down like a kite over an anti-aircraft battery. The very mention of 'more work' just made her eyes go wide in panic, and an awkward laugh escaped her lips as she sidled towards the staircase - and the airlock.

Mr. Van Steyr just gave her that blank, slightly disappointed look she'd come to expect of middle-management, and Lisa was busy trying not to die laughing at her little spectacle. "I'll probably have a lot of drills to run tomorrow..." She added, which the vampire figured had a fifty-fifty chance of not being an outright lie.

"Have a good night, then." Vincent responded as he waved back, the middle-manager's tone rather professionally cordial, though, even his stoic, businesslike attitude couldn't quite mask the almost paternal sense of disappointment.

"See ya!" Lisa, added, waving her off with a teasing smile that made Serena worry if she was picking up some of Gabriel's more annoying habits. Inside, she felt a slight twinge of guilt for shirking responsibility - especially when Lisa and Vincent started talking more about the nitty-gritty details of what she'd found in Lazerian's computers, but frankly... She just sighed. The vampire felt like she'd done enough work today, and she was damn tired. She could practically already feel the covers against her skin and the inviting mattress beneath her...

Serena stretched her arms as she walked back into the airlock, away from the bustling zombie lab and back towards the sinister - and mostly deserted - corridors of Lazerian's hideout. It definitely felt a lot less threatening, she mused while the airlock cycled, now that it's owner had been sent packing and his creations had been... She sighed. Exorcised.

That was the right word. She and her colleagues exorcised a den of evil, and she spared a quick thought as to what Bathrette - presumably the new owners by right of conquest - would do with the facility. Somehow, despite all the wicked deeds and slaughter that'd occurred here, it didn't seem right to just let it rot, but-

An image of the encroaching horde of cybernetic undead shambling towards her flashed in her mind's eye, each one of them once a person before Lazerian... Murdered them and turned their cadavers into his... Playthings... Serena just clenched her teeth and violently shook her head as the opposite airlock door slid open and revealed the hallway, a very tense and foul look on her face.

"You know what? Nevermind." She whispered to herself.

When she really thought about it, it seemed like nothing good would ever come from this place, and as soon as Bathrette got what they wanted they should just bury it and forget about it. Even if it never became another hive for horrifying, abominable scientific research, it'd probably just become the hideout of some criminal enterprise or gang of doom cultists or even - she shuddered at the thought. An auxiliary Bathrette research center. Serena just really hoped she'd never see this place again.

Of course, before she could even entertain calling it a night, she'd first have to go right back up twenty-something flights of stairs - and she wasn't going to count them, either. Especially after practically dragging herself to the top, Serena just found herself way, way too damn tired to bother. Really, she wondered exactly how a bunch of weedy academics could manage it if a rigorously trained, nanite-enhanced commando was horribly out of breath and badly aching by the time she got to the top.

Still, the trip gave her a lot of time to think. Mostly about what she'd have to do tomorrow, what she'd make for breakfast, and where in the world she was gonna find a pack of smokes at this hour. There was also the... More disturbing and pressing matter of Lazerian's eventual return and what the mad scientist would get up to next, but... The vampire just shook her head as she tracked through the - significantly less dusty now - old red-brick sub-basement that led into Lazerian's hideout. Well, she didn't want to give it too much thought. If she was being honest with herself, it kinda scared her. Knowing an immortality-seeking murderous madman was on the loose wasn't exactly reassuring.

So, as she wearily ascended one last flight of stairs back up into the Santa Monica apartments, she just bottled that thought up and filed it away under 'problems for Future-Serena.' It was, after all, not something she could affect right now, right? Lazerian had been sent packing, and... She groaned, balancing the package she was carrying in one arm and opening up the door that led back into the warmly lit corridors of the tenement block. Knowing the perversity of the universe, it's definitely going to be her problem later on, so while she still could, she grimly mused, might as well just try to relax, right?... Serena found herself nervously giggling a bit as she stepped out into the lobby-

"What's so funny?" Gabriel asked, and Serena locked up, freezing in the doorway with an awkward, embarrassed look on her face. She had spared a thought on her way up as to exactly where the eccentric scientist had gotten off to, but she just figured he'd spoken to Mr. Van Steyr and headed on back to the lab or something. She wasn't exactly expecting him to be... Here. Sitting in the apartment's lobby and reading from a dataslate - right where Thoth had been, actually - and cracking a slightly playful expression that Serena just... Really wasn't in the mood for.

"Nothing, nothing..." The vampire responded in a tone somewhere between irritated and distant - though, more than anything else she was just freaking tired. Still... A small smile crept on her face. There was a part of her that, for reasons alien to even her, was just glad to see him. "So, what are you doing here?" Must have had something to do with that near death experience, she mused.

"Waiting for my cab." Gabriel nonchalantly replied, looking up from his dataslate. Serena had an inkling he meant he was hiring a driver from one of those ridesharing services - no legitimate taxi service would be caught dead stopping in a neighborhood like this, even before you factored in the zombies. "I was down in the bunker for a while, but..." He just laughed a bit, and put his dataslate back into his tweed jacket. "Well, you know - computers are more yours' and Lisa's area of expertise, not mine."

You just know everything about everything else." The vampire dryly responded, which just made the eccentric scientist laugh again. "Anyways..." She raised an eyebrow, finally taking notice of the fact that Thoth and Coke-bottles - her mental name of the cultist who'd stabbed her - were missing from where she'd put them. "What happened to everyone else?..."

"Who else?"

The vampire just groaned and rolled her eyes. "Thoth and that, uh, knife-wielding cultist - who else would I be talking about?-"

"I thought you'd be talking about Mrs. Rosalyn too, actually." Gabriel added with a wry smile, and Serena just looked a bit awkward at that. "She's alright, don't worry." He laughed a bit. "She wasn't too happy about the fleet of Bathrette cars on the street and in the parking lot, but that's water under the bridge, isn't it?"

"So, err..." Serena just took a deep breath. "Well, how are they?"

"Well, when he arrived Mr. Van Steyr sort of took stock of the whole situation." The bespectacled scientist explained - and on that note, Serena realized, he'd found a pristine new pair somewhere. "The guy who stabbed you ended up getting stuck in the back of a security department cruiser and shipped off somewhere-"

"Did they send him to the Mounties?" The vampire asked, a sudden reflexive look of alarm coming onto her face, and Gabriel just laughed, which - granted - did calm her down a bit, even if she found herself more irritated than anything else.

"You know the boss and his secrets." He wryly responded, adjusting his glasses. "They're probably going to 'debrief' him back at the castle and see if he knows anything about where Lazerian could have gone. Besides that, well..." Gabriel just got a bit more comfortable on the bench as Serena just stood there a bit awkwardly in the middle of the lobby. "Mrs. Rosalyn just went to bed - it is like one in the morning, after all." Serena checked her phone. 1:43 specifically. "And y'know how Thoth fell asleep after you drank him?"

"Don't say it out loud!" Serena just suddenly looked a bit agitated - and irritated with how lightly Gabriel was treating a potentially fatal secret, and it really wasn't the sort of thing she even wanted to... Acknowledge. It was what it was, and she really didn't want to court danger any more than she needed to by bringing it up, even if they were - she took a quick look through the plate glass doors, finding nothing more than one bored, inattentive looking Bathrette security officer in a long greatcoat and peaked cap watching the cars outside, not paying them the slightest bit of attention - mostly alone.

"Gotcha." Gabriel replied, straightening his tie. "So, after you had your way with him-" Serena shot him a harsh glare. That wasn't as bad, but it was pretty damn close. "-Thoth just got knocked right out of it, and Mrs. Rosalyn was too nice to throw him out into the snow just set him up in Lazerian's old apartment with an old sleeping bag she found."

"Wait, really?"

"Well..." He just laughed again, shrugging his shoulders. "It's not like she - or Lazerian - was using it. So, anyways." He changed the subject and adjusting his spectacles a bit. "Are you heading home, now?"

"I'm probably gonna have a quick smoke break first, but yeah." Her red eyes shifted down towards the duo of packages in her arms as she entered through the doorway into the lobby proper. One was elegantly wrapped up with heavy brown paper and a string, the other a hastily taped up black garbage bag that squished at the touch. "I think I'll have to take the train."

She irritably added. There was no way in hell she was going to be able to steer her motorbike while holding onto these things.

Gabriel pointed towards the packages she was carrying, quick on the uptake. "So, what are those, anyways?"

"Clothes. Mine, if you wanna get specific."

"The ones you got covered in blood?"

"Yeah, those ones." The vampire replied, her tone very clearly peeved at that, though it was only half true. The brown paper package contained her shirt and turtleneck - which both had bad knife-holes that would need to be sewn back up - and her jeans. They were all fresh, clean, dry, folded, neatly wrapped up, and ready to stick back in her closet.

The black taped-up garbage bag - really, a few layers of garbage bags - on the other hand, concealed her blood-covered leather jacket from the prying eyes and inconvenient questions such an article would doubtlessly attract. Serena was just really hoping nothing would leak out - and that she'd be able to find a sufficiently prudent launderer tomorrow. "Anyways, I'm gonna-" The point was punctuated with an involuntary deep, loud yawn that hung in the air awkwardly. "Head on home."

"You don't want a cab or anything?"

"I'll... Pass." After a few seconds, she cracked a wry smile as she found a non-asshole-y excuse to say as she approached the glassy apartment door that led out into the dark, snow-covered street. "I don't wanna owe you anything more, okay?"

"Suit yourself."

"See you at work one of these days." Serena paused right in front of the door, a hand still on the handle, and the vampire turned away from the door and the outside world and looked over her shoulder, a smile on her face - but a much more warm and genuinely happy one. "G'nite." She said, with a wave goodbye.

"Hopefully," Gabriel added, waving back. "In good circumstances." That was clearly supposed to be optimistic and reassuring, but Serena just locked up again, a feeling of dread coming over her and a deep sigh escaping her lips, and the eccentric scientist's expression just looked a bit nervous.

"I'll be honest." She wearily responded. "I don't think there's gonna be any 'good circumstances' anymore." Her tone was half worried and half horribly, bleakly sarcastic.

"That's a bit of a negative way of looking at things, you think?" The eccentric scientist cracked a joke. Well, more of a half-joke.

"It's kinda true though, isn't it?..." Serena just found herself laughing again, and, on a whim, found herself digging through the pockets of her new coat and showing off her flashy new badge to the impressed looking scientist. "This sort of career I've got is pretty dangerous, you know." She said, with a mixture of trepidation and excitement that was worrying her. "So, if we're ever 'on the job' together-"

"Besides the usual maintenance."

"Besides that, I mean." Serena just sighed, an irritated smile on her face. Did he really have to be that pedantic? "Like I said, if we're ever on the same 'mission' again, it'll probably be more dangerous crap like this. It won't really be a good circumstance."

"How exciting." He sarcastically responded, and Serena opened her mouth to tell him off, before... An awkward smile came onto her face, and a chill went up her spine.

"Y-yeah..." She nervously laughed again. She wanted to call him an idiot or something and wholeheartedly deny it, but when she thought back to the carnage that'd played out just an hour and a half ago, playing the scene back in her head, of the zombies bearing down on her and Lazerian's awful, demonic laughter, the pain, the panic, the fear in her heart and the feeling that she was almost going to die - again... The gore, the cascading frenzy of steel and blood spraying everywhere, all the severed limbs and viscera, the adrenaline pumping through her veins as a splash of dead, ice-cold blood coated her face... Serena just shook her head, dispelling the horrifying images in her mind. "I guess..." She nervously added.

It wasn't just that the memory was disturbing - on paper, it was. What was really disturbing the vampire was just how... Captivating it was. At the time it was absolutely freaking terrifying and she HAD been fighting for her life, but, thinking about it in retrospect... Serena just took a deep breath, the air inside the apartment tasting painfully stale. It was exciting. Even if she had the willpower of a god, she couldn't deny that. She'd... Lived something that before today only existed within the confines of a book or a trideo screen. To someone who'd been a completely antisocial shut-in with a boring life that'd nearly killed her, it was like escaping a cave full of shadow-puppets and seeing the real world.

Or, well, like she'd just discovered some horrific, sanity-blasting secret. About herself. A very awkward, nervous, edgy look came onto the vampire's face. She'd just gotten her first taste of danger. REAL Danger - that business with Euler barely counted - and, much as she didn't want to admit it... Serena weakly laughed again. She liked it... "I guess it is pretty exciting killing zombies and busting apart mad science experiments..." The vampire added, doing her best to not look crazy. Well, crazier.

"Then I guess you've 'chosen' the right career." Gabriel cracked back, and Serena just sighed. Crap... Well, he was right. Vincent's assessment of her might not have been so inaccurate after all. "Anyways, g'nite for real."

"G'nite." Serena responded as she stepped through the door, finally leaving The Santa Monica apartments behind and the sinister halls of Lazerian's lab buried deep underneath it, as that last comment rang uncomfortably inside her mind. It felt... Disturbing. She was changing - and it felt out of her control. She didn't exactly see herself as an adrenaline junkie or a seeker of danger, but... Just the thought of it sent a tingle up her spine. She felt scared of it, and yet, at the same time, drawn to it. It was odd, and she couldn't make heads or tails of it, but...

The vampire just stopped a bit out of sight from the door, and took in a deep breath of the cold, late-fall air. This sort of cold was more her thing. It was crisp and refreshing instead of stifling and artificial, and all around her, the snowflakes were spiraling down like ballet dancers in the sky, shimmering where they caught the warm, orange light of the streetlamps above her, set against the backdrop of the shadowy, austere residential blocks and the black and purple-accented cruisers of the company's security force around her and the night sky. It was... A small smile crossed her face. Refreshing.

It was also something, she realized, she could appreciate a lot more now that she'd almost... Died. Again. Near-death experiences really did something for your appreciation of natural beauty, huh?

At the very least.. Serena just laughed a bit to herself as she started walking once more. She wouldn't ever be bored again, and she'd have tons of stories to tell. Her mind began to wander into idle fantasy, as she pictured a young boy with black hair sitting opposite her in a lovely old-century style home up in the domes, spellbound and mesmerized at hearing about how his mommy hacked apart a whole horde of zombies with just a butterfly knife...

Serena snapped right out of her imagination, a flustered look coming onto her face as she realized where her mind had gone, and just started laughing it off. Well, first things first, she mused, she had to actually survive long enough to... Do that. She cracked a wry, sardonic grin. That shouldn't be too much trouble for a...

She just groaned. It shouldn't be too much trouble for a vampire like her.

...

Serena really, really hoped she wasn't starting to lose her marbles.

\*click\*

A small, orange flame, like the breath of an exceptionally tiny dragon flickered out from the nozzle of a cheap lighter, igniting the tip of the black-wrapped cigarette in her mouth, and Serena felt the calming rush of nicotine washing through her as she blew out a cloud of gray smoke into the snowfall beyond. She had to admit, really thinking about it she felt a bit guilty - this stuff WAS bad for her, after all, but... The vampire just shook her head. Frankly after everything she'd been through, she needed it.

Miraculously, she didn't even need to go that far off course to satisfy her vices. Only a block or two from the Santa Monica she'd spied the inviting, neon red and orange sign of a Mack's - a chain of corner-stores with a comically sinister-looking cartoon mascot - and a wily, excited smile crossed her face. One quick exchange with her credstick later she was leaning against the outer brick wall, her bundle of clothes laying at her feet, just watching the snow fall down and thinking about life - not too hard, of course. The last time she'd gotten too absorbed into her own musings she'd gotten a very harsh and painful lesson in the dangers of being imperceptive, and Serena was keeping a very close eye - and ear - out to the street in front of her.

The snow outside was making it simultaneously easier and harder to keep watch. Even though it was still November, Saint Petersburg was far enough North that the cold weather usually came early.

When she and her companions entered the Santa Monica It'd been a small twinkling of powder snow like the heavens themselves were dusting the city with icing sugar, but in the time she'd spent cutting apart zombies the snowfall had picked up the pace - not to mention size - and it was looking like the city would have to send out the plow trucks tomorrow morning.

The snow accumulating on the ground and the snowflakes fluttering down from the firmament were all catching the cozy, orange light from the streetlamps and made the whole neighborhood a bit brighter than it'd normally be at this time of night, not to mention giving the whole place warm, almost inviting atmosphere, especially with the snow drifting all around the stark, austere residential blocks that dominated this part of the city. Under normal circumstances it would be pretty relaxing.

Serena's circumstances were far from normal, however - and she still had bad memories of the last time she'd relaxed for a smoke break in a bad neighborhood. Not helping her was how... Quiet the whole place was. Moreso than usual at this time of night.

She remembered reading something once about snow absorbing sound, and while it'd usually give the whole world a calm, serene atmosphere to it, tonight it just made the vampire a bit paranoid. If someone was sneaking up on her, she thought, blowing a small wispy cloud of smoke into the snowfall, would she even hear it? Or would the \*crunch, crunch, crunch\* of footsteps in the snow be obscured by-

Wait...

The vampire raised an eyebrow and found her cigarette hanging anxiously from her mouth. That wasn't her imagination, was it?... She tried to focus a bit more, and her red eyes went wide as she realized it. She COULD hear a pair of footsteps from somewhere off in the distance... Getting closer, and she locked up, suddenly unsure of what to do. Run? Hide? Start shouting and waving a gun around?... No, that'd scare the hell out of the bored, inattentive looking college student she could see manning the corner store through the window.

Already, Serena had instinctively unbuttoned her new coat, feeling a rush of cold, snowy air piercing her shirt and putting her weapons within easy reach. Even if she were all out of bullets, the handgun could still make a decent way to scare someone off - but she couldn't figure anything out about who - or what was approaching.

The footsteps got closer and closer and Serena could feel her heart pound harder and harder in her chest. A slight twinge of doubt came over her mind - maybe this was just another nicotine addict coming for their fix, and didn't mean her any harm?... She just took a deep and nervous breath, her trigger finger feeling twitchy but her mind still blank, as the sounds of footsteps in the snow got closer and closer and closer-

"AAAAAAAAGH!" The vampire, still very stressed out from a night of chaos and carnage and near-death experiences, just panicked. For just a moment she felt absolutely terrified someone like that Euler character was creeping up on her, and did something she normally wouldn't have if she could think clearly.

Serena just snapped to her right, an expression somewhere between terrified and wrathful on her face, and, quicker than most men would have blinked, drew her empty pistol and prepared to yell something nasty-

"SERENA!" Gabriel just had a very, very shocked look on his bespectacled face and quickly backed up, raising his hands in a gesture that very clearly communicated 'don't shoot me!' The vampire, to her credit, snapped back to lucidity remarkably fast, and, as she realized what she was doing, just quickly stowed her sidearm back into her jacket and took another drag on her cigarette, trying not to look like she was willing herself to disappear.

There was a short, awkward pause before she just sheepishly admitted. "I'm... A bit high strung, sorry." and took a deep breath.

"I can see that." The eccentric - and still a bit shocked - scientist in a tweed coat responded, as Serena's demeanor turned from embarrassed and sheepish to... Bewildered.

"So why're you here, anyways?" The vampire asked. In normal circumstances she'd probably be glad to see him as opposed to some cutthroat or creeper, but really, these sorts of circumstances were just making her confused - and a bit agitated.

"My ride's apparently going to be delayed." He replied, and both pairs of eyes shifted back over to the street, now getting more and more covered in a soft, enchanting, almost mystical layer of fresh, white snow. "So I've got some time to kill."

"To come over and bug me?"

"I thought you'd enjoy the company." Gabriel snarkily responded, and Serena just blew a bit of smoke in his face. Yeah, she probably would, she mused, but there was a time to admit these things and now wasn't it.

"How'd you even track me down, anyways?..." She asked, though, when her gaze drifted down towards two pairs of footsteps in the snow, one fresh and the other only slightly beginning to fill up with fresh snowfall, she just groaned and took another drag off her cigarette. "Whatever." Serena added, causing Gabriel to snicker a little and a slight jet of choler to shoot up her neck. "So what's on your mind?" She asked.

"Honestly?..." Gabriel just stretched out and joined her in lounging on the convenience store wall, the two of them looking more like bored teenagers than anything else. "I just wanted to make sure you were feeling alright."

Serena just shot him a funny look. "Huh?"

"Well, you ARE pretty high strung tonight." He explained, and the vampire just had to look away, an awkward look coming onto her face. He didn't have to rub it in. "You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to, but as your doctor-"

The vampire nearly choked on her cigarette as she heard that, doubling over a tiny bit with a very bewildered, awkward smile on her face and laughter escaping her lips that bordered on the violently angry. "THAT's what you're calling yourself?" She turned towards him, completely in shock at what she was hearing. " 'My doctor?' "

Gabriel just cracked a wily smile and adjusted his glasses. "It IS technically part of my job description." He said, "And it sounds a lot nicer than 'wrangler.'"

"Whatever." Serena just blew out another cloud of acrid smoke out into the cold, late-fall air. "And... You already know, Gabriel. You were THERE."

"I know I was there. I just wanna make sure you're feeling alright."

"I..." The vampire just groaned, fighting off her usual instincts to tell him to get lost and to just not entertain the topic any further. She really, really wanted to but something was stopping her. Maybe it was just the... Disarming demeanor her colleague had. That stupid smile of his was almost impossible to stay mad at. Or maybe it was that niggling little doubt at the back of her mind, that her mother was right - she'd feel better if she just talked about it. "Look, I'm not feeling bad or anything like that, I'm just a bit."

"Rattled?"

"Yeah, sort of." Serena took a deep breath. "It's all a bit... Weird. I mean, he was sending zombies at us."

"It was pretty scary."

"That's not even the worst part!" The vampire added, her tone turning harsher and more... Angry, though, not directed at the eccentric scientist standing beside her. "Lazerian... Killed a bunch of people to make those things. People who had lives, families, futures, all before-" She just stopped, her expression turning intense and her eyes turning distant as she took another deep drag off her cigarette. "He used them as raw material in his experiments, and so what?! So he could find a way to live forever?!" She snapped, finding herself surprised at how much anger and viciousness she was suddenly unleashing. "People like that don't deserve to live, period!"

"Harsh!" Gabriel's tone was only half sarcastic there, and, as Serena turned over to face him, she could see a very slight glint of worry in his eyes.

"But it's true, isn't it?" She responded, her tone at once angry and... Scared. She realized she felt scared, and it was a very uncomfortable sensation, to say the least. "We don't let people like him just... Run amok, killing people and playing God with his insane scientific experimentation!"

"That's a bit awkward coming from you, Serena." He added, and the vampire just crossed her arms and shot him a dirty look.

"I know, I know, but I'm still not gonna live forever, even with this... Augmentation." She responded. "Besides, you never killed anyone to build this."

"Yeah..." Gabriel replied, taking a deep breath and blowing a cloud of condensation into the cold, late-fall air. "Besides, remember?..." He just cracked a bit of awkward laughter. "Everyone who, er, helped me develop that had a pretty similar, er, condition to you. It was all voluntary. In a sense of speaking."

"And like I was saying," The black-haired commando continued. "He just... Creeps me out."

"Hm?"

"Even beyond all the murder." She explained, gesturing a bit with her cigarette. "I can't really put my finger on it, but Lazerian just gives me the worst feeling. I don't like the way he was scrutinizing me, I freaking hated his... Laughter, and..."

She took another long, harsh drag off her nightstick. "Why the hell did he say we were 'kindred spirits' anyways?!" Serena snapped, her demeanor suddenly turning very intense and almost panicky, echoed by the shocked look on Gabriel's face as she, in a fit of nervousness, grabbed him by the lapel and demanded from the poor scientist, "WHAT THE HELL DO WE POSSIBLY HAVE IN COMMON?!"

"I..." Gabriel stammered a bit, his first priority - as usual - being disentangling himself from the hysteric vampire girl's grasp, but after he got a step back he was able to take a deep breath and think about it, which, as Serena calmed down, she found a bit... Disquieting. She'd been expecting him to crack a joke, but he was really taking it seriously. "I'm not sure." He responded, and Serena felt a bit let down.

"I didn't really know Lazerian well enough to say what you two have in common, so..." Gabriel just shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe there's just something about you he sees himself in."

"I hope it's JUST that he used to work in cybersecurity, too." The vampire responded, calming down a bit, leaning back more heavily into the brickwork and letting her cigarette hang in her mouth. "I... You know what?" She turned over towards Gabriel again, who recoiled ever so slightly in fear for his lapels. "I think I might be better off not knowing what he sees in me..." She shuddered a bit. "I don't wanna be like him."

"Might be for the best." He just adjusted his glasses. "Are you scared of him?"

The question came at her like a ton of bricks, and a chill went up her spine - once again, in spite of the cold all around her. Serena needed to fight back the urge to react with anger or violence - though judging by the way Gabriel flinched, she was definitely showing it on her face - but... She just took a long, deep smoke and decided that, maybe it'd be for the better to just express herself. "Yeah." She finally replied. "I'm scared. All his talk about immortality and all the lines he's willing to cross to get there. It just scares the hell out of me."

"You sound more angry than scared, though."

"Can't I be both?" She just crossed her arms again. "I... I'm scared to death of him and his... Mad experiments, yeah, but I'm angry, too."

She cracked a small, nervous grin. "I... I'm angry 'cause I'm scared and... Disgusted. You know he would have made us into zombies too, if we lost?"

"It's..." Gabriel took a deep breath. "Something I didn't want to think about too much." He admitted.

"So, yeah." She blew out another harsh cloud of smoke. "I'm scared of him, but angry at him. He DID try to kill us, you know, and all those... Horrible experiments only make it worse. I'm honestly more angry at myself that we let him escape."

"Well..." He just laughed nervously. "I don't wanna make you too anxious, Serena, but you'll probably get the chance to rectify that."

"Yeah, I know." The vampire groaned. "The next time he pops up, our bosses are probably gonna send me out to deal with it-"

"Not what I meant." Gabriel cut in, and Serena just raised an eyebrow, a bad feeling beginning to settle in her stomach. "Remember when he called you his enemy?"

"Yeah?..." She took a deep breath. "Ooooh..." He face turned even paler, and an awkward grimace of a smile came onto her face. "Oh crap."

"Yeah, you might not need to wait for him to show up." The eccentric scientist elaborated, his expression turning a bit awkward and uneasy himself. "He might just have the courtesy to come to you."

"That's..." Serena paused, cigarette still in her mouth as the image of a dozen pale, dead-eyed corpses with trodes nailed into their heads surrounding her bed flashed in her mind's eye. "Gonna keep me up at night..."

While it was one thing to... Well, want justice and closure, the thought of a murderous immortality-seeking madman being HER enemy - and wanting revenge was another. She just took a deep, shaky, breath of cold air.

"Well, like I said, don't worry about it too much!" Gabriel tried to cheer her up, even giving her a pat on the back that just made the black-haired vampire flinch. "He's probably not going to go that far - at least for a while. He's probably still running away as we speak."

"True."

"And besides!..." He just laughed a bit. "Serena, I don't think you're giving yourself enough credit. I mean, were you watching yourself?... Probably not, actually, but I was." A slight bit of warmth returned to her, and the vampire found it difficult to suppress a prideful smile. Freaking flatterer. "Don't worry, if he comes after you, you'll probably be able to handle it."

"And it'll be another chance to bring him to justice."

"See!" He cracked a wily smile and even did the finger gun gesture towards her. "I told you there was a bright side to everything!"

"Oh, shut up!" Serena playfully batted his hand away and turned to the other side, unable to suppress an irritated, yet, at the same time, almost embarrassed smile.

"Well, you know it's true, though."

"Really?" The vampire turned back to face him, cigarette dangling mockingly from her hand and her tone dripping with playful sarcasm. "There's a bright side to all this? There's a bright side to the fact that I let a crazy scientist who's trying to make himself immortal escape?..." Though, her demeanor was rapidly degenerating, swinging right back into tense, and almost choleric. "And that he might be out for revenge because I trashed his lab and re-killed all his zombies?"

There was a long, awkward pause as the two of them tensely locked eyes. "Well, we're still alive, for one thing." Gabriel finally piped up, and Serena almost immediately calmed down, going from tense to... An odd sort of place, emotionally. Somewhere on the intersection of relieved, irritated and... Agreeable. As a whole, she looked remarkably calm, though she still shot him a heavy-lidded stare.

"Yeah..." She was just inclined to agree, taking another drag off her cigarette as a small smile found its way at the corners of her mouth. "We're still alive..."

She just let that hang in the air for a while, and relaxed against the wall, watching the snowfall flutter down onto the white covered streets, seeing her breath - and the smoke hang in the air, as the old man's words echoed in her mind, and she just had to let loose a small, wry laugh. Well, she sardonically mused, they were alike in one way, at the very least.

For a few moments, the conversation subsided and the vampire and the eccentric scientist just stood there, doing what would probably be considered loitering if the convenience store clerk cared even a micron. The two of them just stood there, taking in the cold, quiet atmosphere, the snowfall coating everything like pure, white linen sheets. The dim, orange light of the streetlamps reflecting off it and coating the whole world in a calming, warm glow, lighting up the harsh, run-down looking buildings at ground level and gradually fading out as Serena's eyes tracked upwards towards the heavens, completely dark where they were touching the sky - and like a flight of angels, the snowflakes were pouring down all around them in a cosmic ballet.

"So..." Serena finally broke the silence and turned over towards her friend, a curious expression on his bespectacled face. "Do you smoke?"

Gabriel's look turned a tiny bit awkward - and surprised. "Well, why are you asking?"

"Well, I know you definitely smoke SOMETHING." She sarcastically responded, and the eccentric scientist cracked a guilty smile and looked away. "But I just wanna know if you smoked cigarettes, since..." The vampire just looked a bit shy. "I feel kinda awkward just smoking here by myself."

"Vice loves company, huh?"

"I was really asking if you wanted me to put it out or not." She harshly responded. "I'm just trying to be nice, here."

"Well..." Gabriel took another deep breath, and stretched his arms out a bit. "If you REALLY wanna know, these days I don't, but I used to." A small grin found its way on his face. "Back when I was about your age, actually."

"Well, why'd you stop?"

"Oh, you know how it is." He cracked an earnest, but wistful laugh. "You get with someone who isn't a smoker, you either quit, or you get them into it." An awkward, regretful and guilty look came onto Serena's face as an uncomfortable memory flashed in her mind, and she needed to fight off a powerful urge to stick the lit cigarette in her mouth to conceal it. "She was pretty dogged." Gabriel continued. "So I quit."

"I didn't know you had a girl-" Serena tried to say, but something stopped her right in her tracks, and she went a bit paler than usual. It was that look in Gabriel's eyes. She'd seen it once before, when she'd lost her temper with him, and had seen a similar glint in his eyes back when Lisa had accidentally pushed his buttons in the coffee shop. The smile had entirely faded from his face, the usual cheery sanguine demeanor was gone, and, though his expression was blank, there was a cold, solemn harshness behind those glasses that she suddenly felt very, very afraid of.

Though, on the surface he tried to preserve the mood, merely cracking a warm smile - emphasis on 'crack', since Serena could practically see the cracks - and saying, "Let's talk about that some other time..." Serena, not being born yesterday, knew when her friend was saying, 'some other time', he really meant, 'never', and his eyes told her much more than his mouth was willing to spill. They just said, 'Don't ever bring this up again.'

She just gulped an awkward breath of that ice cold air and took a long drag off her cigarette, the vampire's expression turning tense and nervous and... Almost curious under the hood. It was just human nature to wonder, but... She sighed. No. She shouldn't probe. She owed him that much, if nothing else. He could keep his secrets...

"So you haven't touched any cigarettes since?..." Serena finally piped up with a reluctant, almost shaken up tone, desperate to change the conversation.

"Well..." Gabriel just awkwardly laughed, trying to dispel some of the tension that'd come between them now that a bit of his usual overly optimistic vigour had returned to him. "I mean, no, not really. When I said 'quit', I meant that I quit it as a habit. I still smoke once in a while."

"What sort of 'once in a while?' " The vampire asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, you know..." He adjusted his spectacles and cracked an earnest grin. "Cheat days, celebrations, sex, that sort of thing."

Serena briefly paused to think. "Wanna celebrate now?" She asked.

"What's the occasion?"

She just cracked a wry, playful smile. "Being alive."

"A worthy cause to celebrate if I've ever heard one." He responded, a massive smile on his face. "Besides," The eccentric scientist flashed a knowing, sly look. "I'd hate to leave you out in the cold."

"Cute." The vampire responded, as, with rehearsed precision, swiftly maneuvered another black-papered cigarette out of the pack and handed it over. Once it was in Gabriel's mouth, the scientist leaned in, and she obligingly lit the other end, a warm, flickering glow in the cold, snowy streets for just an instant, before she released the button and extinguished it, leaving only a small corona of embers on the end of his cigarette, and Gabriel took a small drag, blowing out a cloud of smoke into the snow with a small grin on his face.

"Pretty good." The eccentric scientist gave his judgment. "It's way rougher than my type of smoke, but I like it."

"Well, what IS your type, then?"

"Oh, you know..." He just laughed again. "Flat-chested blondes..."

Serena just locked up, her eyes going wide, her face going red, and her expression going completely nonplussed as she stammered out "I - I meant your usual type of cigarette..." That... She just took a deep breath, and looked down at herself, a very awkward and almost embarrassed look on her face, and her mind just drawing a blank. That...

The vampire just reflexively took a long, harsh drag off her cigarette, peering over at a suddenly very awkward and guilty looking Gabriel out of the corner of her eyes as the vampire found herself clenching her teeth, a flash of choler storming up her throat and a violent impulse making her hands twitch. Okay, well, she had to admit she wasn't really into him in a romantic sense, but that didn't exactly make Gabriel's words sting any less.

If anything... She took a deep breath. That just made it a bit worse. Somehow, Serena was getting the impression he did that on purpose, and it was making her want to kick his ass.

"Ooooooooooooooh!... My bad!..." He just laughed a bit and tried to play it off as Serena shot him a dirty look. From the glint in his eyes, though, she got the impression he knew. He was telling her something he didn't want to - or couldn't express with words, and Serena couldn't really decide if that made it better or worse. "Usually I like a nice London Lamplight..."

She just groaned, and took another long drag on her cigarette. Well, as much as she liked him, she cracked a small, irritated smile, he was still a pain in the ass.

There was another long, awkward pause before Gabriel just took a drag off his cigarette and, staring off into the distance, just said, "It's a nice night, huh?"

"Yeah..." Serena responded, taking a deep refreshing breath of that sinus-freezing cold air through her nose. "I guess you really learn how to appreciate them..."

"Appreciate them how?"

The vampire just cracked a playful, sardonic smile. "I guess you appreciate nights like this more when you survive to see them." She said, and the two of them just erupted into a bout of raucous, but relieved laughter. It was definitely a nice night to be alive.

"How..." One of the cultists moaned, the blond one wearing a jagged-looking metal band T-shirt under his two coats piped up, his tone anxious and grim, his pallor visibly pale and his expression clearly pained - though that might've had something to do with having been shot in the leg. "Far is it to the safehouse?..." He asked, his tone weak and almost desperate.

"Far enough." Lazerian harshly groaned, still a bit busy fiddling with his dataslate. The blond cultist took a quick look over his boss' shoulder - well, moreso around it, 'The Professor' was a tall bastard - and found himself staring at some incomprehensibly over-complicated three-dimensional map, and was really, really hoping it made more sense to his boss than it did to him. "About four kilometers from here, give or take."

"He IS looking pretty bad." The other cultist piped up - the black haired one who'd had a preppy appearance before he covered it up with a thick winter jacket. He'd been fortunate enough to escape the hideout without any injury, though, there was still a look of worry very clearly visible on his face - at least, what little of it could be seen. The flashlights all three men were holding felt very insufficient in lighting up the dark, abandoned tunnels they were trekking through like a trio of scouts reconnoitering hostile territory. He took a deep, nervous gulp of horribly stale air. It certainly felt like something could jump out at them at any moment.

"I don't think I'm gonna make it..." The blond one punctuated the point, doubling over slightly with an agonized expression coming onto his face. "My legs' about to-"

"Casey, quit your damn whining. You'll live. I fixed your damn leg myself." Lazerian just harshly shut him up, both cultist's eyes going a bit wide at the admonishment. It was fairly obvious the professor wasn't in the best of moods, and the black-haired cultist - he usually went by 'Blake' but nobody really asked - mused that he probably had every reason to be. Some crazy broad and her dumb friends had just barged into the lab, destroyed all the zombies they'd spent WEEKS working on, and forced them to flee into the dark corners of the city, way past where anyone sane would pursue them. It was real inconsiderate, and enough to make anyone mad as hell, really.

Even as HE was thinking about it, he was kinda getting a bit pissed off, though it still wasn't enough to override the tension and the terror he was feeling. "And both of you, pipe down." Lazerian added, lowering the volume of his voice, but not letting up on the harshness for even a second. "We're not alone down here."

Casey and Blake just turned damn near white as ghosts at that - well, mostly Casey. Down here, in... Well... He just took a deep breath, the air around them was cold and disgustingly stale. Like the bottom of a deep, dark cavern. Blake wasn't even sure what this place was.

Dr. Lazerian had called it 'The Under-sprawl', but he wasn't even sure it had a name. Saint Petersburg wasn't exactly a... Planned community, and what he was used to thinking as 'the city' was really just rather haphazardly built over several layers of ruins of... Whatever this had been. He quickly shined his light against the wall, and behind a thick coating of dust and mildew and graffiti was smooth, elegantly minimalist, geometrically patterned wall of - formerly - white concrete that he was pretty sure had been out of style when his dad was a boy. By the looks of things, a lot of the corridors and chambers they were traveling through dated back to before The Crash, and probably even all the way back to the 20th century.

It was a ramshackle labyrinth of ruins and detritus, probably barely holding itself together - Blake had the very uncomfortable impression that even pressing on the walls too hard would cause the ceiling to collapse in on them, and like he'd already mulled over the place was pitch black. The city's power grid obviously wasn't hooked up to anything this far down, and though the woefully inadequate cone of illumination his flashlight projected occasionally revealed a lamp or light fixture, they'd clearly been divorced of any phosphorescence for ages. This was a place the light had long abandoned, the cultist mused.

It was absolutely deathly quiet, too, which just made his hair stand on end. Being a city kid, Blake was all too used to constant noise and bustle from the streets, or even just the omnipresent humming of computer equipment. All the way down here, even deeper than the laboratory, deeper than any human being should be, the only noise was the soft pattering of their boots on the cement, and the occasional soft \*drip-drip\* of water from unseen cracks in the ceiling.

Lazerian's observation that they weren't alone down here was, in all honesty, probably the worst thing he could have said, and it sent a shiver up the black-haired cultist's spine, and his flashlight began to shake a bit in his gloved hand. Besides them, he grimly mused, who - or what - would be crazy enough to lurk down here?...

"So..." Blake quietly spoke, his tone solemn and very clearly careful of drawing any attention to the group. "What's on the agenda once we get to the safehouse?" He asked, a nervous expression on his face and a distinct sense of unease on his tone. Really, he felt all-too eager to get out of this... Well, it was all too cold to be a hellhole, wasn't it?

"First thing I'm gonna do is pass out..." Casey weakly moaned, nearly tripping over himself again and only managing to stay upright by a morale-boosting death glare from the mad doctor looking over his shoulder.

"Mostly re-configuring the computer systems." Lazerian soberly responded as he turned back around to face the darkness ahead of them, the shadows so thick and omnipresent even a torch couldn't illuminate more than ten meters away from them. "That, and taking a breather."

Casey just laughed wearily at that. "Thank God..."

"All my backups are automatically ported to a myriad of servers on my network." The Doctor elaborated. "I won't lose more than a few days' worth of research at best. The real issue is replacing all the hardware, personnel, and, of course..." The necromantic mad scientist just groaned, and shook his head. "Building a new freaking laboratory... That little minx just set me back a few months..."

"Are we gonna..." Casey took a deep, pained breath through clenched teeth, his tone sounding very scared and almost reluctant. "Gonna have to do anything about her?..." Though, Blake could feel a small bit of anger bleeding in through his agony, and it was obvious, really. That Serena nutcase had killed their good friend Tommy, after all.

Still, his reluctance was obvious too - talking about it was one thing, but doing was another entirely. How exactly DO you go about snuffing out someone who cut down an entire horde of zombies with barely a scratch on her by the end of it?

He took a deep, nervous breath of that stale air. She didn't look like any cyborg he'd seen, and he was a big enough person to admit that girl terrified him. He was a seeker of forbidden lore, after all. If he was uncertain about something, then it was probably something really dangerous.

To both henchmen's simultaneous relief and disquiet, Lazerian just shook his head. "Right now my priority is getting back onto my feet. This is a bad setback on my scientific journey, so right now priority number one is reversing it. Serena isn't much of an issue."

A look of bewildered disbelief came onto the cultist's face. "Isn't she a threat?"

"She is, but believe me." Lazerian took in a deep, irritated breath of the stagnant air. "Her bosses are way, way worse."

"Huh?"

Lazerian just groaned. "On top of how Bathrette is run by a group of crazy, psychopathic bitches perpetually on the rag, They're the ones PAYING her to bust up my research operation. She's got a self-preservation instinct - I doubt she'd be in my hair if she weren't on Bathrette's payroll and didn't have to explain her fuckups to them... Then again..." The dataslate disappeared back inside his coat, and the mad scientist laughed softly to himself as he stroked his chin. Both cultists just exchanged a nervous glance. That couldn't be anything good.

"Serena's definitely a spirited girl, and I get the impression she's more than just another hired thug." The Professor elaborated. "There's something... Interesting about her. I could tell from the day I first laid eyes on her."

"Beyond her... Combat abilities, you mean?" Blake nervously asked.

"I'm fairly certain she was unaugmented when we'd first met - she DID say she was in cybersecurity, after all." Lazerian added. "However, yes, I suppose we have to acknowledge her... Abilities."

"She's a bit dangerous, isn't she?..." Casey wearily piped up from the back.

"Dangerous if she's around, but not much of a threat in the big picture." The mad scientist elaborated, to his minions' slight confusion. "She - Bathrette in general, really - are fairly reactive."

"Huh?" Both cultists expressed their confusion in unison, to their master's irritation and chagrin.

"They react to what I'M doing." He explained, like a mildly frustrated schoolteacher. "I act, they react. I left, they sent somebody after me. They're likely going to be on high alert for any signs of my... Return, but unless I go loud we're unlikely to see Serena again for the time being..."

"Aren't you... Y'know..." The preppy, black-haired cultist just raised an eyebrow. "Mad at her?"

"Oh, believe me..." Lazerian responded through clenched teeth, a vicious smile plastered on his wicked face. "I'm mad as hell, and she'll get her due eventually, but..." He just took a deep breath, a viciously calm smile coming onto his face as a feeling of disquiet shot right up Blake's spine. "I'm too damn old for revenge these days. If I took the time out of my busy schedule to settle every damn grudge I've got, I'd be getting lowered into the grave by the time I was halfway done!"

The mad scientist just shook his head, and laughed bitterly to himself. "No, Serena's a problem, but she's a problem I'll eviscerate when it comes up. Besides..." He laughed again, but this time it was much more menacing and vicious, and his two minions just looked very, very worried. "If anything, I ought to be thanking her..."

"WHAT?!" Both cultists replied in shock, though, obviously, Blake was much more spiritedly than Casey was.

"It's a glass half empty sort of situation, boys." The mad scientist explained, taking his dataslate back out and peering over it, eventually leading his minions through a hole in a wall into what, long ago might once have been a train station or something... With all the decay and detritus and collapsed bits of masonry - not to mention all the oppressive, crushing darkness all around them - it was hard to tell. "I could just sit here and feel sorry for myself that a crazy girl went and killed all my zombies-"

"Re-killed." Blake interjected, which earned him a very harsh stare from his boss.

"Who cares." Lazerian shot him down. "The point is, you can't always linger on the bad parts of life. There just ain't enough life to just wallow in pity and depression all day. Even when you get knocked down a peg, you've gotta find that silver lining to every cloud."

"I..." Now, The preppy cultist just looked confused. "I don't see how the hell anything good came out of-

"It's a chance to start over." The mad scientist cut him off. "Wipe the whole damn slate clean and go back to the drawing board. The zombies were a good start, but they just had too many shortcomings."

"How?" Blake asked, visibly a bit confused and agitated, not too sure where his boss was going with this.

"Well, for one, the trodes I built to control them only worked on bodies that were already dead, and you both know how many damn complications came with that." He just groaned and shook his head. "I liked to be a bit hammy with it, but calling that 'resurrection' would be an insult. Really, it was just piloting a corpse via remote control, sending impulses down dead neural pathways and crudely manipulating muscles and extremities. It was a good parlor trick, but, well..."

The mad doctor just bitterly sighed, as he led his men up a pile of rubble that formed a conveniently placed - if awkward to climb - staircase up from what Blake suspected used to be railway tracks, up towards the platform. "The 'live fire test' we ran shows they're damn near worthless. Too slow, they can't use any weapons, and if you take e'm outside a meat locker, they'll just rot! Overall..." He just laughed irritably to himself. "Nothing more than a footnote. Just another step forwards in the field of... Eternal life."

"So we're not going to make any more zombies?" Casey asked, the blond cultist's expression curious through the pain, and Lazerian paused in his tracks, right in the middle of the dust and detritus covered tile floor of what had once been a large, vaulted subway station. A wicked, evil smile crawled onto his face as he turned to face his minions, only getting more sinister with the dense, black shadows their flashlights were casing on his face.

"Not more of those ones specifically. Immortality is an infant field, boy. There's so many wonders of science-" He raised a hand up to the ceiling to hammer his point home. "-I have yet to discover in my quest to live forever, and believe me..." He let loose a throaty, evil laugh into the darkness, throwing caution and silence - temporarily - to the winds in his enthusiasm. "We're going to have something much, much worse in store the next time Serena decides to show her pretty little head around here."

## POSTSCRIPT:

Thanks for reading another instalment of Blood on The Matrix!

This one, I feel is a bit of a landmark in the story, in that it's the first time we really see Serena in her new job, facing new challenges and getting in way, way over her head. Second Chance was really more of an introduction to the protagonist, her situation, and the world she lives in. This one's also a full-length novel (around 92,000 words specifically!) as opposed to a novella, and it took me a freaking while to write! For you, dear reader, it probably doesn't seem so long considering I published this about four months after the first one, but behind the scenes, I started writing this in November of 2022, and only finished it in late June of 2023, which, compared to most other things I've written is insanely long. Still, glass half-full, it also gave me a lot of time to think about the way I want the story and characterization to go and fine-tune everything. I hope you enjoyed it!

-Joe

If you want to read or view more of my works, check out [my Deviantart](#), [my Twitter](#), [my Tumblr](#), or my [Neocities Website!](#)

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