

Blood

ON THE

Matrix

PART I: SECOND CHANCE



NAVY JOE

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The relentless march of technology, reaching heights once thought impossible has created unparalleled tyranny, as well as opportunity. The consolidation of resources and wealth has enriched a small few at the expense of a great many, and private capital has become so deeply entrenched and interconnected with government power that the two are nearly synonymous.

Yet, in spite of their best efforts to legislate and restrict, the common man yet still has the capability to drastically change their own destiny. The world is far from static, and with the right know-how, the right friends, the right server in the post-crash "Information Matrix", and just the right amount of luck, even the layman can defy the existing power structures - or raise himself within. While the systems of power are deeply entrenched, the people within that system are far from it, and every day, with all the politicking and scheming and the occasional touch of Lady Luck, fortunes are created and lost in the blink of an eye, and nobody quite knows what the next big thing is going to be.

Still, For all the heights technology has achieved, some things never truly change. Money and status aren't the only things that can be lost at the great cosmic roulette table of life. Even the greatest and most accomplished among us is more fragile than they look, and, while it's not something people like to talk about, anyone can simply be carelessly struck down, by pestilence, accidents, or simply being on the wrong end of someone's plot or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Technology, for all it's amazing achievements and capabilities, will never be able to stop this fact of life. Sometimes, you just get unlucky.

...

But, when the stars align, if circumstances are just right, and if you're in the right place at the right time, while technology can't outright prevent your misfortune, it might give you a second chance.

-O-

vrrrrrooooooooooommm...

The dark-red motorbike's engine purred like a content lioness as its tires screeched against the wet pavement, the rain relentlessly crashing down all around it. The morning's deluge mercilessly poured down from the heavens, splattering against the other cars and bikes on the road, the umbrellas of pedestrians walking by, the sloped roofs safeguarding the entryways of the colossal neon-covered buildings that flanked the streets, and of course, against the black, half-faced motorbike helmet of its leather-jacket clad rider.

The woman's eyes were obscured by the tinted visor, and her buff-coloured scarf trailed violently behind her, flapping from her neck like a pennant from a knight's lance. She took a momentary glance up at the urban sprawl all around her, the neon lights and advertisement billboards lining the avenues and sky-roads overhead, flashing an injection of colour and vigour against the drab, slate-coloured morning sky. All the neon contrasted heavily against the buildings they were mounted against, with their vaulted, arched windows, harsh geometry, and the elaborate, richly decorated exterior facades. Statues and relief carvings broke up their outlines, and a constant stream of water flowing down through their gutters, being poured out into the streets from the mouths of leering gargoyles.

The rider made a left turn, rubber screeching aggressively against the asphalt underneath, spraying rainwater as she went, her hands tight on the handlebars as she struggled to keep control of the machine against the lack of traction. Thankfully both for her and the man running the soy-dog stand on the corner, she'd managed to avoid crashing, and gunned the engine, powering on as her destination slowly came into view. The imposing, richly decorated towers and lengthy battlements poked out through the gaps in the city around her, massive rows of vaulted windows and turrets, colossal wings of the whole facility each the size of a city block connected by sky-bridges and the rails of an auto-tram. The whole structure topped by decorative, red-tiled roofing and surrounded by an intimidating-looking concrete wall, garnished with razor wire and spotlights in the turrets, with guards in peaked caps and long, double-breasted pea-coats patrolling the battlements.

The walls were given a clearance of almost thirty meters from the road and a much larger sidewalk to accommodate it. A massive sign proudly adorned the surface of one of its taller towers, facing the road, displaying the logo of a cartoon heart pierced by an arrow. The company's name, 'BATHRETTE BEAUTRONICS', surrounded the heart on the top and bottom, and right underneath, the corporation's slogan - 'Beauty knows no compromise', all written in the medium of bright pink neon.

It was a display of naked, prideful defiance, as if daring anyone to attack its ramparts, a gesture that just made the rider crack a sardonic smile as she rode around the castle's proud, sturdy walls. The building was Bathrette Beautronics' corporate headquarters, their home base, and it was massive - almost 40,000 people worked here, after all. Even if you got past the walls, you'd find an army of security guards, and some of the best network defences in the biz - the rider should know, she was responsible for them, wasn't she?

There was, only one way in or out of Bathrette's HQ, and that was the front gates, where the walls suddenly turned inwards at ninety degrees along with the T-intersection in the road, and four massive lanes - each one wide enough to drive a tank through - led up to four sturdy-looking gatehouses.

The driver morosely mused that it looked like a killing field as she drove up to one of the gatehouses. From behind the visor, she found herself raising an eyebrow. This early in the morning, shouldn't there have been more cars trying to get in? The ridiculously heavy rain could only really explain so much, and the rider felt an odd, uneasy feeling welling up inside her as she eased off the throttle, slowing her bike down as she approached the gatehouse. She probably wouldn't get too much time to dwell on it, so... It was probably irrelevant, she mused, cracking a sardonic smile under that helmet of hers. At least, that was her hope.

The guard manning the checkpoint didn't seem to share the rider's apprehension - in fact, the man looked bored out of his skull. Being left with nothing to do was probably a bigger concern for him than the lack of people to begin with. A flash of surprise came up over the guard as the dark red motorbike pulled up to his window, and its rider could see a him quickly putting a dataslate under his desk out of the corner of her eyes, before composing himself, sitting upright in his chair, and asking, "Identification?"

The woman responded by digging through the pockets of her leather jacket, the retrieval of her wallet - and the corporate ID within only slightly delayed by the thick racing gloves she wore to stave off the rain and the cold and to get a proper grip on the handlebars. With a practised precision, the guard took the slightly garish-looking holocard and stuck it into the reader of his cyberterminal, an entry popping up on the dated-looking graphical user interface.

The card he'd scanned identified it's holder as Serena Olivine-Ramneau. Female, Age 24, Cybersecurity Technician, Level 1 security clearance, employed since 04/17/2066 - just over two years, by her recollection. The entry even had a file photo attached, and the guard turned over towards the card's holder, who just sighed and finally removed her helmet. Even though she'd passed through these gates often enough to know all the guards - by appearance, at the very least, this one she could tell from his mutton chops - there were still protocols to observe, especially in a facility with security as tight as this one.

Serena put the helmet to one side as briefly shook off the flecks of water that'd accumulated in her short, neat black hair, cut up to just below her jaw, a bit different from the pixie cut she'd sported two years ago in the photo - she'd let it grow out a bit. Her face was a touch more mature, too, and the photo lacked the cheap ear-studs that probably had less silver in them than what she'd eaten for breakfast that morning, but her dull, greyish blue eyes were just the way they'd always been - along with the slightly moody look in them.

Her skin, however, was a bit more pale and her eyes hadn't sported massive, black bags in the photo. Still, it was still obvious that she was who she said she was, and the guard handed her ID card back, raising the barrier that impeded her access and wishing her a nice shift. Followed by a suggestion to "Oh, and maybe get that photo updated" as Serena was busy putting her wallet back.

"I'll think about it." She replied, with just a touch of sarcasm, stowing her helmet on her bike's rack and hit the throttle, speeding out into the courtyard of Bathrette Beautronics' HQ - which, it's employees usually just called 'The Castle.'

An eerie mist had settled in the large, open plaza, the light-fixtures embedded at the corners of the concrete tiles like will-o-the-wisps in the gloom barely keep all the branching roads crossing the courtyard visible. Serena just ignored all of those, since she was heading for the main building, after all. The cybersec-tech wheeled her bike up to the front entrance, a look of relief on her face as she passed under the massive, sloped roof blocking out the rain, the ornate steel and concrete exterior with it's massive, glass windows reminding her a bit of something in-between an airport, a bank, and, well, a fortress. Soon enough, she found what she was looking for - the autorack.

It was a nifty bit of machinery mostly concealed in the castle's wall, with only a rail and a portal poking out, with a graphical user interface-based terminal adjacent to it. No fuss, no spending ages looking for a free parking space, just put her dark red motorbike on the rail, scan your employee ID into the terminal, and watch in marvel as the bike was slotted into the machine. With a smooth hum of machinery, her red motorbike was spirited away into the autorack's inner workings, ready for retrieval when her shift ended. At least, if the damn thing would still be working properly by then.

Serena just shrugged her shoulders and yawned, trying not to concern herself with unpleasant memories of that time it'd taken the engineers four hours to retrieve her bike from a malfunction. Serena stretched her back and just tried her best to not look horribly tired. Despite getting a full eight hours of sleep, it had been an errand and a half even getting out of bed, much less all the way here. The programmer could already tell focusing on anything mentally taxing would be an ordeal and a half. Maybe she should've had a third cup of X-caff before she left...

Tsssh

The sliding door opened about a second before Serena actually put herself in range of the scanners, but given how she was in the middle of yawning again, eyes closed, she didn't really notice anything wrong until she opened her eyes again, and nearly flinched when she saw the man blocking her path.

It was a new face - definitely not someone from her department, she'd been there long enough to know everyone by now, and Serena couldn't exactly picture herself forgetting anyone like him. He was an old man, but far from feeble.

He looked like a gnarled old oak, burning with a vigour and determination that contrasted his thinning, white hair and large, drooping moustache that looked like it was out of style while Serena was still in her mother's womb. She wasn't a short girl by any stretch but this old man was almost a full three-inches taller than she was, and, despite his unfocused stare, the cybersec-tech could tell he was brimming with burning, barely-contained homicidal rage, and she locked up a bit, a nervous look coming on her face.

"Er..." She stammered out, a bit awkwardly, trying to take a step back. "Am I in your?-"

"Hold on." The old man barked, stopping her with but a gesture - impressive, considering the two large, heavy-looking suitcases he held in his hands, and Serena just froze as he sized her up - which also gave the cybersec-tech an opportunity to do some sizing of her own. He looked to be in pretty good shape for a man of his evidently advanced age, and had a thick, faux fur coat draped rather awkwardly over a closed labcoat and black slacks - was he in R&D?

"What's your department, young lady?" He asked, putting a special stress on the 'young' part that made her equal parts confused and perturbed. There was just something... Wrong about it.

"Cybersecurity." She truthfully - though awkwardly - answered. "We sort of maintain the company's intranet, all the programs, and chase out any intruders with aid from the ICE-"

"Spare me..." He sarcastically cut her off with a shake of his head, though, a warm, wistful smile came to his face in a way that didn't exactly reassure her. "I know what you kids do in cybersec. I started there at this company almost forty years ago..."

He flashed a wry grin, as he tapped the back of his neck. "Still got the implant from when you needed a data-jack. Back then," He continued, trailing off a bit, the anger and annoyance seeming to fade, and his tone became a touch more pleasant "I was still fresh, just got out of university, all filled with piss and vinegar and hopes and dreams, ready to leave my mark on the world..." The old man took a deep breath, Serena still just a bit confused - and would be even more confused when he suddenly asked her. "I've got a question for you, kid. What's the most valuable treasure one can have?"

"Uhh..." That question definitely took Serena for a curveball, and the programmer blanked out a bit. This was the 21st century - there were a whole load of priceless things one could have. An A2 bomb, a captive Omega-Class AI, a vial of adrenochrome, controlling shares of a AAA-class mega-corporation like Bathrette?...

Or, maybe something more metaphorical like "Love" or "Happiness", something straight out of that stupid high-school philosophy elective she'd taken... As it was, though, the cybersec-tech found the weirdness of the whole situation - coupled with her tiredness - made it a bit hard to think, and she just blurted out the first thing she could think of. "Gold."

From the disappointed look in his eyes and the annoyed scowl on the man's face, that was obviously the wrong answer, and Serena felt a small sliver of fear crawl up her spine. Luckily, the bitter old man didn't do anything worse than just glare at her and growl out "Life. To live is the most valued treasure of all, even if most people don't know it. If you're gonna learn one thing here, young lady, make it that."

"O..." Serena just looked a bit awkward and confused at that. Obviously your life was the most valuable thing you owned, even if it was the one thing you ever got for free. You couldn't exactly take gold with you after the fact. "Kay..." She responded. "Are you telling me to make the most of it, or-" She tried to get out, feeling a bit of shame and anxiousness that bled into her tone as she said it, but, with another shake of his head, the old man just cut her off.

"A word of advice." He said, callously pushing her out of his way with his forearm, sending the tired cybersec-tech stumbling back and nearly into the ground with a surprised look of indignation on her face, neatly contrasting the dour, resentful look on his. "If you've got any dreams of scientific advancement, then quit as soon as your contract's up." The old man paused, on the precipice of stepping into the rain. "The ignorant Luddites at this company have no respect for... True genius."

Serena opened her mouth, wanting to tell him off or... Say something, but found her tongue going slack as the old man stepped out, into the rain, and began to gradually fade into the mist as he walked away. "I've got places to be, and real science to do, now scat." He said, before finally disappearing into the gloom, leaving Serena standing in front of the still-opened doorway, a strange sense of... Disquiet welling up inside her.

Somehow, for some reason, she got a very... Bad feeling about that whole exchange, but she couldn't really figure out why... Yawning one more time and shrugging her shoulders as she turned around, towards the warm, summery glow of the lobby's interior, Serena just decided to forget about it for the time being, and just get to work. Whatever it was, it was probably someone else's problem.

Once again, Serena took a deep, intense yawn, covering her mouth and closing her eyes as her black dress loafers brushed against the carpet on their way to her cubicle. Since punching in, she'd ditched her riding gear and helmet in her locker, revealing the mauve dress shirt she'd worn underneath and the sturdy, black leather belt holding up her dark gray slacks, and the red and black-striped necktie around her collar provided a welcome flash of colour in the otherwise dreary-looking office space of the Cybersecurity department.

One wouldn't have expected such a vital organ of this company's security network to simply be an array of cubicles on the thirteenth floor, nestled right in between the accounts receivable department and their sister department - Information security. Infosec's work was much more mundane, and more preventative in nature, whereas Serena and her colleagues here took a more active role in keeping Bathrette's net infrastructure up and running.

Her cubicle was basic and austere, lacking the pot plants and post-it's common in the rest of the building's workspaces. A desk with a cheap office chair Serena was hoping would break soon so she could get a replacement, and a large, bulky cyberterminal rig underneath, connected to a desk-top monitor to access it's graphical user interface, and a keyboard to control it. The demanding and highly technical nature of her duties, however, meant she rarely used those antiquated interface methods. Instead, when Serena sat down at her desk to power her 'rig' on for another day at work, she reached over for the third peripheral connected to it.

The trodes were comparable to a diadem, and they fit rather snugly on Serena's head, but the band was much thicker and adorned with six large, round 'studs' on the outer edge, and a cable in the back. Just as a keyboard and mouse were peripherals for controlling a computer with your hands, trodes let you operate one with your thoughts, sending signals to, and receiving signals from your brain. A 'thought interface', it was called.

Serena found herself thinking about it as she inputted her login credentials, the old man's comments about his data jack still ringing in her mind. Whether wirelessly or not, controlling a computer with your mind was something people fifty years ago would have thought impossible. Then again, people from two hundred years ago would have thought a computer itself to be a some sort of magical artifact. Technology was always marching on, and what seemed impossible could find itself becoming a part of everyday life.

Not always a bad thing, either, she mused, entering a few keystrokes to boot up the Thought-interface operating system. There were a few advantages to foregoing a 'turtle mode' interface for something like this. Lack of carpal tunnel, for one, but also the increase in reaction speed and seamless integration of yourself into a computer's systems that you'd definitely need in her line of work, but what had really made thought-interfaces catch on was something deceptively simple.

The cybersec-tech leaned back in her chair, watching the looping, little swirly blue graphic underneath GIT's - Global Industry Terminals - faded block capital-letter logo, her heart rate picking up a bit as she tried to find a comfortable position in her uncomfortable seat. A thought interface worked by reading the signals your brain sends to the computer, but, it was a two-way system.

Serena's eyes went wide, as she felt a familiar little 'pulse' in her brain - something she'd compared to getting an egg cracked over it - and everything went black. A thought interface could also send a computer's signals to your own brain, essentially 'piggybacking' off the nerves, overwriting - or, essentially hijacking - the senses, and, instead of your eyes telling you what to see, your hands what to feel, nose what to smell, the computer could instead.

The 'black screen' lasted for a few seconds before GIT's logo once again popped in again, a monochromatic, faded beacon in a tumultuous sea, as a familiar sense of weightlessness and etherealness washed over her - in a way, it was reassuring for a seasoned thought-interface user like her. It meant it worked, and that she was 'in.'

In where? Well, in Bathrette Beautronics' intranet, that was!... Although, before she could actually get there, Serena found herself faced with a familiar sight as the blackness finally faded out. The cybersec-tech found herself in a musty, dusty old office, with creaky floorboards, and tall, baroque-looking shelves piled with all sorts of books and tomes, with a smile coming to her face. Using a thought interface was unique in the sense that you could essentially 'see' inside the computer, and that you could customize what it looked like. Within certain limitations, obviously - this machine WAS technically still company property, and she only had so much leeway to customize it...

The cybersec-tech drifted over towards a tall, ornate-looking mirror in the corner of the room, the extra processing power spent rendering the office-space twice well worth being able to get a good look at her avatar. Just like how the appearance of the computer's systems all around you was mutable, so was the user's appearance. One's physical 'imprint' on the computer was represented by a program wholly under the user's control, from which they could manipulate other programs, launch their own, or even edit the very code of the systems around them- an avatar. Controlled with your brain as easily as you controlled your own body back in 'meat-space'.

It still needed an appearance, however, even if it was just a floating icon. In Serena's case, the figure staring back at her in the mirror was a simulacrum of herself. Company policy being what it was, she wasn't allowed to resemble a fire-breathing dragon or a silver-clad rock n' roll angel. Still, it wasn't quite a 1:1 copy. Her avatar wore a white shirt with dark pants - but kept the same tie - though, that was far from the only difference. The processing power needed to render ultra-realism and the desire to dodge the uncanny valley left Serena's avatar resembling a cartoony version of herself, with a simplistic, exaggerated face and hair, complete with big eyes and a small mouth that was rendered as a single line when closed.

Reflexively, she adjusted her tie - though, she'd need to alter her avatar's code if she wanted to actually alter it, real world habits dying a bit hard - and stepped towards the edge of the room, towards the doorframe. The ornate, richly decorated dark oaken door set within was a representation of her computer's connection to Bathrette's network, and, if Serena would put her hand on the knob and turn, she'd find that no force on Earth could move it.

The connection was there - it automatically engaged whenever she booted the system on - but it was still a private network, which means to access it she'd need to input valid login credentials. With but a thought, a gesture, and a command word uttered under her breath, a fine-tipped calligraphy brush appeared in front of her. It hovered right in front of the avatar's nose before Serena plucked it from the air and shook it a bit, and the tip began to glow, turning a bright, phosphorescent white and leaving streaks in the air as it passed. The cybersec-tech began to write her credentials directly onto the door itself, leaving stark, white printed letters where her brush swept, glowing like neon lights against the night sky. Finally, after she was done, she placed her palm against the doorframe and spoke another command word, this time, out loud. "LOGIN."

The programmer pulled her hand away, as her handwriting began to shift, running slightly, as though the very words were melting, squirming, moulding themselves into a-

DING!

Serena cracked a small grin. With a sound like an old radiation-oven, the door confirmed her connection request, her handwriting having shifted into glowing, block capitals reading "ACCESS GRANTED". The cybersec-tech just spoke her earlier command word again, dismissing the brush, and it vanished from her hand, fading into a puff of smoke.

A very simple thought-interface operation - all she really did was launch the login form-filling application - a peripheral within a peripheral - and used it to finalize the connection to Bathrette's network. A minor process, but she wouldn't fault the untrained eye for thinking it to be some kind of arcane ritual. It certainly LOOKED the part. Controlling a computer with your mind was a discipline that took a while to master - some people never did. Even she was a bit bewildered by it all when she'd first started using a thought-interface.

Connection established, Serena turned the knob and stepped through the door, finding a feeling of floaty levity under her already weightless feet as she did so, transitioning from her own realm to that of Bathrette's. The programmer entered a vast antechamber, coloured with stark whites and floral pastels, decorated with ferns and potted plants and even a few trees to enhance the atmosphere of tranquility.

Her virtual ears filled with the humdrum and buzz of people talking as the avatars of her co-workers darted to and fro, flying through a sea of information moulded into something vaguely resembling a beauty salon - rather typical for a cosmetics company, Serena idly mused. A small grin came onto her face as she too, jumped up and found herself floating in the air of this new realm, the door to her office shutting closed beneath her, though, the connection far from shut. Every realm had it's own rules, and Bathrette Beautronics' intranet - cut off from the global matrix of information for reasons of security - allowed it's users a luxury Serena purposefully excluded from her own system: the ability to fly.

It was for reasons of practicality - a speedier way of transport through the sea of information, getting from one part of it to another, and since the cybersec-tech's virtual office space was only one room, she didn't really see any reason to tick that particular box. Being constrained by an imaginary impression of gravity somehow made that moody bookworm's lair somehow feel a bit more... Real.

Still, she could probably float in place, watching cartoony-looking avatars of office drones and sales-girls go flying by until her supervisor showed up to give her a reprimand, but it wouldn't do her much good. Regrettably, it was time for Serena to actually get to work.

With another gesture and word of command, the dark-haired girl launched her itinerary program, and found a spiral notebook pop into existence right in front of her, and as she opened it up to see what she'd need to do today, her heart began to sink, and an awkward, resigned smile came on her face as a groan escaped her lips. With a sigh, she closed the notebook, minimizing the program and attaching it to her belt with a virtual lanyard using another command. Finally, Serena sped off into the server, joining the crowd of avatars flying through the simulation as she headed over towards her first errand of many today. It was going to be a long shift, that was for certain...

"Like, oh my god, seriously?!"

"Yeah, he was totally serious!"

"Oh, he's such a douchebag!"

A ringing, raucous cacophony of girlish laughter erupted at the office's canteen table, and even Serena couldn't help but crack a smile at... That anecdote. The antics' of Lisa's boyfriend - at least, that's what she thought the red-haired waif's name was - managed to briefly snap her out of that odd, fatigued malaise she'd been feeling, that no amount of coffee seemed able to cure, that definitely hadn't been helped by the massive workload she'd been given.

"You should totally dump him!" Becky cut in - a girl with longer, lighter brown hair, a tress of it hanging over one eye, and her tone just a bit bitchy for Serena's taste. The dark-haired girl's pale, blue eyes lidded a bit as she scrolled her gaze over the gang of her co-workers in the sitting around the lunch table. They were some of the only females in the otherwise male-dominated Cyber-Security department - something that didn't really bother Serena as much as it did others, but, hey, girls have to stick together, right? The fact that she didn't actually like anyone she was sitting next to didn't matter so much in the grand scheme of things. Any company on her lunch break was good company, right?...

Serena just took another sip of her X-caff - black as the night, the way she liked it - while trying and largely failing to pick away at the chili-flavoured bowl she'd ordered, which she figured, for the cost and by the taste, was mostly textured soy protein and mealworm powder. Not a hint of even fake meat.

"Naaah!..." Lisa jokingly waved her hand and laughed, though, Serena could feel a bit of tension in the air, a bit of choler on her face despite the smile, that it wasn't as much of a joke as it'd seemed. "I think I'll give him a bit to see if he can make it up to me, besides, it was just a joke..."

"I still think he's kind of a dick." Becky responded, rolling her eyes, and the Dark-haired girl could feel a hint of irritation flash on Lisa's face for just a moment.

Throughout their lunch break, she and the rest of the girls mostly just gossiped or talked about whatever personal issues they were dealing with, and while normally Serena found herself wishing they'd stop talking about their boyfriends - mostly out of irritation that she didn't have one. Today, however, it was a welcome relief.

All this mindless chatter was... Soothingly distracting, a bit like shooting ambrosia, but without any of the bliss or the horrific comedown. It let her forget for just a moment about how tired she felt, and the mountain of work she had waiting for her as soon as her lunch break was over. 'Fix this subroutine, herd these ICE programs, debug this front-end page.' It was all mindless busy work, and it was driving the already tired cybersec-tech to the point of exhaustion.

The closest she'd had to anything exciting was when she thought the ICE had detected an intruder in the system, but it was just one of the managers in the payroll department accidentally uploading something from his home server onto the network... Serena just sighed, and leaned forwards a bit, nodding off slightly. She'd long given up trying to actually finish her lunch, and doubted she'd feel any better for it. "Like, that's a low blow." The brunette continued. "It'd be like if she called Serena-" The dark haired girl's eyes suddenly widened, her reverie shattered at realizing she'd just become the conversation's focal point. "A vampire or something 'cause she's looking a bit pale."

"Oh, come on!" Serena wanted to open her mouth to speak, but found Lisa already doing that, a streak of choler in her words that was proving impossible to hide. "That's a reach, but... Uh..." The redhead found herself turning over towards her dark-haired colleague, the look of anger starting to fade out, turning into one of concern as, one by one, all the girls started to suddenly turn towards her.

"Well, now that you brought it up, er..." Serena found herself sort of locking up again, an anxious, almost alarmed expression coming to her face, finding herself unsure of what to do. "Serena, are you feeling alright? You HAVE been looking a bit anemic lately..."

"Er..." The dark-haired technician just stammered nervously, putting on a rather forced laugh to try and dispel the tension suddenly thick in the air like cloying graveyard mist. "Well, w-what do you mean?"

"You look a bit more pale than you usually do." Lisa responded.

"Yeah, and you've been looking like you haven't slept at all these past few days." Becky added, the dark-haired technician catching a mote of genuine concern below the her bitchy attitude, and that just perturbed her even more. "Look at those bags, geez."

"And I think you've lost a bit of weight, too." Another one of her co-workers piped up, with a bob cut she'd dyed a deep blue, pushing the acceptable limits of the uniform policy. Julie, Serena thought her name was. "And not in a good way, either..."

"You guys!..." Serena just tried to put on a jokey face, and even cracked another laugh, though, none of her co-workers seemed to be fooled by that display of positivity, and, on the inside, the dark-haired technician was beginning to feel a bit worried herself. Was there... Something wrong with her?

She hadn't really given her health any thought, kind of dismissing the fatigue of late as just being overworked, but, now that her colleagues had noticed it... The fatigued cybersec-tech just found herself nervously laughing again, a feeling like goosebumps crawling on her skin, suddenly finding an overpowering need to for a cigarette creeping up on her. "I... Think you guys are getting worried about nothing..."

"Isn't that?-" Lisa raised an eyebrow. "Like your fifth cup of coffee today?"

Serena nearly spit-took her drink, almost blasting black liquid back into the cup she'd taken a drink from without even realizing it. She wasn't really sure whether to be more... Ashamed that her co-worker had picked up on that, or that she was wrong - technically, it was her seventh. "I... Uh..." Serena just laughed again. "Guys, I'm sure it's nothing..."

"Urrrrrgh..." Serena groaned, putting a hand up to clutch her avatar's temple, the soft pastel colours and stark lights of Bathrette's intranet all around her feeling like it was faintly spinning, and she fought down the urge to have her physical body violently vomit. 'Nothing' may have been a bit painfully incorrect. As the lunch break ended, and her shift dragged on, she found herself plugged back into the network, and things had only gotten worse and worse.

The workload definitely wasn't helping. It felt like the whole network was on the fritz today. Programs constantly needed debugging, front-end interfaces constantly needed re-tooling, and twice now, someone had managed to lose their login credentials, and she'd needed to issue them new ones. What was she, an Information Security technician? All this mindless net-based drudgery would have been barely tolerable if she was in a good state of health, but, as it was, it felt like she was about to black out.

Sighing deeply, and instinctively resting her avatar up against a wall the colour of a desert sunset, Serena reached over for her belt and picked her itinerary back up, the lanyard extending automatically as she did so, and scrolled through the pages, finding little respite in the mountain of errands still waiting to be done-

FHWEEEEEEEE!

A droning, old-fashioned steam whistle roared through the virtual halls of Bathrette's intranet, and instantly, the atmosphere seemed to shift. The roar of conversation all around her lowered in pitch, avatars flying every which way now found themselves stilled, and a bit of life returned to the eyes of Serena's avatar. As if confronted by a miracle, she acted in a trance, turning her left hand over to reveal the wristwatch-program on her wrist, a smile coming onto the drawn-on mouth of her proxy when she saw where it's hands were on the antiquated looking display. Large on twelve, little on five. Time to punch out. About time, too.

The cybersec-tech wasted little time, as, one by one, the avatars of her co-workers flickered out of existence around her, disappearing in puffs of smoke. That mountain of work would just have to wait until tomorrow, and she really wasn't getting paid enough to put off sleep for it. With another command word, Serena found an antique, folding hand telephone of the type that hadn't been made for decades appearing in front of her. She'd just booted up the exit program, and operating it was as simple as unfolding it, placing the device to her ear, and uttering the command word, "Log off."

With that, the dark-haired security technician felt another broken-egg pulse in her brain as the world around her suddenly went black, an odd feeling coming over her as, gradually, her body suddenly began to have weight again, she could feel a cold breeze from the air-conditioner brushing against her skin, and could feel a bad cramp coming on from sitting in that terrible chair all day.

Just as she was feeling almost completely drawn back into the real world, the words, "IT IS NOW SAFE TO TURN OFF YOUR CYBERTERMINAL" flashed in her eyes for a few seconds, the stark white, block capitals burned into her retinas even as the darkness began to fade from her vision, and Serena found herself right back in her cubicle, slumped in her chair, her head spinning as the sudden sensation of having to obey the laws of gravity once more nearly made her collapse onto the floor.

She just groaned, took a deep breath, and tore the trodes from her head, not even attempting to neatly place them on their stand. Serena just dropped them to the side of her keyboard as she reached under the desk and, as instructed, powered her terminal off and stormed out of the cubicle. Her mind was running on autopilot, barely giving any thought to her actions as she found her feet moving on her own, taking her away from her workstation and re-tracing a route she'd already taken dozens of times already towards the locker room.

Her face was half-asleep and her eyes were heavy-lidded, barely able to concentrate on the world around her. Despite the fact that it hadn't exactly been helping her so far, her instincts were telling her to go right to bed as soon as she got home, and, for probably the first time in her life, the thought of that stuffy, slightly uncomfortable, Far-East-style floor mattress brought a warm, contented smile to her face. She could hardly wait...

"Hold on! Hold on!"

Serena's eyes flashed open, her expression shocked as the dark-haired technician realized that she'd been nodding off, resting up against the wall of the elevator. Acting on instinct, she snapped right into action, nearly tripping over her bike helmet resting on the ground as she extended a leather-sleeved arm towards the silvery control panel. She didn't even realize what she was doing or why that voice ringing through her head sounded so familiar until her mind gradually began to reboot. Serena gradually realized her finger was pressing right up against the 'hold door' button, and the dark-haired cybersec-tech turned over towards the entrance, just in time to see a flash of red, and a grateful, relieved smile on Lisa's face as she came through the portal just before the polished, steel doors finally closed.

"Thanks..." She said, still trying to catch her breath, almost doubled over from the exertion of the sprint, as Serena just found herself resting back up against the elevator's mirrored wall, her gaze once again unfocusing and turning a bit heavy-lidded. At a glance, she looked a bit spaced out. "Oh! Serena!" The redhead's voice perked right back up as she caught a look at who she was sharing an elevator ride with, an eager smile coming onto her face as she said, "I've been meaning to ask, me and the girls were gonna head out for a night on the town later... You interested?"

"Uh..." Serena just took a deep breath, her tone probably would have been more awkward if she could really focus on that right now. Normally, she'd have to give Lisa's request some thought - so she could turn it down in the best way possible, but at the current moment... "I dunno, I don't think I can make it..." She took a deep breath, and just clutched her temple as she reclined back against the wall of the elevator - and for once, it wasn't an act. "I feel like shit..."

"Oh." Lisa's expression turned a bit anxious, even regretful, and Serena's eyes shot open once again, an astonished, awkward look coming to her face as she realized what she'd just said.

Since her shift ended, she'd been running on autopilot, feeling much like a zombie animated by some dark magic, going from her cubicle to the locker room to the elevator without thinking about it, but the accidental admission had snapped her right back to reality, and the dark-haired girl found herself stammering a bit as she tried to figure out what to say.

"Right... I'm... Sorry, I really shouldn't have asked..." Lisa cracked a small grin and laughed a bit, trying - and largely failing - to relieve the awkward tension brewing in the air. "You really should get some rest."

"Er-..." Serena tried to open her mouth to speak, but, once again, she found her tongue going slack, nothing else to do but sort of stare nervously at her, wondering there was something wrong... Wrong with herself, she meant.

Lisa looked a bit more cheery than she was, with her vibrant red hair pulled back into a ponytail and a homely-looking face that had a bit of a girl-next-door quality, and a more modern, tan-coloured treated fabric raincoat that contrasted against Serena's black leather. "I... Was sort of planning on resting for the rest of the night, maybe even just going to sleep as soon as I get home-"

Her eyes flashed again, her heart pounding in her chest, as she fought an urge to cringe and clench her teeth. Again! She'd been dazing off and hadn't been watching her words again!... Serena took a deep breath, a feeling of disquiet welling up inside of her, and, for once, she didn't know where it was coming from...

It definitely wasn't Lisa's probes or her concern - she'd just felt embarrassed and anxious about that, not afraid... Serena took a deep breath and tried to pull herself off the wall, only to find it felt like she weighed a million pounds, her body refusing to budge... Maybe just save that for when she needed to get off the elevator. For just a second, she let that thought roll around in her head, yawning deeply without even realizing it, before her eyes went wide yet again. Wasn't that sort of... Fatigue supposed to be a bad thing?

"I thiiink I reeeeaaly need to geeet to beeed..." The dark-haired cybersecurity technician continued, finding the words trailing off, like she was already half asleep, or really drunk. The disquieting feeling in her gut quickly matured into full-on panic as the realization hit her like a truck of bricks, her pupils narrowing and her breath-rate steadily increasing, bordering on hyperventilation as she realized, to her horror, Lisa had been right. Something was definitely wrong with her.

"Serena?!" Her red-headed co-worker's expression of concern had only intensified, the fellow cybersecurity technician's gaze also beginning to look a bit nervous, too. "Are you feeling alright? Do you need a doctor-"

"I'm fine! I'm fine!" She found herself shouting, a blatant lie that failed to calm either of them as she struggled to push herself off the wall and get back onto her two feet just as the elevator finally came to a stop, the polished steel doors opening with a charming little chime just as Serena finally succeeded in forcing her leaden body to move, standing upright, only to find her blood turn to ice.

Alarm bells rang out in her mind as the view of Lisa in front of her started to split into two images, her sight going blurry at the edges of her peripheral vision, her heart feeling like it was about to beat right out of her chest and her breaths increasing in pitch to full on hyperventilation as she stumbled out into the lobby like a drunkard, clutching her stomach which felt like it was tying itself up in knots, abandoning her helmet on the elevator floor, shouting, "I just need to lie down for..."

Her vision blurred out, the colour draining from her sight as Serena felt like her mind was filled up with a dense, choking fog, the dark-haired cybersecurity tech not even realizing she'd toppled over until she felt the cold, hard impact of the floor crash against her body and head, the world around her spinning like she was on a merry-go-round, her limbs feeling too heavy to even move themselves, let alone her body, and her energy and will to go on fading out like a flickering candle's flame gradually dying out. "a bit..." She weakly uttered.

The last thing Serena heard before she finally blacked out was a scream, ringing in her ears like a funeral bell...

GASP!

When Serena came to, the first thing those dull, greyish-blue eyes saw was a ceiling she'd never seen before, a white drop ceiling, illuminated by stark, white fluorescent light. It reminded her of the ceiling she was more familiar with at work, but... Cleaner. More sterile.

The cybersec-tech felt a disturbing sense of unease as she slowly rose, the haze gradually clearing from her mind as she began to take her surroundings in. She was in a bed, for one. A slightly stuffy, uncomfortable mattress covered by neat, blue sheets and a thin, flimsy-feeling white blanket. There were a few more beds like it in the room as well, one right across from her. Another was visible just at the borders of her peripheral vision, though, the curtains drawn as barriers between the bed-frames kept her from figuring out how many more were in this white, neat-looking room.

It was all white. The floor was white tile, the walls had white paint, even the window to her right seemed whiter than it should have been, or, maybe that was just the rain, still crashing mercilessly against the glass with the city's lights blazing out through the gloom. The whole place smelled strongly of disinfectant, and it was making Serena a bit nauseous - not helped by the anxious feeling crawling up her spine as she realized she was in a hospital.

It was especially obvious from how she looked, the programmer's eyes going a bit wide as she had a look down, and found her leather jacket missing, switched while she was out for a blue patient's gown, with a few monitoring patches stuck to her head and arms, connected by wires to a bulky-looking cyberterminal by her bedside. A million questions ran through her mind. What the hell happened? Why did she black out? Why was she here, and one in particular proved impossible to ignore, sending chills up her spine as she whispered aloud, "What's wrong with me?..."

She couldn't exactly ignore or deny it anymore - she DID black out, after all... Her heart began to start beating heavily in her chest again, and her breathing started to increase in pace as a dozen paranoid possibilities out of her worst nightmares started running through her mind. She felt the urge to tear off the damn wires and jump out of this bed, and run, fleeing into the rain away from... Serena just shook her head. Herself. It wouldn't do her any good, really, but somehow being here just made her feel... Sick. She just groaned at the horrid irony in that thought, since she probably was.

The cybersec-tech just sat there, paralyzed, focusing on the tapping of the rain outside the window and the beating of her heart in her chest like a metronome, breathing heavily, trying to calm herself down, and reviewing her - realistic - options, all of which amounted to just sitting and waiting... Serena swallowed. It didn't exactly reassure her.

Thankfully - she raised an eyebrow, as a new instrument added it's sound to this melody of malaise she'd been composing in her head. It was the sound of shoes rapping against the tile floor, joining the rain, her heart, and distant hum of computer equipment. She wouldn't be left waiting for too long, as a new figure emerged, poking his head out from behind her curtain barrier with a soft, reassuring smile on his face that was failing to do much reassurance.

A slightly portly-looking, older doctor with dark skin and thinning, black hair, easily recognizable by the tablet computer in his off hand, and the lab-coat and sweater vest. An old-century fashion, probably a deliberate choice to evoke a pleasing sense of nostalgia and comfort in a place that otherwise lacked it. Serena just took a deep breath, and shifted her weight on the mattress, fidgeting a bit. It wasn't exactly helping.

"Finally awake, huh?" He asked, The Doctor's tone reminding her of a kindly old grandfather than a medical professional, but, she supposed, that was just part of the man's image.

"Where are we?" Serena responded, deciding to start with the most obvious questions first - or, maybe, she thought, she was just trying to put off the bad news for as long as possible... She just shook her head. There she was again, pessimistically assuming the worst of outcomes... Sure, it was probably bad news regardless, but how bad could it possibly be, right?

"Heinrich MacGreigor Hospital." The Doctor answered, as Serena wondered to herself who the hell that was. Some rich nob who got the place named for himself, most likely. "Your company has a contract with us, so your bosses had you sent here after that nasty bout of exhaustion you had."

That just made her raise an eyebrow. "Exhaustion?"

"Well, that's just the most obvious symptom. I..." The Doctor just laughed a bit and shook his head. "Haven't exactly gotten the opportunity to read your diagnosis yet - the analyzer-" Serena turned to her left, back towards the bulky-looking cyberterminal she was hooked up to. So that's what it was, she mused. "-sent a printout to my slate earlier, but I haven't really had the time to look over it, so..." He lifted the tablet computer up to eye level and withdrew the stylus from its compartment, fiddling with the device for a bit as he said, "Let's have a look, shall we?"

Serena tried to calm herself down as The Doctor evidently read over her file, taking deep breaths, trying to reassure herself. It can't be that bad, she mused. It can't be anything that can't easily be fixed, right?... I mean, it IS the 21st century, isn't it?... Still, her anxiousness slowly turned to dread, her self-reassuring pep talk suddenly feeling much less reassuring as he read over her file, each second seeming to stretch out into an eternity, and a fearful, foreboding feeling began to well up inside her as she realized the chipper, paternal smile was rapidly disappearing from the man's face.

"So?!" The dark-haired programmer snapped. Finding herself unable to stand the dread of waiting any longer, like a soldier staring out into no-man's land, hoping the battle could finally begin, her face turning nervous and a bit manic. "W-what is it?"

At first, The Doctor didn't respond, simply taking a deep sigh and shaking his head - which just made Serena's anxiousness even worse, her heart beginning to thump nervously in her chest. "I... I'm sorry. I've... Never been good with delivering bad news..." He finally said, the physician's bright, cheery tone having drained entirely, replaced with a flat, almost morose demeanour, and Serena's eyes flashed with horror for a second, as all that forced positivity and optimism she'd subjected herself to vanished like the reflection in a mirror against a thrown brick.

"So I'll have to be blunt." The doctor austerely continued. "I'm afraid it's a rather... Progressive, very aggressive cancer of the blood. The Analyzer's diagnosis states you have about..." He took a deep breath. "Three months to live."

Serena just sat there, eyes wide, pupils narrow, a look of disbelief and an awkward, nervous grimace of a smile plastered on her face. Stunned like she'd just caught a baseball pitch with her forehead. "You're..." She finally replied, her tone anxious and staggering a bit at the news. "J-joking, right?"

The physician just shook his head, his expression as grim and serious as a grave marker. "We don't joke about these things, Ms. Ramneau."

"But... Er..." She just laughed a bit, her gaze shifting anxiously back and forth around the room. "There's still stuff you can do, right?" She asked, finding a bit of slightly shaky vigour coming back into her tone, the dark-haired technician having not quite yet resigned herself to her fate. "Right?"

All she got in reply was a deep, almost mournful sigh, and an uncomfortable, stabbing feeling came into her stomach, Serena not exactly finding herself reassured. "We're... Contractually obligated to try anything we can, though, I'm afraid your condition has progressed to the point where there's little to no chance of reversing it." He said, and Serena felt a cold sweat break out, her breathing once again picking up in pitch as she leaned in a bit, gazing into The Doctor with wild, staring eyes. "If we'd... found this cancer about a year or two ago, there might be some hope for recovery, but, as it is... Any treatment we could try would likely be ineffective at best or counterproductive at worst."

A long, grave silence hung over the hospital room as Serena just stared forwards towards the physician, her gaze at once detached and hyper-focused, not unlike a shell-shocked soldier. Her head tilted forwards a bit, only exaggerating the dark bags under her eyes, her breathing raggedly and laborious, and The Doctor just nervously looked away and rubbed the back of his neck. "So..." She finally piped up, letting those words hang in their air with the pattering of the rain outside and the humming of computers inside. "I'm... gonna die, then?..."

The Doctor didn't answer with words, but with his deeds- or, rather, what he didn't do. His gaze just shifted sullenly towards the floor, an awkward, statue-like look on his face, and Serena just took a deep breath, her stomach tying itself up in knots, and a petrifying, hopeless feeling overcoming her. It was like she was trapped at the bottom of a dark oubliette, the last sliver of light having been snuffed out by the closing gate, leaving her in crushing, oppressive darkness.

"So, I'm gonna die..." She repeated aloud. She always knew she was going to have to leave this world eventually - everyone did, but she'd always pictured herself dying of old age, surrounded by her grandkids... Or, failing that, the type of Hollywood-esque downfall suffered by the rich and the famous, not... This. She took a deep breath, and shook her head. Wasting away, killed by a damn cancer she didn't even freaking know about until now...

"It's..." Serena clenched her teeth. "Not... Freaking fair..." She took a few deep breaths, the whole experience feeling so much like a bad dream, yet, no matter how hard she pinched herself, she just wouldn't wake up, and the doctor had to start holding her back after she'd drawn blood.

"I... Still..." Serena continued, closing her eyes and shaking her head once again. "Crap... I... I had my whole freaking life ahead of me, I... I didn't think I'd be freaking ending it here, as some... Nobody wage-slave in the cogs of some stupid cosmetics company!" The dark-haired programmer found herself yelling out loud, a flash of choler at the unfairness and ridiculousness of the universe. "I..." She put her head in her hands. "Always thought I would at least accomplish... Something!"

"Well..." The Doctor anxiously piped up, and Serena raised an eyebrow, lifting her head back out with a mixture of anger and curiosity. "What were your dreams, Ms. Ramneau?"

"I..." She took a deep breath, and just shook her head again. "I dunno, get married? Get something better than this crappy job!? Become a... I dunno..." She started to laugh again, a bitter, sardonic, hopeless laugh. "An accomplished pianist, I guess?"

"Hmm?" The Doctor actually looked intrigued, and, without even thinking about it, Serena found herself elaborating.

"I know I..." She just nervously laughed again, stroking a hand through her hair, wondering why she was even going along with this. "Don't really look like it, but I'm actually pretty good on the piano. I guess I'm a natural with any sort of keyboard, really..."

It took The Doctor a few very awkward seconds to realize she had cracked a joke, and he just nervously laughed along with it, making Serena groan with irritation. Who did this guy think he was, just... Asking her about her private life and her hopes and dreams!? Hopes and dreams that now seemed to amount to nothing at all, now that she had less than three months to do any of it...

She just sighed again, and shook her head. Maybe that was why she was putting up with this - she just wanted someone, anyone besides herself to know about it... "I was kinda slacking off with it lately, since I've been..." Serena's expression once again turned flinty and irritable. "Really freaking tired, and busy at work but... Well..." Her speech sort of trailed off there, the dark-haired technician turning morose and silent again, her expression drifting towards the floor. Her mood rapidly beginning to sour. "It's kind of a moot point now, isn't it?"

"I..." The Doctor nervously stammered.

"I don't want your sympathy." She snapped, a sudden flash of choler running through her veins, scowling at him the way a man wrongly condemned of a crime might scowl at his executioner.

"No, no, I just..." He took a deep breath. "I'm... Sorry. Like I said, I've never been... Particularly good with... Situations like this... I suppose it might help to be a bit more... Positive about-"

"Positive about dying?!" Serena didn't look too convinced, and The dark-skinned physician just tugged at his collar a bit.

"No, not... Like that..." He tried to salvage the situation a bit. "I suppose, well... It's... Not the most encouraging thing in the world, but, at the very least you were able to get... This much out of life, wasn't it? I'm sure you've already made some lovely memories throughout your life to look back on..."

Serena felt another flash of white-hot rage burning inside her, like a small spark igniting a towering inferno, and judging by the way The Doctor recoiled, she was clearly letting it bleed out into her face. Who the hell did he think he was?! The dark-haired technician fought down the urge to leap from this damn hospital bed and break that condescending dick's jaw. To make him hurt in a small fraction of the way she hurt. He visibly had at least twenty years on her, yet still burned with more life than she'd ever have...

Serena took a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself down a bit, with mixed success. It almost made her a bit jealous... The terminally ill cybersec-tech just started laughing a bit. It was a morose, bitter laugh, her psyche pushed to the limit of madness. Only yesterday, she'd dismissed that old man's words as stupid ramblings, and today, she realized just how right he was...

She just took a deep breath, and shook her head, even cracking a smile. It felt a bit like a cool wind blew through her, tranquility suddenly coming much, much easier, the urge for violence subsiding as Serena just slowly laid back down in the hospital bed, taking in deep breaths of air as The Doctor looked on in disbelief, almost a bit astonished she hadn't leapt from the bed and knocked him out, but... What would the point be? She could work out her temper and beat the ever-loving shit out of him, and it wouldn't change a damn thing. Maybe that stupid physician and that crazy old man were right, she mused. She didn't exactly feel like dying angry. Serena took a deep breath, and tried closing her eyes. Maybe she should just try to take her death in stride, and appreciate the life she'd already managed to live...

A young girl with long, dark hair almost to her hips takes her head out of a dataslate, a slightly irritated look on her face, as the tapping at her window finally became too overwhelmingly annoying to ignore.

She moved through her darkened room, towards the window, sliding the glass panel out of the way and leaning out of the second-story apartment window into the streets below, where a gaggle of children are waiting outside.

"Hey, Serena!" A tomboyish girl in overalls and a striped shirt with reddish brown hair and freckles on her cheeks hollers up, cupping one hand over her mouth as an impromptu megaphone. The other visibly still holds a handful of gravel. "Come out and play!" She yells, and Serena just shakes her head.

"I'm reading right now!" The dark-haired girl yells back. "I'll come out and play some other time!" She just ignored the disappointed looks on her friends' faces and the groans coming from outside, and shut the window, quickly disappearing back into the shadows to get back to her book.

...

A teenage girl with dark hair coming down to her shoulders lights up a cigarette, the rolling paper almost as black as her 'do, the orange embers merging with gray smoke as she takes a puff from it, and exhales, letting the dark trail drift up into the ceiling of the girls' bathroom as she taps the cigarette with her hand, depositing the ashes into the sink.

"So yeah, like I was saying," recounts her dirty-blonde haired partner-in-crime as she takes a drag off her own cigarette. Her brand's paper is white, with a teal-coloured band close to where the filter was. Serena liked Nightsticks, this girl liked Neohafens. It was a semi-occasional source of conflict. "I was planning on heading down to Cyberia tonight with a few buddies of mine, you wanna come with?"

"Cyberia?..." Serena responded, not sounding too enthusiastic about it. "Not my kinda hangout..." The dark-haired girl took another drag off her dark-coloured cigarette. "I'll pass."

"What, seriously?" The blonde girl looks a bit disappointed, and Serena doesn't look like she cares too much.

"Yeah, seriously." The Dark-haired girl replies. "Anyways..." She starts heading towards the door, rubbing the half-smoked cigarette out and stashing it in her uniform's jacket for later, leaving her blonde-haired accomplice in the dust. "I'm gonna head back to class...."

...

A college-aged girl with a dark, neat bob cut leans against the old-century style brick wall of the university's main building, waiting for... Something while idly taking puffs off her cigarette, the paper black to match her hair, staring off into space, watching the crowds go by, watching the vibrant city lights beyond the campus' walls, watching the dull, gray sky, consistently the colour of a busted-up old trideo rig that needed re-tuning, dazing off a bit...

"Serena?!" A voice catches her off-guard, her eyes going wide as she snaps out of her reverie, deposited back into the real world with all the grace and elegance of a massive rock stoving in the engine bay of a sedan. She turns around to face him, an awkward, surprised smile on the girl's face as she recognizes him immediately, laughing nervously as she quickly pops the cigarette in her mouth, getting the little rolled-up tube out of sight, fighting the urge to flinch as the hot embers singed her cheek. One thing about him she remembers very clearly - he always disapproved of her smoking habit...

"So... Er..." The dark-haired girl just laughs again as the boy gives her a funny look. He's got a do of sandy, slightly messy blond hair, and freckles on his cheek that gave him a demeanour not too unlike that of a farm boy from the old century. He was about the last person she'd have expected to be pursuing a career in computer science, but, regardless, here he was. "What's up?" She asks.

"Well, I was just kinda wondering..." The farm-boy laughs a bit earnestly, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "Since we've got a long weekend next week and all, if you wanted to... Err... Do something? Like, if we don't have too much homework-"

"Err..." Serena locks up, trying her best to not look anxious and uncertain even while her stomach feels like it's been made host to a whole colony of butterflies.

"I... Uh... Don't think I can, sorry..." She responds, feeling a slight wince of pain as she does so, but... The thought of the alternative just fills her with fear and nervousness and the instinct to turn around and bolt at a full sprint. "My folks are dragging me back home for the weekend, and I'll be pretty busy after that..." She puts on an awkward laugh. It's a complete lie, but right now she can't think of anything else.

"Oh..." The boy looks disappointed, and once again, Serena feels a wince of regret and remorse stab right through her heart, trying her hardest not to flinch. "All... Right, I... Have to get to class, so-"

"Yeah." The dark-haired girl responds, taking a deep breath and turning right around, giving him the cold shoulder in figure and in fact, as she starts heading towards the lecture hall's entrance. "Me too..." She says, like it's not obvious - they do go to the same classes, after all. Her breathing starting to pick up in pitch as she picks up the pace, eventually breaking into a sprint as she fished the half-smoked cigarette out from her mouth. The girl cursed a bit as her saliva made re-lighting it an impossibility, and cursed herself for... Messing up like that...

...

A woman with a dark pixie cut and a new leather jacket disinterestedly waits for the elevator with a pack of her co-workers. She probably wouldn't have even been with them in the first place were it not for the, well, unfortunate timing that meant she'd missed the last elevator and was forced to wait for the next one, all the while listening to the girls' inane chattering.

"Okay, so, why don't we just go there after work?" One of them, a tanned girl with dyed green hair in a side-part asks. Serena takes a look over at her - it's someone she doesn't remember too clearly, maybe she got shuffled around or got fired or even promoted some time ago. "Mark's club SHOULD be open tonight."

The dark-haired technician raises an eyebrow. Not that she really cares, mind, she's just idly curious as to where they're going with this. "So, it's a plan, then?" A cheerful-looking girl with red coloured hair tied into a short ponytail pipes up, to her co-workers' approval, and even in this hazy recollection she can still recognize Lisa's face.

"What about you, Serena?" She asks, and the disinterested, moody cybersec-tech's eyes suddenly flash open, taken right back into the real world as all eyes fell upon her. "Wanna come with?" The brunette asked, putting pressure on her seemingly out of nowhere, and Serena just awkwardly stammered a bit, unable to help feeling a bit irritated at being... Invited out like this. They barely even knew each other!

"I... Uh..." Still, Serena found it politic to avoid antagonizing her co-workers, and just put on an earnest, slightly nervous smile. "Sorry, I can't make it." She said, trying to sound as sincere as possible. "I've got plans tonight..." She neglected to elaborate on the fact those plans were to lurk on Strangeworld and read terrible horror novels.

Lisa looked a bit disappointed, while the green-haired girl just rolled her eyes, and the rest of them didn't look too surprised - her reputation as somewhat of a flake having already spread a bit, but Serena just took a deep breath, and turned away. She didn't really care that much. Why was she expected to go and 'hang out' with her co-workers, anyways? They were just her colleagues, nothing more, and to top it off she didn't really like them all that much. It wasn't like she was permanently burning bridges of social connection, anyways. If she ever changed her mind, it probably wouldn't be that hard to start being a social person, would it?... Serena just shrugged her shoulders, finding that, for the time being, she still didn't really care that much. It was her own choice, after all. It wasn't like she was forced to be an anti-social recluse for all her life...

"Oh, God..." With rather alarming speed, Serena sat right back up in the hospital bed, her pupils narrowed and the black bags under her eyes having intensified somehow, her expression morose and dejected and very very disappointed. With deep, drawn out, miserable groan, she leaned in and covered her restless-looking face with her hands, and uttered, "I've wasted my liiiife...", her tone somewhere between depressed and violently angry.

"Er..." The Doctor just had an uneasy, almost embarrassed look on his face, and his stammering really wasn't improving Serena's mood any, and the technician just took her hands down and stared at him with such intensity that she probably could have broken a window with her death glare.

"Oh, don't look at me like that!" She snapped, pointing resentfully towards the dark-skinned physician, projecting onto him a little. "How the hell was I supposed to know I was gonna be dead at the age of 24?! If I'd freaking known not to spend all the time I was gonna get as a shut-in, I would!... Have..." There was another deafening, awkward pause between the two of them, punctuated by Serena's heavy, deep breathing, and the battering of rain on the windows outside.

The Doctor just began to awkwardly sidle towards the door "I..." He took a deep breath, fidgeting a bit as Serena tracked him with her death glare. "Think I'll just head out now..."

"I think you should head out now, too." Serena curtly responded, the physician just coughed, and turned away, shaking his head and just going on his way, and it was only irritating Serena even more! Why the hell was he being so... Passive?! Was he just going easy on her because she was dying?! It was really starting to piss her off...

"Well, there's a call button on your bed if you need anything..." The Doctor turned towards the door, and Serena just clenched her teeth, feeling another wave of choler come over her. He could at least freaking look at her... Well, maybe that one WAS her fault, what with the death glare and all. "I've got a lot more patients to attend to," He continued, reaching for the doorknob. "So, try to make yourself comfortable-

SLAM!

The Doctor looked a bit surprised to see the door opening in front of him, and Serena didn't quite notice what was going on until she poked her head around the divider to see another figure coming into the hospital room, panting and visibly exhausted, like he'd just ran up a dozen flights of stairs to get here, which... The dark-haired technician turned over to the rain-spattered window, and the view of the city far below. He actually might have.

"Phew!" The man said, rather dismissively pushing past the now quite flabbergasted doctor and ignoring his demands to know, "Who the hell are you and what's going on?" in favour of dashing right over to Serena's hospital bed, with an earnest, eager smile on his bespectacled face, the tails of his lab-coat trailing behind him. "Sorry I'm late - I came as soon as I heard the news, but I had some car trouble, and-"

"Uuuuhh..." Serena just murmured, wearing a look of stupefied confusion - and alarm. "I think I agree with the doctor - who the hell are you-?"

"Oh!..." The newcomer just laughed a bit, digging through his pockets. "Where ARE my manners? I haven't even introduced myself yet..." He said, pulling out a brass-coloured cardholder from his jeans and producing a set of business cards, quickly handing one to both physician and patient, Serena's eyes lidding a bit as she read the name off hers'. "Gabriel McGarahann?" She said, still a bit confused, his identity alone not really answering too many questions.

"That's DOCTOR Gabriel McGarahann to you." Gabriel flashed a wry smile, as he extended a hand over Serena's bed, and it took the programmer a few seconds to realize she was supposed to shake it - which did give her a few seconds, all the while getting a better look at the, er, other doctor.

Dr. McGarahann looked a few years older than she was - maybe almost a decade and a bit - and had very messy, walnut brown hair drawn back into a ponytail, and his ears framed by short-cut sideburns. His fashion sense was a little... Well, to use the vernacular, 'wack', with a multi-hued, tie-dyed necktie over a blue pinstriped dress shirt half-tucked into a pair of jeans. He reminded her a bit of a chemistry teacher she'd had back in high school, but somehow even less grounded in reality. "and today's your lucky day, Serena..." He continued, adjusting his glasses.

The dark-haired cybersec-tech just sat there, paralyzed, a morose, grim, awkward look on her face, as Gabriel just stared at her all earnest and expecting her response, which, would leave him waiting through damn near a minute of awkward silence. "Are you fucking serious?!" Serena finally piped up, her tone flushed with indignation and resentment. "Do you have any goddamn clue what just happened?"

"I actually do." Once again, Gabriel flashed a wily, self-satisfied grin like a cat who'd caught a particularly juicy sparrow. "But I should probably explain myself first." He gestured over to the card, still in Serena's hand, and she just groaned and continued to read off it.

"I'm with Bathrette Beautronics' Department of Special Projects." Gabriel continued, as Serena just raised an eyebrow. "We're a specialist division of R&D." The scientist explained, and the programmer mused that he probably was, considering he'd put 'roboticist, biotechnologist, and nanotechnologist' on his business card, and she was pretty sure those last two weren't even real words.

"I've been working on a very... Critical project for quite some time now... I'll get straight to the point." He said, rather offhandedly pointing towards her as Serena raised an eyebrow. "You're a perfect fit for testing it out. I get sent a memo whenever a patient with this type of condition comes in, and-"

"Err..." The dark-haired programmer just eyed him up suspiciously. "What?"

"Did I stutter?" The scientist just laughed a bit. "I know, you've probably got a few questions like-"

"Why should I be your lab rat?" Serena finished his sentence, and Gabriel looked pleasantly surprised at that.

"Well, for one..." He just laughed, his expression and tone viciously sweet like envenomed honey, as he produced a dataslate from his labcoat. "You don't really have a choice." Gabriel responded, showing Serena the screen with a playfully earnest smile on his face. "See this?"

"Err..." Serena just squinted her eyes a bit to read all the fine print. "What is it?-"

"It's an employment contract - specifically, YOUR employment contract." Gabriel responded, and a look of worry flashed on Serena's face - suddenly, she was getting a very bad feeling.

"Article 35, Section 3 dictates that, in the event of terminal illness, near fatal mutilation, brain death, persistent coma, or other situations of 'minimal hope', Bathrette Beautronics reserves the right to use you and-stroke-or your body as a test subject and-stroke-or raw material for scientific experimentation."

"So..." The programmer looked on edge, disbelieving and a bit disturbed. "I HAVE to do this... Or lose my job."

"Or get sued into the ground, but I don't think it'll come to that..." Gabriel just laughed again, and Serena flashed him a glare. His spirited attitude was really starting to piss her off. "Since I think you're gonna want to do this."

"Oh?" She responded, her tone thick with sarcasm and scorn. "And how are you gonna do that, master negotiator? I AM dying, you know. It's not like I care about being sued."

"It might have something to do with the fact that my... Procedure can... Well..." He broke eye contact, just for a second, and Serena raised an eyebrow. "It's not EXACTLY a cure, but if everything goes well, you definitely won't be doing any dying anytime soon."

A flash of light seemed to twinkle in Serena's eyes, the programmer's face blanking out for a moment as she registered what had just been said. "What did you just..." She responded, breathing deeply and heavily, the words ringing around in her head, and feeling so unreal, like she'd waltzed from one dream into another. "Say-"

"I said," The mad scientist just laughed a bit, leaning in over her hospital bed again, with a massive, self-satisfied grin on his face. "I can keep you from dying, Serena. Are you SUUUUUURE you don't wanna go through with this?"

"I..." She took a deep breath, clutching her temple, finding the room beginning to spin a bit, like she'd had a few too many strong drinks in too short a time frame.

An awkward, almost desperately hopeful smile started to curl up at the corners of her mouth no matter how hard she tried to suppress it, a pessimistic niggling doubt at the back of her mind telling her, "This can't be real..." Serena took a few long, deep breaths, trying to calm herself down, and Gabriel just cracked another earnest smile.

"Want me to pinch you?" He asked, and Serena just furrowed her brow and looked away, though, she still couldn't suppress a small grin. "I wouldn't have come all this way just to tease you, you know - even if it would probably be pretty funny."

"It just..." She just groaned a bit at that last comment. "Feels... Unreal." Serena took a deep breath again, a tired expression on her face as she lay right back down in the hospital bed, the stark, fluorescent lights overhead intensifying the dark bags under her eyes.

"Today's been... Terrible." She added. "Collapsing in the elevator, finding out I'm dying of cancer, and now..." She looked down, over at Gabriel - and his smile - once again, the labcoat-clad scientist looking somehow simultaneously fitting and foreign to this hospital environment. "This. It just feels..."

"Good?" Gabriel asked, which only earned him a hateful glare from his would-be patient.

"Why the hell would it feel good?!" She snapped, sitting up with a speed and anger that made an attack plane look slow and cool-tempered. The Doctor behind him just looked awkward and nervous, Gabriel didn't even flinch.

"Because..." The scientist just laughed again. "Like I said, you're probably the luckiest girl in the world today. It's not every day a miracle breakthrough comes along for your condition just as you're dying from it..."

She took a few more deep breaths, suppressing her choler, and trying to relax, laying back down on the hospital bed. Gabriel's speech reminded her of the old man's words of wisdom, a burning sensation roaring within her, rolling in her gut, coursing through her nerves, setting her very mind ablaze. It was a new sensation - something she really wasn't even sure how to put a finger on, but, the closest thing she could think of was, 'hope'.

The dark-haired programmer's pupils narrowing and her gaze shifting towards the window, of the oppressive rain and gaudy neon lighting of the city outside. It was, at the same time, a paralyzing, cloying feeling. The more she thought of Gabriel's 'offer', the more she was finding - to her horror - that she was beginning to consider it - no, more than that. Serena just took another deep breath and clutched her head, the room feeling like it was about to start spinning again. Her mind spun around with nervousness and hope in equal measure, and the persistent smell of antiseptic all around her was really starting to make her sick.

This whole thing was just too good to be true, it was shifty as hell, she found herself profoundly uncomfortable with the way she was... Contractually obligated to serve as a lab-rat for this procedure, and she definitely didn't like Gabriel's attitude, either. It was too... Nice. It really irked her a bit how upbeat and chipper he was being while she was dying. Yet, despite all that, in spite of her suspicions and reservations, that burning feeling still welled up inside her like a volcano, her anxiousness and apprehension drowned out by hope and regret and... Desire, and she couldn't stop herself from saying, "I want to live..."

Gabriel just flashed a smile, and Serena felt like a lead weight had settled in her stomach. It was hardly a reassuring one, even if he looked a bit like he was trying to be that way. His grin was far too... Eager for her liking. "I was hoping you'd see it that way." The scientist responded, and Serena just laughed nervously a bit, wondering if she'd just made a mistake.

"Everything's almost in place..." Gabriel turned over towards one of his assistant surgeons, and Serena took another deep, nervous breath. The cold, sterile metal surface of the operating table under her only was worsening the chill crawling up her spine, that apprehensive feeling that she was making a horrible mistake having never really left her. If anything, as the day went on, it'd only intensified, peaking in the immediacy, as she lay naked under the stark, white floodlights in the surgical theatre, save for a pair of trodes over her head, a cold wind blowing in and tingling her bare skin, making her shiver a bit - though, that may have just been the nervousness again.

After giving her 'consent' for the procedure, Gabriel wasted exactly zero time getting everything ready. Within ten minutes there had been an ambulance readied to transport them all right back to where everything had began: Bathrette Beautronics' corporate headquarters. Serena had asked why they weren't doing this 'procedure' in the hospital - whatever it was. Gabriel had been very tight-lipped about the exact details - and his reasons were twofold. One, the castle was where all his equipment was, and it WAS a very specialized procedure. Two, the exact details were highly classified - Serena needed level 3 security clearance to even know what he was doing, which just made her even more nervous.

The dark-haired programmer didn't even know the Research and Development department HAD a surgical theatre, but, as Gabriel explained, where else would you install cybernetics? Though, the company's chief interest was in cosmetics, makeup, and other beauty products, of late Bathrette had been trying to establish a foothold in the market for cybernetic enhancements. However, as Serena looked around the operating theatre, she couldn't exactly see any mechanical arms or skull-mounted energy weapons ready for installation. Just a bunch of computer equipment, tanks full of... Something, and surgical tools on a rack that made her feel a bit nervous to look at.

Gabriel had said - rather inadvertently - that her treatment was to involve a revolutionary new piece of cybertechnology, but, like with much of everything else about this, he'd been tight lipped on what exactly it was, and all Serena could do was take another deep breath and try to steady her nerves. She wanted to live, right?...

Still... The dark haired programmer looked around the surgical theatre, at Gabriel and his assistants as they moved to and fro setting all their complicated-looking medical and computer equipment up. The scientist and his minions were clad in scrubs and surgical caps, their faces obscured with goggles and face-masks that gave her an impression like alien invaders prepared to cut her up and stick her full of probes... She just clenched her teeth and shuddered awkwardly. That... WAS sort of what they were going to be doing, wasn't it?...

The dark-haired programmer just took another deep breath, and looked down at herself, at her own naked, exposed body resting on the operating table like a corpse on a morgue's slab, another shiver crawling up her spine from the cold metal below her, a tingling sensation all over her skin from the cold, sterile air. It was... Awkward to say the least, and she didn't believe for a second it was truly necessary for her to be in the nude. Only the sudden will to live had kept her in place, submitting to these... Arcane procedures. Still...

Serena flinched, closing her eyes, clenching her teeth, and turning her head the other way, a nervous, uncomfortable grimace on her face. This was just... Embarrassing! The surgical techs weren't really... Eyeing her up - at least not for more than a moment, so thank God for small mercies, at least, but she still felt a bit mortified having herself... On display here - especially since... Well... Serena took another deep breath, her irritated-looking eyes lidding a bit and a slight blush coming on her cheeks.

Her body wasn't really, well, 'nude model material.' She wasn't overweight by any stretch of the word, but she didn't exercise much, and it showed. The dark-haired girl generally looked out of shape, and she wasn't sure if it was just being naked or her... Unappealing, soft-looking figure that was embarrassing her more. Serena just sighed, and shrugged on the operating table. More evidence of a wasted life, she supposed. While her colleagues were hitting the gym, she'd been messing around on her cyberdeck.

Serena raised an eyebrow, the embarrassment - momentarily - receding as she realized something, a faint glimmer of hope welling up inside her again like the beacon of a lighthouse on a foggy night. There wasn't any reason why she couldn't start working out, right?... There wasn't any reason she couldn't become a master pianist, there wasn't any reason she couldn't claw her way to a position of power and influence, out of a one-room apartment, eating textured soy protein and mealworm powder and that Advent beef crap...

She took a deep breath, steadying her nerves, turning her head back towards the complicated-looking medical equipment the surgical techs had wheeled in. The thought hit her again - she might not be dying, after all... She just had to survive... Whatever it was Gabriel was going to do to her.

"So... Uh..." Serena's face turned red again, the embarrassment creeping back up on her as another cold breeze blew through the operating theatre, caressing the curves of her naked body in an icy chill, reminding the cybersec-tech that her bare form was on display to all onlookers. "Are you gonna sedate me soon, or what?" She turned towards Gabriel, her voice choleric but dripping with discomfort and nervousness.

"Well... Not quite..." The scientist paused in the middle of hooking up some odd-looking tubing on one of the tanks, while another technician was busy calibrating a large, bulky-looking cyberterminal, and a third started applying scanner patches to her head and body, a flash of embarrassed anger welling within the dark-haired programmer - she couldn't see the man's face, but was juuust fairly certain from the way he was touching her that a massive, enthusiastic grin lay plastered on his face behind that mask. He was applying the patches way, way too intimately for her liking, and Serena fought down the urge to smack him away. She wanted to live, right?... A little bit of sexual harassment was something she could endure.

"We can't use any drugs." Gabriel explained. "It would adulterate your bloodstream, and that would cause... Some pretty alarming complications." Serena raised an eyebrow at that. He paused for a moment, his face going a bit awkward, before settling right back into his usual upbeat, amicable attitude. "So, we're gonna go for a more high-tech solution."

"Hmm?" Serena looked a bit curious, and Gabriel just pointed towards the trodes on her head.

"We're going to turn off a few of your senses while we do our thing." The scientist explained as he got back to work with the tubes, and Serena felt a cloying, nervous feeling in her gut. Something about that didn't sit a bit right to her. "The tech is a bit similar to the sensory override you're used to while using a thought interface. It'll be completely painless... Well..." He paused for just a moment, stroking his chin "Completely painless, if my calculations are right this time."

An uncomfortable, nervous smile came on Serena's face, the anxious feeling inside her only growing stronger. "This time?" She repeated.

Gabriel, chipper as ever and dodging her question completely, just turned over towards the assistant manning the terminal, asking, "Is everything ready?"

"Everything's ready for your input, Dr. McGarahann." He dutifully replied, and Gabriel just flashed an enthusiastic smile, neatly contrasting the awkward one Serena was wearing.

"Alright, put her under, I'll be there to direct the nanites as soon as I've hooked up the connection." Gabriel responded, and Serena's eyes went wide, the words registering in her mind for the first time, a veil being lifted off a part of this mystery, and the dark-haired programmer suddenly found herself very, very concerned.

"What nanites-" She tried to ask, though, she only made it that far before a familiar, egg-on-brain pulse bobbed through her psyche and her tongue fell slack in her mouth, but the feeling was far from reassuring. It was as far from the familiar weightlessness she knew came with using a thought interface. If anything, she felt even heavier. It was still a familiar feeling, however, and it filled her with dread and panic.

As a child, she would, on rare occasions, be struck by sleep paralysis. Where the mind wakes before the body does, and Serena recognized it in an instant. Her eyes would probably be going wide in fear if her nerves were even capable of it. In spite of her urge to see what was going on, she couldn't look around, in spite of her urge to leap from the surgical table and run as far as she could from this hellish operating theatre, her body stayed anchored right where it was, and, in spite of her urge to scream as Gabriel leaned over her, a reassuring smile on his face that utterly failed to distract from the tube in his hands, she was completely silent.

The spiked, syringe-like tip glimmering in the stark lights overhead, as Gabriel cheerily told her, "I know you can't move right now, but try to hold still anyways," as he lowered the tube's end towards her, and, to Serena's horror, he stuck the needle right into her neck, the syringe going through flesh as readily as if he were carving up an Advent Beefsteak, and she felt nothing, failing to even make a single sound as an ethereal, uncanny red-tinted saline-like liquid began to flow through the tube, into her neck, into her body, and her vision began to darken, an overpowering need to scream out in terror consuming, her, but she didn't even make a whimper before finally blacking out.

Serena clutched her breast, clenching her teeth and sweating bullets, her heart beating uncomfortably hard, feeling like it was on the verge of exploding right out of her body. A writhing, spasmodic panic permeating her whole being like worms made of napalm, setting her ablaze with horror and alarm, finding herself doubled-over, clasping her heart with one hand and her stomach with the other, trying to suppress that horrible, overpowering anxiety in her stomach that was threatening to make her vomit all over the...

Serena just squinted her eyes, and tried to figure out exactly what it was she was standing on. It looked like sand, but it was all wrong - it was tinted a deep red, and stuck together in clumps like the ocean had passed over it, staining her loafers and slacks with its brownish, cinnabar tone. Serena really couldn't explain why she was dressed for a day at work, but that was about the last thing on her mind right now.

The dark-haired programmer peered into the cloying, oppressive darkness around her as she tried to step forwards, taking in deep mouthfuls of stagnant, sulphurous-tasting air and momentarily taking the hand off her stomach to wipe a fountain's worth of sweat off her brow. Her skin felt all clammy and cold, but the air all around her felt hotter than the Amazon desert, and Serena wasn't sure if she'd pass out from heatstroke or from fear first.

She squinted her eyes again, her nervousness only increasing in pitch as her heart-rate intensified and her breathing picked up in pace to the point of hyperventilation as she noticed a shape in the darkness slowly coming her, the dark-haired programmer finding her legs locked in place, unsure if she should approach or flee, but she found she could do neither, only stand and watch as the shape got closer and closer, getting clearer and clearer.

She felt a bit reassured when she could make out a human outline, and when the figure finally got close enough for her to make out any clear details in the darkness she felt elated, a relieved smile finally came to her face, and for the first time since... Whenever, she felt at ease, her heart beginning to slow down as she recognized a familiar, freckle-adorned boy's - admittedly handsome, even obscured by the darkness - face, and that messy, blond hair of his, and she just laughed anxiously, waving her hand and calling out, "Hey, -!"

But he just stopped her with a shake of his head, the dark-haired programmer not even able to call out his name before he said, "Who are you?"

She just stood there, stupefied, frozen like a deer in the headlights, unable to figure out how to respond to that. Had he forgotten her?... "It's... me..." She nervously responded, pointing at herself with her index finger. "Serena, remember-"

Once again, he shook his head, and Serena felt a cold wind of anxiousness blowing through her. "I don't know anyone by that name." The farm boy responded.

"We went to college together, remember?!" Serena called back to him, her voice now filled with fear and uncertainty and a tiny bit of irritation, but the farm-boy didn't look shaken at all, and just turned away.

"I was looking for my girlfriend..." He replied, and Serena felt a flash of pain in her gut, a crushing feeling of guilt and regret overwhelming her, and the dark-haired programmer found herself doubled over again, clutching her stomach, trying not to vomit, and a look of despair on her face as she watched him slowly walk back into the darkness.

"Wait!" She yelled, calling with an outstretched arm, but if he could hear her, he wasn't paying her any attention, and simply disappeared back into the darkness, leaving Serena behind, her heart picking up in intensity again, and, acting on instinct, she turned around as well, heading over that bloody sand in the opposite direction from him.

She couldn't even tell how long she'd been walking through these shadows - had it been a minute, an hour, or more? Time seemed to go runny... Wherever she was, but she paused in her tracks once again, her spirits momentarily lifted by another figure approaching her in the darkness.

Serena raised an eyebrow. It was two figures. Two human figures - one male and one female - that were slowly getting closer and closer, and, when they got within range of identification Serena's eyes went wide, and, even though she thought she should feel reassured, something about it made her... Worried. She recognized their faces, their hair - the man's neat and short-cropped, the woman's hanging down to her hips, both as black as hers' - and reached out for them, calling out, "Mom! Dad! I-"

"Hmm?..." The two of them hummed in unison, and something uncomfortable stirred in Serena's stomach as she could see their brows both furrow, their expressions irritated and hostile, and the cybersec-tech took a deep, nervous breath. "What the hell are you talking to us for?" The woman asked, her tone curt and hurtful, as sharp as an assassin's dagger and cold as a witches' heart. "You should be ashamed to even be here, you little shit!"

Serena's eyes went wide, and she found herself taking a step back, her mother's words striking her like razor blades over her skin, and the programmer took a few deep breaths as she clenched her stomach again, asking "What-"

"What does she mean?" Her father spoke up, his tone just as bitter and caustic as his wife's, striking into their daughter with all the force and wickedness of a headsman's axe. "She means, 'We have no daughter', you worthless waste of space!" He tore into her, jabbing viciously into her chest with his index finger, and Serena had to fight down tears at the sight of it, pleasant, warm memories spent with her mother and father flashing through her mind, sharply contrasting with the display of vitriol before her.

"You've done nothing but waste your goddamn life on worthless vacuity, and brought shame to your family! You have some goddamn nerve even showing up here, young lady!"

"I... But..." Serena tried to plead, choking back tears, fighting back the urge to collapse, to flee into the darkness around her, to do... Something, ANYTHING to get away from this. "I... I finished college, I've got a decent job, I'm pretty good on the piano-"

"Oh, shut up!" Her mother struck back, silencing her daughter with a vicious word. "Excuses, excuses, excuses. Let me make this perfectly clear." She added, gesturing with her index finger. "Neither of us EVER want to see you again, you worthless piece of shit. Am I clear?"

"I-"

SMACK!

The sound of her mother's hand impacting her cheek reverberated throughout Serena's ears, the sound seeming to last an eternity as the force of the blow threw her back, falling into the crimson-coloured sand underneath her, a wet, squishing sensation on her back as the dark, reddish ichor stained the back of her shirt, contrasting with the tears that now began to wet the front of it. "I WISH I'D NEVER GIVEN BIRTH TO YOU!" Her mother yelled out, and though Serena cried out in anguish, she seemed deaf to her daughter's pleas.

"WAIT!" Serena yelled, extending an arm out from where she lay, sitting in the mulchy, wet red-coloured sand, reaching out for them, yet finding no purchase - her parents had already turned and left, walking back into the shadows, leaving her in the sand, ignoring her entirely, unfeeling and unflinching as she desperately called out, "MOM! DAD!... DON'T... GO!..." unwavering in their course, Serena's parents simply disappeared back into the darkness, and, slowly, the dark-haired programmer began to pull herself up from the wet sand, breathing heavily, clutching her heart and staining the front of her dress shirt, but she didn't care.

An overpowering, uncomfortable, anxious feeling ran through her entire body like a live wire, and, drunkenly, she stumbled after them, chasing into the darkness, wearily calling out for her mother and father, to no avail - they were long since gone into the darkness, and, if they even could hear her, they didn't seem to care much, and salty tears mixed with the ferrous stains on her clothes as Serena blindly probed through the darkness, reaching out with one hand and clutching her heart with another, trying to keep it from blowing a hole right through her chest.

Time and distance once again seemed to go runny at the edges as Serena found herself all alone - once again, she couldn't really say for certain how long she'd been chasing after the spectre of her parents, nor how off course she'd gotten - between her anxieties, the heat, and the mulchy, wet sand underneath her shoes, she couldn't even tell where she was going - there were no landmarks, there was no elevation in the terrain, and the oppressive, cloying darkness wouldn't have let her see anything even if there were, yet... She paused, squinting her eyes again at a shape in the distance. She could see another figure, rapidly on the approach, and a sensation of dread welled up inside her, wondering - and fearing - exactly who she might see.

As the figure drew into view, however, Serena just looked... Confused. Slightly agitated, but mostly confused. She remembered his face like it was yesterday - because it was. That gnarled, bitter, wrinkled, vigorous old face, thinning hair, large drooping moustache, were familiar enough, though, rather than barely contained anger, the old man's face was twisted in a grim, vicious, ironic smile, and his cold, yet fiery eyes were busy staring daggers into Serena's, who couldn't quite decide whether to be nonplussed, scared or...

A sudden flash of choler came onto her face, as she snapped, "What?!" Or to just be angry. Something about this whole thing was really starting to irritate her. "I..." She took a few deep breaths, a bit overwhelmed. "Where the hell is this?!" Serena looked all around, into the oppressive, impenetrable darkness surrounding her. "Who the hell are you?" She turned back to the old man, matching his overpowering, burning stare with her own. "Why the hell am I here?"

Her questions, though, far from what she was expecting, just made the old man laugh. "Why the hell indeed, Serena." He responded, stressing the word 'hell' in a way that made her look a bit concerned.

"I... Er..." She stammered a bit, the vigour and choler bleeding out of her, just leaving the apprehension and anxieties below the surface. "How do you know my name?"

"Oh." The old man's grin intensified, and Serena found herself taking a step back. "I know the names of everyone in here - I ought to." He just laughed sardonically as he casually pointed a finger at her and said, "You're dead, Serena. This is hell."

Her composure shattered like a brick thrown through a plate glass window, the dark haired programmer flinched back, her eyes going wide, staring at her hands and recoiling when she realized they were covered in blood. Her own, she instinctively realized. Her breathing picked up in pitch as she looked down at her body, her shirt and pants covered in her blood, too.

She started taking a few steps back, clutching her heart, feeling like she was about to collapse, breathing that stagnant, hot air all around her so quickly she could barely take any of it in at once, and she looked all around, at the blood-soaked sand under her feet, and began to scream. She closed her eyes, clutched her head, and broke out at a dead sprint, screaming her lungs out as the the horror overtook her, the wet splattering of blood under her feet as she ran, a deep, burning pain in her stomach and in her heart as she ran into the darkness, the devil's vicious, mocking, maleficent laughter ringing in her ears as she screamed, to no avail or succour...

GASP!

Serena sprung up in the hospital bed, eyes wide, mouth agape, breathing heavily and clutching her heart, as if trying to stop the organ from beating right out of her chest. The dark-haired programmer had broken out in a cold sweat and a writing feeling of panic and alarm permeated her whole body, but began to slowly settle down as her brain gradually made a return to the world of wakefulness, and she began to take in where she was.

It was another unfamiliar hospital room, this one's walls painted a dull, sea-green. That much was obvious from the persistent, nauseating smell of antiseptic once again filling her nose, the scanner patches stuck to her body hooked up to another analyzer cyberterminal, and the fact that, once again, she'd been clothed in a patient's gown.

The room was much smaller - only fitting a single bed, and the view outside her window was different, yet... Serena squinted her eyes and peered out into the misty city lights beyond as the rain battered down on the glass. It was familiar, and she couldn't quite put her finger on why until she realized it, her eyes going wide with surprise. This was the view from Bathrette's Corporate headquarters.

The dark-haired programmer just exhaled, and lay right back down on the hospital bed. So, she was still here. Serena just closed her eyes, and drew the thin, sterile covers over her, trying to relax a bit and calm down. She still didn't know what to make of. Whatever had just happened. The memory was still hazy, but she could only really describe it as a waking nightmare. Even now, the dark-haired programmer still couldn't be completely sure if she was even alive or not - but it did hurt when she was pinched her arms, so, that had to count for something. Serena just stretched her arms and shoulders out and reflexively covered her mouth, expecting a yawn, but...

Her eyes flashed wide open again, and she once again sat up in the hospital bed with alarming speed, a look of surprise and astonishment on her face as she realized it, staring down at her hands. There wasn't any yawn. She wasn't even tired, either. For the first time in a while, she actually felt... Energetic.

A small smile crept on her face at the realization. It was a deficiency she'd just gotten used to, and now feeling it lifted off her shoulders felt... Nice. Not quite a deaf man hearing music for the first time, but Serena just found herself anxiously laughing all the same in between deep breaths of air. She actually felt... Good.

Brimming with vigour, like she could go run a marathon, climb a tree, do... Anything that didn't just involve screwing around on the matrix or going straight to bed after work. Though... Her eyes narrowed, and the smile faded from her face, replaced with a look of anticipation and slight anxiousness. Did that mean whatever Gabriel did... Worked?...

SLAM!

The Door shot open and Serena's eyes immediately darted to the vacant frame, where a certain ponytailed scientist was doubled over, propping himself up on the doorframe and completely out of breath, like he'd just ran up a dozen flights of stairs again, yet still, there was a massive, relieved grin on his face that just made Serena's eyes lid a bit, and a slightly annoyed smile come on her face. 'Well, speak of the devil', she thought, even if the phrase made her a bit... Uneasy for reasons she couldn't really describe...

"How are you feeling?" Gabriel asked, as soon as he could stand himself back upright, reflexively adjusting that gaudy, multicoloured necktie of his, his voice still peppered with just a touch of exhaustion. "I came as soon as the scanners showed you woke up - I was..." He just laughed nervously. "Hoping you would soon."

"Err..." Serena just raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean by, soon?" She asked, her tone suddenly filled with concern. "Was I out for a while?"

"Almost a week." The brown-haired scientist responded, and Serena's eyes went wide. "Some of the other techs were a bit... Concerned you might not ever wake up, but..." He just laughed again, which definitely didn't reassure Serena one bit. "I'm glad you did - the whole procedure was... A bit... Odd... Even by the standards of bleeding edge experimental medicine"

"How odd?" Serena asked, her tone flat and scrutinizing, and Gabriel just laughed nervously and ruffled up the back of his neck.

"Well, for one." His tone was half-joking, though it was still making Serena a bit nervous. "After I hooked up the nanite dispenser, you just started... Screaming." That just made her go a bit pale. "It was a bit distracting." Gabriel just laughed a bit, and it took Serena a few seconds of staring at him funny before she realized he was just cracking a joke. "But that's all water under the bridge, isn't it?"

"Er-"

"But yeah, how do you feel?" Gabriel asked, as the scientist walked up towards the analyzer cyberterminal Serena was hooked up to, producing a dataslate from his labcoat again and connecting it to the analyzer. "No exhaustion? no aches? no hot flashes?"

Serena just shook her head. "It's gonna sound weird, but..." She just stretched her arms out again, a small smile coming onto her face. "I feel... Good. Like I've got energy to burn." Gabriel just looked simultaneously proud and relieved to hear that, and he looked even happier to check his dataslate and read over the printout of Serena's vitals.

"The spread of your cancer's been completely halted!" Gabriel proclaimed, and Serena's eyes widened, the dark-haired programmer taking a deep sigh of relief that wouldn't quite last when he started reading off the rest of her chart. "No brain damage, no internal hemorrhaging, no heart inflammation, no kidney failure, all vital signs nominal, and your skin looks... Flushed... Well, better than before, at the very least... I..."

The scientist just took a deep breath, and let loose a long, relieved laugh that was just making Serena feel a bit anxious. "It might be a bit too early to say definitively, but..." He took a deep breath, clenched both his fists and, with a massive, elated grin on his face, looked towards the sky and proclaimed. "It's a success!..." before letting loose a massive, relieved, ever so slightly mad laugh that just put Serena visibly on edge. "I've... Done it!" He yelled. "Ophelia, do you hear me! I've finally done it!-"

"Hooold on a second..." Serena leaned in a bit closer, with a suspicious, look on her face. "Who the hell is Ophelia?" She asked, and Gabriel just looked a bit awkward at that, unable to meet her gaze. "And... Is heart inflammation and brain damage supposed to be... Common?!"

"Oh, I..." He just laughed nervously again, and adjusted his tye-dyed necktie while clearing his throat. "I wouldn't worry about that too much - I HAVE ironed out all the kinks for this procedure, and you know how it is with clinical trials - can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs, but, we've got bigger fish to fry here..."

The scientist just leaned in, a massive, enthusiastic, playful smile on his face, and Serena just leaned back, the dark-haired programmer wearing an awkward, uneasy expression. "Like I said," He continued. "It is a bit... Early to declare it a total success, and you DID say you feel like you've got a lot of energy, right?"

Serena just raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?..."

"Now, normally, after surgery you're supposed to get a lot of bed rest, but it has been a week, so..." The brown-haired scientist just laughed again. "Wanna run a few tests?"

The dark-haired programmer just looked simultaneously concerned and... Intrigued at that. "What sort of tests?" She asked.

Beads of sweat started to drift down towards Serena's face as she breathed in and out like a metronome, syncing up with the sounds of her feet hitting the treadmill below, as the machine's speakers emitted another bell-noise to show she'd just ran another kilometre, the programmer's eyes focused on the exercise machine's colourful display, her expression simultaneously shocked and... A bit proud.

She'd just completed a twenty kilometre run, and this was coming off a week's worth of bed rest and a life's worth of sitting around, playing on computers and reading books, and if the results weren't right in front of her eyes, she wouldn't even believe it herself. She scarcely exercised - her body was all untuned and soft - yet here she was, making a pace like a professional athletic sprinter. Part of it felt... Disturbing, but another part of her felt... Strangely proud.

It was as though her body had taken a complete one-eighty, and though her legs were starting to get sore, her abdomen burned with a sharp, stabbing pain, and she was absolutely covered in sweat, she just kept indomitably going forwards, all that physical strain having failed to even put a dent in that mysterious well of energy and endurance, and she still positively burned with vigour and drive, like some phantasmal source of energy was pushing her on...

Serena's expression shifted, turning contemplative - and a bit suspicious. Thinking about it for more than a second was just weirding her out - there was no way in hell this was natural, and as far as she knew, no treatment for her sort of blood cancer could create results like... Another bell rang, as her total clocked twenty-one kilometres. Like this.

Her eyes narrowed as she turned her gaze towards Gabriel, sitting in a nearby folding chair in the otherwise empty gymnasium filled with all sorts of weights and racks and exercise machines, the walls all lined with mirrors to better monitor one's form, the ponytailed, bespectacled scientist just watching her and writing down whatever results he was looking for onto his dataslate with the stylus. Despite the fact that this... Procedure had evidently been... Successful, there was still a lot he wasn't telling her...

"Okay..." The dark-haired girl's pace began to slow down, and the scientist just looked up from his dataslate, an intrigued look on his face as he adjusted the eyeglasses.

"Hm?" Gabriel asked, as Serena finally jumped down from the treadmill, her expression cool and collected, but visibly suspicious and very assertive, and the scientist couldn't suppress a small grin at that - which just pushed her into looking a bit annoyed.

"What did you even do?..." Serena got straight to the point, but paused, her speech trailing off a bit as she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, realizing that, up until now, she hadn't really had the opportunity to... Analyze herself.

Her skin looked relatively flushed and healthy again, having shed the alabaster pale, anemic complexion she'd had for a while, but she still had a head of very short-cut hair. Given the nature of the tests, she'd swapped out that hospital gown for a black tank top and a pair of blue gym shorts, but beyond a change of clothes she didn't feel like she looked all that different... Maybe a touch slimmer than she was before, and she could see a flash of red-

Her eyes went wide, and Gabriel just looked a bit awkward as she rapidly approached the mirror, close enough to touch it, taking deep breaths as she looked into eyes that were her own, yet, at the same time... Completely foreign. The eyes she remembered having were a dull, slate-blue, but the ones currently set in her skull were coloured a deep, vibrant crimson - the colour of freshly spilled blood.

"WHAT DID YOU DO!?" Serena snapped, quickly turning around and darting over to Gabriel's position faster than the scientist had been expecting, judging by the wide-eyed look of surprise on his face. He'd been quick enough to stand up, but not quite quick enough to avoid Serena grabbing him by that gaudy necktie of his and yelling, "WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO?! WHY ARE MY FREAKING EYES RED?! WHY CAN I SUDDENLY RUN TWENTY GODDAMN KILOMETRES STRAIGHT OUT OF BED?!"

"I..." He just laughed nervously and averted his gaze, trying to pull away - to avail, Serena just dragged his neck closer. "I don't suppose you'll listen and let it drop if I just say, 'don't worry about it', right?"

The dark-haired programmer just shot him an irritated stare. "No." She flatly responded.

"Well..." Gabriel just laughed again. "It IS above your security clearance, but... Well... I guess while it's inside you, you kind of DO have a need to know..."

She just raised an eyebrow, the momentary distraction allowing Gabriel to stealthily undo the knot on his necktie and allow the garment to come loose, leaving Serena holding a piece of dazzling, tie-dyed fabric as the scientist took a step back, taking in a deep, fresh breath of air now that she was no longer choking him. "It?..." She asked, seemingly more focused on what the scientist had put inside her rather than the fact that he'd just freed himself from her grip.

"I've inserted a colony of nanites into your bloodstream!" Gabriel triumphantly explained, and Serena's eyes went wide again - a vague, hazy, slightly traumatic memory of that word ringing in her ears. "Or, nanobots, if you'd prefer. Same thing, really - tiny, microscopic robots that can alter matter at the atomic level, and they've set up a 'hive of sorts in your heart!" He pointed over towards Serena's chest, coming scant millimetres away from touching her buxom. "They're hard at work keeping the spread of cancer contained, and the... Well..." He laughed nervously a bit, and Serena's eyes just lidded suspiciously again. "Everything else is probably helping to... Assuage the rest of the symptoms you'd probably been having - fatigue, migraines, anemia-"

"What do you mean," Serena leaned in forwards a bit, as Gabriel just leaned back. "Everything else?"

"Well..." He smiled nervously. "You see, there was a bit of... Corporate nonsense with the project."

She raised an eyebrow. "What kind of nonsense?"

"It's a bit complicated, but there was some budgetary issues, security concerns, and staff cuts in R&D so a few projects had to be merged. I was working on a nanotechnological medical procedure, and a colleague of mine was working on a nanotechnological augmentation to enhance physical abilities for use by police and military clients.

Then some budgets got cut, that guy ended up getting shuffled around, and his project ended up merging with mine, so, it had to do both things..." Gabriel just laughed again, and Serena's eyes went wide, simultaneously struck with wonder and fear, taking in deep breaths of air, as the realization crept up on her.

"So..." She just pointed at herself. "You put a super-soldier augmentation into my body?"

"Well, that's a bit of a cliché way of describing it," Gabriel joked, adjusting his glasses. "But I guess it's correct... Don't worry, don't worry!" He waved his hands taking a step back. "My goal was, and always has been to fix that sort of illness you had! The super-soldier stuff was always secondary, rest assured!"

Serena took another deep breath of air, and turned to face herself in the mirror again, holding up a hand to her eye and letting the words just ring around in her head. 'Super-soldier'... It was definitely disquieting, but, at the same time... A small grin began to form on her face. The dark-haired programmer found she couldn't suppress a feeling of... Liberation welling up inside her.

It was an exalting, joyous feeling, almost pleasant, the sharp contrast her life had taken in only a week. Only a week ago she'd been at the lowest she'd ever been, dying of cancer, gripped by despair and regret, and now... She took another deep breath, triumphantly clenching her hand into a fist. Not only had she been... Spared that fate, but she was... Superhuman now, wasn't she?

She could run twenty-one kilometres at a pace that would make Olympic athletes jealous like it was nobody's business, and... She was alive. More than alive, even... She turned back over towards Gabriel, a sharp contrast on her face compared to only seconds before, her expression brimming with vigour and exultation, and a hopeful, determined light burning in her eyes that just put a warm smile on the scientist's face. "So, what else do these... Nanites do?"

"I'm glad you asked!" Gabriel responded, looking particularly proud at that as he turned around and retrieved the dataslate off his chair. "Why don't I read off the list of features?..." He asked, scrolling down a bit with the stylus and adjusting his glasses with the other end of the tool as he cleared his throat and began his recital.

"Enhanced muscular development," Gabriel listed off, "Enhanced endurance, enhanced reaction time, enhanced fine motor control, low-light vision, rapid regeneration of body tissue, filtration and neutralization of airborne and blood-borne toxins, and, of course, the management and containment of cancerous and cystic cells in the body.-"

"And changing the colour of my eyes." Serena responded, pointing to her blood red irises, her tone sour and waspish, and Gabriel just laughed a bit.

"Well, that was an unexpected result, but not... An unacceptable one. So it's a bit low on the list of things to fix." Serena just groaned at that, and Gabriel continued. "I'm sure I could do a lot more with the technology, but, since these are first-generation nanite augmentations, I just decided to keep it simple."

"So that means..." Serena took another deep breath, a well of vigour and excitement springing up inside her. "I'm super strong, can run for hours, can heal any cuts or bullet holes or whatever, and won't die of cancer?"

"Aside from that last part, we'll still have to see..." Gabriel responded, stowing the stylus back in its holder. "That's just what I programmed the nanites do to, manufacturing hormones and performance-enhancing drugs directly in your bloodstream. We'll have to actually see how they work in practice, so..." A warm, enthusiastic smile crossed his face, and he adjusted his glasses once again. "Ready to get back to testing?"

There was a short pause, before Serena just took a deep breath and cracked a wry, eager grin, handing back Gabriel's necktie as she replied with a calm, yet enthusiastic, "Yeah..." The dark-haired programmer just flexed a - still underdeveloped, but Serena knew there was ample room for improvement - bicep and added, "Let's see what I can do now, eh?..."

Over the next few days, Serena was able to get very well-acquainted with the physical capabilities her new augmentation gave her - as well as the strangely extensive gymnasium complex at Bathrette's headquarters. From waking up, she'd extensively tested the limits of her newly acquired superhuman physique. The programmer ran and swam kilometres without stopping, lifted weights that just a week ago she would probably have failed to make budge an inch, set company records on the pull-up bar, and effortlessly climbing a rock-wall, barely even breaking a sweat.

All the while Gabriel stood nearby and recorded the results - and goodness knows what else - in his dataslate with a proud, relieved grin on his face that Serena was just finding... Infectious. Far from annoying her, she had to admit, she was finding the scientists' attitude a bit... Endearing, which was a bit weird, since just a few days ago that same attitude was pissing her off.

Serena figured out what the difference was fairly quickly. She wasn't dying anymore. It felt galling seeing him smile while she was in a hospital bed, freshly told she had three months to live. Now, though? That the cancer had been fixed and her body was able to surpass the limit of human possibility...

WHAM!

The sound of the heavy boxing gloves impacting against the punching bag echoed throughout the training room, the bag being launched a few inches into the air, before swinging back on a pendulum right into Serena's other gloved fist, a massive, enthusiastic grin on her face, beads of sweat running down her forehead and panting heavily, yet she still found no end to that bottomless well of energy she now possessed. It felt... Good. Satisfying. It felt like she'd been starving to death and now had a sumptuous buffet at her disposal. Her life had taken a complete one-eighty, from crippling despair to overflowing hope, and it felt like nothing could bring her down.

Well, except for when Gabriel had taken her over to the shooting range, and Serena had put more rounds into the ceiling than her target. A sour, irritated look had come on her face when the eccentric scientist just recorded the results and idly commented "Well, I probably should have expected that from a computer nerd."

Her rebuttal that he was just as much of a 'nerd' as she seemed to slide right off him, and Serena just clenched her teeth as she hit the bag even harder, panting loudly, the metronome of her punches beginning to slow down a bit.

So, what if she couldn't shoot straight? She was still a superhuman now, wasn't she? Just being able to... Live was making her feel good again, and it definitely helped that she could now bench press 200 kilograms and do a hundred pull-ups without breaking a sweat, even if... She took a quick break to wipe the accumulated sweat from her brow, her arms beginning to feel a bit worn down and... Fatigued. Serena just laughed a bit awkwardly. She probably just needed a bit more time to get used to these new... Capabilities of hers, right?

Still... She took a few deep breaths, a massive, energetic grin on her face as she turned back towards Gabriel, leaning back in a folding chair, taking results in his dataslate. Despite the man's... Weirdness, like he'd been popping uppers when she wasn't looking, she was beginning to kinda... Like his upbeat attitude. It WAS infectious - or, maybe it was just that life was just getting better all the time.

Serena just laughed a bit. Maybe he was right - she was the luckiest girl in the world, though, her laughter started to turn awkward and a bit anxious when she realized the eccentric scientists' smile was a bit... Off. He was starting to look a bit nervous - even concerned, and Serena could feel a familiar spike of anxiousness in her stomach as she stammered a bit... Was there... She took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. Something wrong-

"Serena?" Gabriel asked, and the dark-haired programmer just flinched back a bit, eyes wide taking in deep mouthfuls of air and finding her footing feeling a bit unsteady below her, needing to stretch a hand out to keep from tumbling down.

"Is everything-" The two of them responded in unison, cutting each-other off, before an awkward look crossed Serena's face, and Gabriel just broke out in raucous laughter. "No, but seriously." The scientist continued, standing up and putting the slate back in his labcoat. "How are you feeling right now?"

"Err..." Serena just raised an eyebrow, trying not to let the nervousness show on her face as she panted heavily, looking a visibly out of breath. "Fine, why?" She responded, not even bothering to think about it very hard.

"Well..." The scientist just laughed a bit awkwardly. "Because this IS still a very new and novel piece of biotechnology, and, I confess, we probably should have been monitoring your vitals more closely, but also because, well..." He rather nonchalantly pointed towards her, raising an eyebrow. "I don't mean to alarm you, but you HAVE been looking a bit more pale since yesterday..."

The dark-haired programmer's eyes went wide, and, reflexively, she held up a hand to her face, checking the pallor along her arm, taking in deep, steady gulps of air and feeling a bit unsteady as she studied the colour... Despite discovering her eyes had turned blood red, she'd still been a bit more... Delinquent about looking at herself in the mirror than any girl should be, especially after receiving an experimental medical procedure. Still, she'd been a bit caught up in enjoying herself, so it could be forgiven, couldn't it?... Serena just found her heart increasing in pitch, a feeling not unlike a lead weight settling in her stomach, as she swore under her breath. From her own frame of reference, at least, it... DID look a bit paler...

"Maybe..." Gabriel added, flashing a warmer, reassuring smile that consistently failed to do any reassuring. "We ought to stop the testing for a while and have a look-"

Acting on instinct, Serena just nervously, and awkwardly laughed him off, and the eccentric scientist was starting to look a bit weirded out. "No! No!" She casually dismissed him with a wave of the hand. "I feel fine!" She responded, but, judging from the way she was panting like she'd just sprinted up a dozen flights of stairs and was visibly having trouble keeping her balance, Gabriel was having a hard time believing her, and it was showing on his face.

"Serena." He added, audibly concerned as he put a hand on her shoulder. "Maybe you'd better-"

"NO!" She manically snapped, tearing his grip off and stepping back, before regaining her composure and realizing just how awkwardly the scientist was staring at her, and just tried to play it off with a laugh that failed to encourage either of them. "Nothing's..." She took another deep breath. "Wrong!... I just... Need a break, that's all!"

"Serena-"

"Don't worry, don't worry!" She just laughed, and waved her hand, then remembered she was still wearing the heavy bag gloves, took them off, then repeated the gesture, to Gabriel's worried amusement.

"That's my line." He flatly responded.

"Well, it's true!" Serena shot back, as she headed towards the door, her footing just a bit unsteady as she added, "I'll go get us some coffee, so-"

Her eyes widened, and a familiar feeling of dread came over her as she stumbled forwards, her vision going runny and pale at the edges, her heart feeling like it was about to beat right out of her chest as she began to hyperventilate, a horrible, familiar sensation coming over her as time seemed to slow as she realized she wasn't on her feet anymore, the ground beginning to rapidly approach as she tried to fight it, flushing her body with adrenaline and even managing to raise an arm to break her fall, but all for naught, as her vision started to darken and her limbs began to feel leaden and useless, and a pathetic, desperate grimace gripped Serena's face as she just weakly pleaded, "No!..." Under her breath, before hitting the gymnasium floor and once again losing consciousness quickly after...

When Serena found herself once again waking up beneath the stark, fluorescent neon lights of a hospital room, bathed in that nauseating antiseptic smell and clad once again in a surgical gown, she didn't waste any time with figuring out where she was and what exactly was going on and shot up, an expression of terror and despair burned onto her face, as she clutched her head in her hands, clenching her eyes shut, desperately screaming, "NO! NO! NO! NO NO NO NO NO NO!"

"SERENA!" Came a familiar voice, though, it held a less than familiar tone. Where the dark-haired programmer had expected something more cheery and upbeat, but the voice ringing in her head and the hands that grasped her by the shoulders, trying to shake her out of a state of panic and desperation - with mixed results - his usual sanguine attitude was still there, though, his demeanour felt much more firm and... Even a bit harsh, though, the sudden dissonance of Gabriel's attitude was about the last thing on her mind. "Get it together!" He yelled, and Serena's expression shifted again, turning bitter and choleric, and she tore the scientists' grasp right off her shoulders and pushed him away, nearly sending him tumbling into the wall by her bed.

"Get WHAT together?!" She yelled back, visibly angry and bitter and filled with despair, breathing heavily and on the verge of tears. "THIS IS YOUR FAULT!" Serena harshly pointed towards the eccentric scientist, propped up on the wall and regaining his footing. " 'The spread of the cancer's been completely halted' " She quoted in a mocking, sarcastic voice, complete with finger quotes to Gabriel's slight annoyance. "IT DIDN'T HALT A DAMN THING! YOUR DAMN NANITES DID NOTHING-"

"They did, and you're not dying." Gabriel harshly responded, and Serena recoiled back, her eyes wide and suddenly finding her tongue slack in her mouth, both at his words hitting her like a truck, and the fact that the scientist actually looked... A bit annoyed. It was weirding her out a bit - this was the first time she'd seen him... Well, anything but all cheery and upbeat. So, he wasn't on drugs, she cynically mused, but still... She took a deep breath, still not quite able to... Make out what to think of-

"W-what?" She awkwardly asked, stammering a bit, the dark-haired programmer's head beginning to spin, this... Whiplash proving to be a bit much for her. She just took a few deep breaths, clutching her temple and

looking partially abated but other than that... It was mostly the same. Same lighting, same sea-green paint on the walls, same scanner patches hooked up to her body. The only difference was... Her eyes went wide as she held up her right arm, only to find an IV drip hooked up to it, steadily flowing deep, vibrant red blood from a bag into her body. "Then, why-"

"It's..." Gabriel sighed, though, Serena felt a small twinge of reassurance when a familiar, awkward smile gradually made its way right back onto the eccentric scientist's face. "Well, a bit of a mundane issue..." Once again, he leaned over the hospital bed, though, this time it was simply to press his dataslate into her hands. "Maybe you'd better read your chart..."

"Er..." Serena just looked confused as she began skimming the diagnostic. Raising an eyebrow and looking a bit annoyed as all of the medical terminology went right over her head. All she could really make out were the simpler things, like her blood type - AB Positive - and her red blood cell count, though, not being a doctor she couldn't exactly say for sure if it was good or not, though... She looked back over to her right arm. The fact that she was hooked up to a blood bag meant it probably wasn't. "So..." She continued, putting the slate down and looking back over at Gabriel with an expression that was half worried and half irritated. "What does all this mean-"

"It means-" A new voice piped up, a deep, collected, slightly scratchy baritone punctuated by the squeaking hinges of the recovery room's frosted glass door, as the programmer and the scientist turned over to face him, Gabriel looking surprised and Serena looking... Confused. "That I'm afraid your report was less than accurate, Doctor McGarahann."

"Oh! Mr. Steyr!" Gabriel piped right back up, though, he looked a bit nervous - and his nervousness was infectious, Serena suddenly feeling a distinct sense of unease, though, that may have had more to do with Mr. Steyr himself. He looked rather... Businesslike, and not in a good way. His heavy-lidded, contemplative expression seemed tuned to a perpetual state of ambient disdain, and his short, neat, professional dark-brown haircut and slightly shabbily-tailored black suit and solid blue tie reminded Serena of every middle-manager she'd ever seen.

Though... The dark-haired programmer raised an eyebrow. She wasn't ready to quite dismiss him yet. Serena could see a hint of something vicious in his eyes, a look almost like a lean and hungry predator concealed by a thin veneer of typical middle-management carelessness, and almost immediately she didn't like it. Or him. "I, er..." Gabriel continued, laughing a bit as he reflexively adjusted his neon-coloured necktie. "Wasn't expecting you to come down so soon-"

"And I wasn't expecting the test subject-" Steyr glanced towards Serena, who tried to avoid recoiling under his harsh gaze. "To be bedridden and needing a blood transfusion."

"It's just a minor complication, sir, nothing-"

"Hold on a second..." Serena interrupted them, Gabriel looking just a bit worried beyond his blustery smile and Steyr's gaze of contempt seemed to intensify a touch. "Who are you?" She asked, taking a deep breath, trying to calm herself down - it might have been a bad idea, but, she felt, she still had a basic human right to an explanation - especially if she was being called a 'test subject', and, Steyr just stood there and sized her up for a few seconds, as though contemplating whether to explain himself or have her pay docked for the insult, before just clearing his throat, a visible look of relief on Serena's face as the intensity of his stare diminished, and he extended his arm over the hospital bed.

"Vincent Van Steyr." The middle-manager introduced himself, and Serena shook his hand a bit awkwardly. "I oversee the department of special projects for our Saint Petersburg branch specifically." He explained. "Dr. McGarahann reports to me, and I report to the Director, who will definitely not be overjoyed to hear that we're still having complications with the augmentation five test subjects in." Vincent dragged the conversation back on track, still quite visibly annoyed, which made both Serena and Gabriel look a bit nervous and concerned for entirely different reasons.

"The complications are completely... Mostly benign this time!" The eccentric scientist responded, gesturing with his hands, his smile turning a bit awkward and almost pleading. Serena, however, was entirely unamused.

"You call this?" She pointed towards the IV in her arm with a sour look on her face. "Benign?"

"Compared to the last few tests a little blood loss is practically a miracle." Gabriel half-joked, though, it was making his test subject and his boss both raise their eyebrows in intrigue.

"Blood Loss?" Serena asked.

"The first thing you should have done." Vincent responded, pointing towards the dark-haired programmer and giving his subordinate a heavy-lidded stare. "Was describe the complications in full, Dr. McGarahann. I'm going to need it for the report to my superiors."

"Well, like I said..." Gabriel just laughed awkwardly and reflexively adjusted his necktie. "It's fairly simple. You see, like any robot, the nanites in her bloodstream," He pointed towards Serena's chest once again, and she needed to fight off a powerful, if admittedly baseless urge to pout and glower at him while blushing. She knew that was where her heart was, but did he have to keep pointing there? "Need energy to function."

The middle-manager just sighed, but apparently decided to humour his blustery, awkward scientist. "And where are they getting this energy, Doctor?"

"Where else?" He just laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Serena's blood!"

"Wait!..." The dark-haired programmer's eyes went wide in shock, that swiftly turned to astonished, almost insulted scorn as she reached over and grabbed Gabriel's tie once again and snapped, "Those robots are drinking my blood?!"

"Well, drink IS the wrong term to use..." The scientist pulled away, and Serena found, to her slight shock that the knot had been tied loose enough to allow it to come undone simply by the force of his retreat, finding herself dazed enough that he could simply take the garment right back out of her hands and re-fasten it as he delivered an explanation.

"Technically speaking, the robots don't drink - they're simply breaking down the cells in your blood into their base proteins and carbohydrates, and metabolizing those components for energy - really, do you expect anybody to work for free?" He joked, which didn't amuse the girl whose blood was being drunk much.

"The problem is..." Gabriel took a deep breath, calming down a bit, his tone turning a touch disappointed. "They're drinking too much OF it. Now, normally, your body would simply be able to replenish it - with extra caloric intake and aid from the hormones the nanites produce, but... Well..." He sighed, and shook his head. "These aren't exactly normal nanites we're talking about."

"How so?" Serena asked.

"At this stage of the technology," He adjusted his tie again. "You really couldn't call any nanite augmentation "normal" by any stretch, but the nanites I put in you ARE doing a lot of work. Containing your cancer, synthesizing hormones and performance-enhancing drugs, ensuring your neural pathways are clear of influence from said hormones and drugs, regenerating any damage to your tissue and maintaining the integrity of your circulatory system..." Gabriel took a deep breath, and adjusted his glasses. "They're VERY hard-working machines, so, it stands to reason they'd need a lot of fuel..."

"Let's cut to the details," Vincent cut in, looking as unamused as Serena, though, she got the cynical feeling it was for entirely different reasons than her. "How MUCH fuel?"

"Well..." Gabriel quickly retrieved his dataslate and started writing things down on it with the stylus. "According to the data from the testing and Serena's chart... Carry the two..." He turned back over to the middle-manager, a slightly awkward look of triumph on his face. "The nanobots will create a net deficiency of fifteen millilitres of blood per day!... Possibly less if she avoids exerting herself, and definitely much more if she needs to push her body to the absolute limit or regenerate a lot of damaged tissue..."

Serena just looked a bit blank - and disturbed - at that... Quantification of her need for blood, but Vincent just groaned, and rested his head in his palm as he shook it. "I was hoping after five attempts you'd have been able to hammer out all the complications with this procedure, Doctor McGarahann. I was hoping to be able to present the test subject with her updated employment contract, but it's looking like I'm going to have to hold off on that..."

"Err..." The dark-haired programmer just raised an eyebrow. "Did you say A new contract?"

The Middle-manager just straightened his tie and took a deep, disappointed breath. "The Director of Special Projects - the whole board of directors, really - have had very high hopes about this augmentation Doctor McGarahann is working on, and, if the results were... Acceptable, they had authorized me to give you a... Promotion of sorts." That just made an uneasy feeling settle in Serena's stomach for reasons she couldn't quite put her finger on. "However, with the latest... Complication this is going to be a much more difficult sell."

"I'm just going to be blunt, Mr. Steyr." Gabriel took a deep breath, and his tone became much more dire and suddenly serious, which also made Serena simultaneously worried and... Intrigued. "You CANNOT let them axe this project." He said, delivering his declaration brimming with a vigour and determination that started to bleed out from his tone a bit as he found himself forced to logically explain why. "The potential for this technology is... Untapped! If we were the first to bring a nanotechnological augmentation to market-"

The middle-manager just cut the scientist off as he leaned in, a very disappointed look on his face as he illustrated, "We. Cannot. Sell. This." driving the flat of his hand into his palm with each word. "We cannot release an augmentation to market that makes it's users require regular blood transfusions, even if it made them immortal. End of story."

"So?..." There was another long, awkward silence permeating the recovery room before Serena rather anxiously piped in. Gabriel just coughed, while Vincent just sighed again.

"So, I will have to compile a revised report for my superiors, and so will Doctor McGarahann." The middle-manager responded, turning back over towards the slightly nervous looking scientist, once again adjusting his necktie. "And while you're doing that, find a way to fix this." He pointed over towards Serena's IV. "Immediately."

"Well, obviously!..." Gabriel just laughed awkwardly again.

"And you..." He took a deep breath, turning back towards Serena, the programmer once again needing to fight the urge to flinch under the middle-manager's oppressive, cold gaze. "Will officially be on medical leave until a solution for your... Sanguinary deficiency has been found. Effective immediately."

"Can I go home, then?" Serena asked, and, to her disappointment, Vincent shook his head."

"Due to the confidential nature of your augmentation and the potentially fragile nature of your health, you'll be required to remain on-site under constant medical observation. It goes without saying to both of you, actually," He made a quick glance towards Gabriel, who just sighed. "That this matter is to remain top-secret. Not a word about the procedure or it's complications leaves this room."

"And I'm guessing..." Serena added, her expression irritated and heavy-lidded. "I can't either."

"To use the bathroom, but that's it." Vincent responded, and the dark-haired programmer just groaned, half out of anger and half out of hopeless desperation. "I'll have a guard posted to this room shortly, but the three of us are the only people allowed in. Is that clear?"

Serena just crossed her arms and pouted. "Don't ask me to like it."

"Good." The middle-manager responded, and she just groaned and lay down, stewing in her anger and irritation that now seemed to hang over the whole room like a miasma, and he turned over to Gabriel and added. "Believe me, I don't WANT this project getting canned either." He said, his tone warming just a bit, turning a touch more sympathetic and, Serena cynically mused, human. "Two big projects in a row getting axed is going to be difficult to explain to my superiors, and after the incident with Lazerian and the skeletons in HIS closet, we're on thin ice here."

"You'll tell them how important the project is and how benign the complications are, right?" Gabriel amicably responded, though, Serena could feel a hint of desperation in his tone.

"I'll pass it along," Vincent replied, heading for the door. "But I need something concrete to show to my superiors." He turned over his shoulder, and once again pointed at Gabriel as he said, "Fix it."

"Err..." Serena just found herself a bit nonplussed at her reflection in the mirror, once again clothed in her familiar dress shirt, necktie, and dark slacks, a finger in her mouth, pulling the lips back to expose the gums and revealing a set of elongated canines. "How does this... Fix anything?" She asked, her tone dubious and a bit worried.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask the same question." Vincent piped up from a seat at the boardroom table he'd commandeered for their little 'meeting'. Serena would ordinarily have found it stuffy, but after a whole week spent cooped up in that recovery room, any change of scenery was welcome.

She'd been stuck waiting for another solution, reading crappy horror novels off a dataslate Gabriel let her borrow while her blood positively boiled with energy, the need to get up, run around, burn some steam only truly stymied by the promised guard posted right outside her door. It'd have been bad enough on it's own, but with only Gabriel and his irritatingly optimistic attitude for occasional company, it was absolutely intolerable. Serena just groaned, shaking her head at the memory. Even if she'd been beginning to warm to his demeanour, being shut up in a tiny room just made his energetic positivity unbearable.

This time, though, he seemed a bit more reserved, sighing deeply and just shaking his head, leaving a long, awkward silence between them as he leaned back in the roller-chair, to be filled in by the rain battering against the conference room windows.

"I tried everything I could." Gabriel dejectedly explained. "Adjusting the power settings of the nanites, the hormone composition, tissue regeneration, but it all seemed a bit ineffective at best and... Well, counterproductive at worst, especially when the management of your cancer comes into it." He added, and Serena just felt a slight twinge of guilt and awkwardness over that.

"But..." He just laughed a bit, a touch of vigour and energy coming back into the scientist's cheeks as Serena's eyes lidded. "There IS a silver lining to all this, and, while I wouldn't call it... Completely fixed, I think I've been able to get the issue... Momentarily under control."

"By giving me dog's fangs?" She asked, looking a bit irritated. When, yesterday, he'd burst into the recovery room proudly proclaiming that, 'He'd done it!', and that 'he just needed to install another piece of hardware', that wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind.

"It came to me while I was skimming the project's mission statement again, and I remembered something interesting about you..." He said, flashing a wry, playful grin that just made her a bit uncomfortable.

"W-What about me?" She asked, pointing at herself, her expression turning slightly nervous.

"Your blood type!" Gabriel replied, a very proud look on his face. "AB Positive. Universal Recipient." The Dark-haired programmer found a look of intrigue - and increased worry coming on her face.

"That means," Gabriel continued, "Your body can receive blood of any type without needing to worry about rejection!" He clarified with a massive, enthusiastic grin on his face. "That, coupled with the fact that the nanites ARE technically supposed to be a combat augmentation..."

Vincent said nothing, but just raised an eyebrow. Serena, on the other hand, just fidgeted a bit, unsure if she liked where this was going. "So?..."

"So, since the need for blood isn't really something we can work around, I decided to, well..." The scientist just gestured for her to approach with his hand. "Come over here and open your mouth!"

"What the hell for?" She curtly snapped back, flashing an irritated, heavy-lidded stare that failed to do much more than make him laugh a bit.

"So I can show Mr. Steyr what I had installed!" Gabriel responded, and, still confused and agitated but generally resigned, Serena just sighed and slowly approached, rounding the conference table to where Gabriel and Vincent were sitting and, like she was paying a visit to the dentist's, exposed her newly-installed fangs to the two men, her face a bit awkward and uncomfortable as she did, not helped by Gabriel's constant adjustment of her positioning and angle. Serena felt a bit of choler simmering in her stomach - the programmer couldn't help but feel like they were looking over her like a prize racehorse.

Far from what she was expecting, however, Vincent just looked... A bit surprised. Serena raised an eyebrow. Now, she was really beginning to feel uneasy.

"Are those..." The middle-manager just leaned in, an intrigued look on his face as he pointed to one of Serena's elongated, sharp-looking canines. "Hollow?" He asked, and the programmer's eyes just went momentarily wide.

Gabriel just flashed another wry, proud expression. "Good eye, Mr. Steyr! They are..."

"What." Serena flatly responded, quickly closing her mouth and taking a step back, an agitated expression coming on her face as she took a few deep breaths, a bad feeling coming over her like a caustic, graveyard mist.

The middle-manager didn't exactly look very enthusiastic either, as he quickly turned and shot the eccentric scientist a harsh, corporate-issue glare that made the both of them flinch and demanded, "Explain yourself immediately, Dr. McGarahann."

"Oh, it's simple!" Gabriel laughed again, but, it was a more nervous laugh this time, and Serena caught him reflexively adjusting his spectacles. "Like I said in my report, the 'blood issue' is, unfortunately, insurmountable for the time being..."

Vincent just sighed, and Serena just fidgeted awkwardly, not really liking that declaration too much. "But!.." Once again, the eccentric scientist laughed a bit, holding up a finger and leaning in towards the slightly recoiling programmer for emphasis. "There's a better way to, er, 'refresh your supply' than constant blood transfusions."

Serena just found herself going silent, a blank look on her face, though, Vincent was more chatty, even if his words were delivered with an unenthusiastic, almost disappointed growl. "I'm assuming she'd use those fangs then, correct?"

"They're hooked up directly into her bloodstream," Gabriel continued, a bit of colour and enthusiasm coming back into his words. "And equipped with pumps wired up to her nervous system, so it should be fairly easy for her to just, er, 'take a drink' in the field."

"Er..." Serena's face went a bit pale, and for once, it wasn't her anemia. The dark-haired programmer found a look of disquiet coming onto her face, and needed to take a few deep breaths, as her stomach ached, anxiously threatening to eject the awful hospital food she'd eaten for lunch. "What do you mean, 'take a drink?'"

"Well..." Once again, Gabriel just laughed a bit nervously as the programmer and the middle-manager were both giving him a nonplussed, disbelieving stare. "It's a bit simple, really..." He said, holding up his forearm and pulling the sleeve back, exposing the bare - slightly hairy - skin underneath, and the dark-haired programmer raised an eyebrow.

"You'd get somebody's neck, and..." Serena's eyes went wide as Gabriel proceeded to demonstrate, opening his mouth and clamp his jaw right around it, a playful, slightly jokey look in his eyes, sharply contrasted by the disturbed look on the programmer's face and the very weirded out look on the middle-manager's. "It goes a bit like that, and then you just kinda start... Drinking." The scientist explained, his voice muffled a bit by his forearm.

"Wait..." Serena needed to take several deep breaths in a row, trying to calm herself down, a horrific, uncomfortable realization crawling up her spine like the razor-sharp edge of a dagger, glowing with a sinister white reflection of the moon, and she needed to clutch her stomach, which was busy turning itself into knots. In a panicked frenzy, the dark-haired programmer stormed right back around to the other side of the conference table and went right back to staring into the mirror, the disturbed, agitated, look on her face as she pried her lips up once again to get a better view of the elongated, sharp, hollow, bloodsucking incisors Gabriel had installed.

A bead of sweat dripped down her face. Fangs, pale complexion, enhanced physical abilities, the need to drink blood... Red eyes... Serena's breathing began to pick up in pitch again as she focused on the figure in the glass, familiar to her, but at the same time, strangely... Alien. She'd read enough horror novels to realize- "DID YOU TURN ME INTO A VAMPIRE?!" She yelled, losing what little composure she had as turning towards Gabriel with an almost irate look of distress and agitation. There was a few seconds of awkward silence hanging over the boardroom before-

snrk...

Serena just raised an eyebrow, her expression turning a bit nonplussed, and with it, all tension in the room suddenly collapsed like a bowling ball impacting a house of cards before both men just burst out laughing, and Serena just felt all the blood and choler drain from her face as she just stood there with an awkward, utterly bewildered expression.

"It's apt, isn't it?" Vincent added, turning towards Gabriel with something on his face that made Serena's pupils go even wider - a smile. Briefly, she wondered if she'd been slipped something.

"She does kind of seem like a bit of a 'vampire-y' person, doesn't she?" Gabriel responded, wearing a playful, sanguine expression that was just making Serena's choler flare up again. "Y'know, all moody and dark-"

"I'M NOT MOODY!" Serena snapped, shifting right back towards a burning, angry agitation. "AND WHY THE HELL-" She pointed over towards the middle-manager, his more amicable and jokey attitude beginning to seriously - and visibly - irritate her. "ARE YOU LAUGHING?!" Serena yelled, taking a few deep breaths. One of them was bad enough.

Vincent's mood briefly shifted, flashing Serena a cold, harsh stare that she was finding preferential in this sort of situation. "Contrary to appearances, I DO have a sense of humour."

"What the hell's funny about this?!"

"Well, now you've got a reason to be all broody and reclusive." Gabriel joked, and she just shot him a death glare that fazed him about as much as a stiff breeze. Somehow, she was fining herself a bit envious of Vincent's talents in that department.

"And it's not every day..." The middle-manager piped up again, a small smile coming to his cheeks as Serena just pouted. "We have a movie monster on payroll."

"I'm not-" She just crossed her arms, an irritated expression on her face. "A movie monster..."

"Yes, you're a great deal more charming than a horror spook," Vincent sardonically replied, and Serena just blew air through her teeth as she looked away, trying to suppress the redness on her cheeks. That was a backhanded compliment if she'd ever heard one.

"Besides, I've seen the kinda stuff you read..." The brown-haired scientist added with a mischievous, playful laugh, as Serena's eyes went wide, a flustered, awkward look coming on her face, the realization it might have been a mistake to borrow a tablet from Gabriel. "Isn't this something you'd kinda like?..."

"I..." Serena awkwardly stammered, before just groaning and turning away, back towards the windows, leaning over the conference table with both palms planted squarely on its polished, dark wooden surface, staring out into the rainy city's lights beyond, emitting a deep, disappointed sigh as she shook her head. Gabriel... Kinda had her there. She'd occasionally had... Childish fantasies about that sort of thing, but who wouldn't?

This, though?... Serena took a deep, irritated breath. This was all wrong. When she'd darkly fantasized about joining the 'aristocracy of the night', those fantasies usually involved some tall, sinisterly handsome stranger with alabaster skin and raven-black hair, grasping her in cold, powerful, and reassuring arms, silencing her fears with a tender application of his finger against her lips, and a predatory, yet inviting smile on his face as he promised to make their love last forever. Not... She turned and stared daggers at the eccentric, obnoxiously sanguine scientist and the cold, mostly humourless, intimidating middle-manager. This, whatever the hell it was...

Serena just shook her head and found a flash of choler running through her veins as she banged on the table, the fangs in her mouth seeming to protrude and rest dangerously on her lips, just a touch away from drawing blood. This was all... Wrong! Where the hell was the rush of power, the feeling of domination and control? She looked all around at the conference room before her. Nothing much had seemed to change. It wasn't a scene straight from her horror novels after all - this stupid procedure hadn't made her a powerful, haughty noblewoman of the night, she hadn't changed much at all!

Frustration burned deep inside her like a caustic, bitter pit of flame belching dark, acrid smoke. Her lot in life was still the same, if not worse-off than before! Where before she only really had to worry about her job and dodging any social obligations, now she was being cloistered up in the bowels of her old workplace and... Serena clenched her fists. And she was a test subject for a procedure that had given her a need to drink blood. All she was getting out of this was....

She took a very deep breath, calming down a bit as the recollection washed over her, the choler bleeding out and replaced with a blank, contemplative, resigned look to her face as she gazed out the windows, the crashing of the rain against the glass ringing in her ears. Life. All she got out of this was that she didn't have to die of cancer... Serena's eyes lidded even further. She just had to drink blood on a regular basis to keep her body going. The vampire just sighed, and shook her head. At what point does the... Cost to live become too great?...

Serena just took another deep breath, and turned back towards the two men, both of them looking a bit surprised at the suddenly harsh, determined, and contemplative look she wore. She couldn't answer the question, she realized, letting loose a harsh, sardonic laugh that was worrying Gabriel a bit. She didn't want to die. She'd barely even lived so far, and the memory of that despair and desperation upon being told she had three months to live still rang fresh in her mind. Serena just shook her head. She had to live.

It wasn't a choice, she realized. The vampire turned back towards the windows, out to the misty, rain-covered city below. If drinking the blood of her fellow man to keep her body from deteriorating and destroying itself, either by the cancer consuming her from the inside out or the nanobots drinking all her life's vitae, was too high a cost to pay then she could just hurl herself right through that plate-glass window into the courtyard below. By her, admittedly slapdash calculations, they were at least fifty stories up. The choice to continue as a bloodsucking monster was hers' alone, and, yet, at the same time... She laughed bitterly and melancholer once again. It wasn't hers' to make.

Her spirit, her human drive, her... Greedy will to live positively burned inside her like a supernova lighting up the night sky, and anchored her right where she was, regardless of what the cost would be to both the world and to herself. The vampire took a deep, focused breath of air and turned back towards the two men, a resigned, bitter, but far from defeated look on her face. "So, I'm a blood sucking monster now." She solemnly responded. "I have to kill people to keep my body running-"

"Not really." Gabriel cut in, and Serena just raised an eyebrow, her harsh, cold expression breaking a bit like someone had swung an ice pick at her. "I mean, if you DO drink too much they'll die, but you can take about... Half a litre without really hurting them." A wry, playful grin came on his face as he added, "You should give your donor some orange juice and a cookie afterwards, though." Serena just shot him a harsh, pouty look.

"Well... Err..." The vampire just stumbled for a bit, before taking another deep sigh and focusing her mind. That was... A bit of a load off her mind, at the very least, but somehow, this whole situation still felt... Awkward. Taboo. Anathema to everything she'd known since she was a kid, even with the burden being lightened a little. She still needed blood, and, even if she didn't have to kill to get it, Serena still had her doubts that most people would voluntarily allow her to drain them. "So..." She sighed. "I have to drink blood, so now what?"

"Well, perhaps..." Vincent raised an eyebrow, and a familiar uncomfortable feeling settled in Serena's gut as a small grin came on the middle-manager's face. "We should see if this procedure has resulted in any other... Complications."

"Hmm?" Both Gabriel and Serena looked intrigued, though, the dark-haired programmer was a bit more worried.

Vincent just laughed a bit as he pointed over the conference table, towards the mirror. "She's already shown she still has a reflection, doesn't she?"

Both of their pairs of eyes went wide, though, Gabriel's expression turned to one of playful, jovial amusement and Serena just looked irritated and thoroughly displeased. "Oh, cut that out-" She tried to say, though, the scientist was quick to cut her off.

"Well, what about running water?" The scientist asked. "Can you cross it-"

"I took a shower this morning, didn't I?" The vampire curtly responded, crossing her arms and clenching her teeth, putting her fangs on open display, though, this only seemed to egg the boys on more.

"Can you stand the sight of a crucifix?" Vincent asked.

"I'm not really that freaking religious anyways.." She irritably responded.

"What about Garlic?" Gabriel piped in, and Serena just shot him a disappointed, exasperated look.

"I couldn't stand that stuff to begin with..." She responded, though, she just groaned and shook her head when that just sent the two boys into another fit of raucous laughter. High school never really ends for some people, she mused...

"Well, how does she handle the sun?" The suddenly vivacious middle-manager piped up, and all three of them turned back towards the window, the harsh rain battering down at the neon city outside, and Vincent just sighed and added, "I suppose it'll be a while before we can find out for sure."

That just made Gabriel erupt into another fit of snickering boyish laughter, as Serena just groaned, and rested her face in her palm. She was still alive, the vampire sarcastically mused, but at what cost?

huff, puff, huff, puff

Serena's breathing synchronized in time with the rapping of her shoes on the treadmill below, beads of sweat running down her focused, tense-looking face, a faint feeling of exhaustion in her legs and her abdomen but her nerves still blazed with a boundless, unrelenting energy that drove her ever onward, with only the ringing of a bell as she clocked in another kilometre briefly dragging her out of her concentration, and wondering if she should slow down a bit.

The dark-haired programmer took a brief look around the gym, observing a few of her co-workers using the exercise machines, one particularly bulky-looking character in particular was busy having a hell of a time on the free weights.

The workday - for everyone besides her - had ended just an hour prior, and 'Mr. Steyr' - who was rapidly beginning to act like her new boss, even though they were in completely different departments - was VERY insistent she not draw too much attention to herself. In this case, that probably meant not running thirty-five kilometres at top speed while not stopping for a break even once, but... She just took another series of deep, determined, almost irate breaths, syncing up perfectly with her legs. Breathe in, touch down, breathe out, touch down, breathe in... Serena shook her head again. She just... Needed to get this energy out of her...

It was still a bit difficult... Adjusting to her new augmentations, and spending a week cooped up in that recovery room while her body surged with energy and vigour and the need to burn it all out was beginning to make her feel stir-crazy. So, after making it very clear that she was in imminent danger of losing her composure, and cajoling Gabriel in order to help her out with by telling the boss-man that they DID technically have the 'blood problem' mostly under control. If they monitored her vitals properly, at least.

Serena found a hand reaching over to her neck, where, what would look like a bandage at first glance really concealed a remote monitoring patch. There really shouldn't be any danger of her collapsing again. Vincent - very begrudgingly - agreed to let her out of her cage, but it came with a set of very strict concessions.

She was allowed to visit the gym and the staff canteen, but that was about it, and they'd know if she broke the agreement, since the vital monitoring patch also had a tracking beacon on it. Besides that, her newfound... Sanguine condition was still to remain top-secret. She didn't think the rest of her co-workers, let alone anyone outside the company, would suffer a bloodsucker in their midst.

Still... Serena exhaled deeply as she wiped the accumulated sweat from her brow. Anything was better than being stuck in the recovery room, and she was really appreciating being able to hit the gym and work off some stress, since she had a lot of it.

After their little 'check-up' with Vincent where Gabriel proudly showed off Serena's new fangs and cracked a bunch of stupid jokes, things had gone right back to business, which, for Gabriel and Vincent involved finalizing and sending out that report to the enigmatic Director of Special Projects, and for Serena especially, a lot of very tense waiting.

For the last few days the possibility of what might happen if Gabriel's project got canned weighed on her like a cloak made of lead. In spite of his normally amicable and optimistic demeanour, even Gabriel wanted to dwell on the possibility as little as possible, as though just by talking about it he'd bring it into being, and that only seemed to worry Serena more. She couldn't help thinking about goons from Internal Affairs coming over to remove every bit of evidence that the inconvenient little project had ever happened, and since there was evidence inside of her...

She just exhaled sharply and shook her head. Maybe Gabriel was right about that, and it was better to just think of it as little as possible. Serena just elicited a groan, right in time for another bell to ring on the treadmill.

Vincent had tried to reassure them both that he'd try to make sure the project could go on, but, at the end of the day, it was his boss' decision to make. That just left Gabriel and Serena waiting for a few days after Vincent sent in the report, The scientist wondering if he'd be allowed to continue his work, and the vampire wondering if she'd be allowed to continue the life that she'd been able to scrape together, fuelled on stolen blood and a very shaky, uncertain sort of hope.

The days had fallen back into a routine for the both of them, Gabriel was just cruising along - until he officially got the red light, the project was still ongoing. He still tinkered and adjusted the nanites and had called Serena over yesterday to apply an update to the subroutines, though, she had been admittedly a bit disinterested in his explanations, and it had been getting somewhat too technical for her tastes.

The vampire was only able to parse a bit of it, like 'emergency compensation system', 'produce adrenaline', and 'should help keep you on your feet even when you've lost a lot of blood.' So, it had been some kind of emergency fall-back to hopefully stop her from blacking out again... Serena just sighed. Any bit counts, she guessed, but hopefully she wouldn't need to use it.

Her daily schedule had turned somewhat bohemian, though, Gabriel had called it reminiscent of a military boot camp. She'd rise at the crack of dawn, brimming with energy, breakfast, blood transfusion - and she didn't know where they were getting all that blood from, and she was a bit afraid to ask - and then hitting the gym until in spite of her augmentations she was almost too tired to move, before retiring back to the recovery room and reading books on the dataslate until she fell asleep.

She hadn't been allowed to return to the Cybersecurity department since what Vincent was telling her was officially written off as a 'spontaneous bout of illness', which, Serena cynically supposed was true enough. The programmer supposed she ought to have been grateful to not have any work, but all this questionably free time was still making her antsy, and all the exercise could only do so much to take her mind off-

ding!

"Huh..."

A familiarly amicable voice came from her left, and Serena nearly flinched as she saw Gabriel, still in his lab-coat, lounging on an empty treadmill besides hers and looking down into the display, almost a bit impressed. "That's gotta be a new record..." He mused, laughing a bit and adjusting his glasses.

"Er-" The dark-haired programmer tried to say, continuing her run with a heavy-lidded look on her face. So... Maybe she was a bit wrong on that. She'd gotten so focused and caught up in her workout she didn't even notice the terribly unsubtle scientist or his terribly obnoxious necktie sneaking up on her. "So what-"

"Hey..." Gabriel's expression changed as his gaze shifted from the display of the treadmill the vampire was running on, to the vampire herself, and she just raised an eyebrow, slightly concerned. "You know, don't take this the wrong way, Serena..." He said, as he sized her up, the dark-haired programmer once again clothed in that tank top and pair of gym shorts. "But I think you've lost some weight."

At that, the programmer's composure completely broke, and she nearly tripped over her own feet as her eyes went wide, and the scientist just laughed a bit as she struggled to regain her footing. When her position on the treadmill was stable again, she just shut the whirring belt of the exercise machine off and hopped down, her expression irritated and a bit flustered, too, and Gabriel just laughed when he caught the redness on her face, the eccentric scientist quickly realizing her flushed complexion wasn't just because she'd been running around all day. "I haven't had much else to do." Serena rather bitterly responded. Somehow, even if he WAS complimenting her, it still felt... Wrong. "What do you want."

Gabriel took a deep breath, a massive smile on his face, full of energy and sanguine vigour, and once again, Serena just raised an eyebrow. "We're in the clear."

"In the clear on what?" She asked, a feeling of intrigue coming over her, though, as much as she felt she should be a bit worried, there was something in the scientist's smile that was, for the moment, keeping those feelings of anxiousness at bay. He didn't look awkward or nervous at all. He was all optimism.

His words, too. 'in the clear.' That could only be a good thing, right?... Her eyes went wide, and a small, relieved grin came on her face as she finally put two and two together. "Wait," She took a deep breath, and drew in closer, an excited expression coming over her as though she'd gotten a contact buzz from Gabriel's cheery demeanour. "Your project's still-"

Gabriel just took the most relieved breath she'd ever seen anyone take, and looked at her with a warm, reassured smile. "I just got an E-mail from Mr. Steyr." He said, nodding his head. "We didn't get canned, but... Well..." He just laughed a bit, and Serena's smile began to fade. There it was, that awkward, nervous shift in his demeanour that signalled something bad was about to come to light. "There's a bit of a-"

"A bit of what?" She cut in, just a touch nervous, and Gabriel just adjusted his tie and took a deep breath, trying his best to look more reassuring and positive, with mixed results.

"It's really nothing bad, but 'the boss'-" He delivered that complete with air-quotations, to Serena's slight chagrin. "-needs to see us right away." Serena just took a deep breath. "He says it's important."

Serena wasn't really sure what to expect when she entered Vincent Van Steyr's office in Gabriel's shadow, though, she definitely wasn't expecting to be accosted with a stunningly enthusiastic handshake from the moment she walked in through the door to that surprisingly cozy, red-wallpapered workplace. Even witnessing the middle-manager's sudden burst of laughter in the boardroom a few days prior didn't really prepare her to see the man actually looking so... High-spirited. In a good mood, even.

Serena just awkwardly shook his hand, and she turned back over to Gabriel, who was just smiling proudly to himself. Maybe she was right - he WAS infectious, and being near the eccentric scientist was causing a shift in the otherwise flinty middle-manager's demeanour...

"Congratulations on your promotion, Ms. Ramneau." He said, and Serena's eyes briefly lit up as she recalled what Vincent had told her almost a week prior. Or, maybe, he was just in a good mood since things had gone surprisingly well.

The formalities out of the way, he motioned for the two of them to have a seat down on some roller-chairs that had been laid out for them while he went right back around his desk, with the dark-haired programmer taking the opportunity to get as comfortable as she could now that she was back in her normal office clothes. It'd taken her just upside of fifteen minutes to shower off and get changed, since showing up to anyone's office still clad in workout gear and covered in sweat was probably a faux pas.

"So..." Serena took a deep breath, adjusting her seating in the chair a bit. "What's... Happened exactly?" She asked. "Gabriel told me the... Project got the green light, but-"

"Yes, it did." Vincent cut in, and Serena just furrowed her brow a bit, just a touch irritated at being cut off. "Despite the, well..." He took a deep breath, the good mood beginning to fade out and be replaced with his usual sort of detached, phlegmatic, managerial demeanour. "Complications the project encountered, my superiors are, nonetheless, impressed with the results."

Both Serena and Gabriel's eyes lit up for a second, the scientist's expression enthusiastic and optimistic, and the programmer's much more cautious, but intrigued. "The general consensus is that the 'Nanotechnological Augmentation Project' shows great promise for both internal use and for market, though..." He just sighed and shook his head, and Gabriel just nervously tugged at his collar. "There was absolutely no way to skirt around the 'blood problem', and it's well... Obviously nowhere near suitable for mass-implementation-

"I'm working on a solution..." Gabriel anxiously added. "Though, it's still very much a work-in-progress..."

"Those are part of your new orders." Vincent responded, and Serena just raised an eyebrow as he retrieved a dataslate from underneath his desk. "The both of you are being... Shuffled around a bit."

"Huh?" The scientist and the programmer both asked, and the middle-manager just cleared his throat as he passed the slate over to Serena and elaborated.

"Like I said, " Vincent continued, as she began to pore over it, raising an eyebrow. The screen was displaying a contract, and her mind flashed back to the company hospital room, when the middle-manager had last mentioned one. "Despite the fact that the augmentation has still yet to be declared suitable for general use, the board of directors still want to make... Proper use of your newfound talents, Ms. Ramneau."

Serena looked back up from the slate towards him, an intrigued, yet slightly worried expression on her face that neatly contrasted the enthusiastic look on Gabriel's. "To that end, you're being transferred to the Corporate Security Department's Special Asset Protection Squad. Effective immediately."

Serena just blanked out at the news, freezing in her chair like a deer in the headlamps of a tank, needing a few seconds to process that news. "W-what?!"

"That's the commando squad." Gabriel explained, cracking a smile, and Serena's heart just sank right into her stomach, an awkward grimace coming onto her face.

She could have sworn the eccentric scientist looked genuinely impressed. "You won't exactly be doing any guard duty or patrols." He joked, which didn't exactly reassure her any.

"That's certainly one way of describing it, Dr. McGarahann." Vincent responded, leaning back in his high-back leather office chair. "As a member of the Special Asset Protection Squadron," He turned back over to Serena, who was still looking a bit awkward and fidgety in her chair. "Your duties will have you undertaking various high-risk direct action missions on behalf of the company, and, on occasion, on behalf of interested third parties that have contracted our services. I would elaborate more, but, the exact duties as an 'agent' are... Well..." He paused, giving her a look that the fidgety, awkward programmer really couldn't put her finger on. It felt like he was sizing her up, but, in a way that was... Subtly wrong. "Anything but routine, Ms. Ramneau."

That... Well... Serena took a deep breath. She wasn't really sure what to think about that. It was... A lot at once. Her? A commando? It was like something out of a movie, but, as much as she pinched herself it didn't stop being real. It was right in front of her - she was even holding the damn contract with her other hand. It was probably one of the more dangerous occupations she could be shunted into, and, after coming this far, after only being able to live because of a literal miracle, she wasn't exactly in the mood to die for real from a careless stray bullet or grenade or plasma burst. Plus, her daily routine in the cybersecurity department had been almost comforting, a warm, familiar structure to base her life around, and it was definitely a good deal safer than running around being shot at by gangsters.

Yet, at the same time... A strange sensation came over her, and her pupils dilated a bit. It was an odd feeling. The closest thing she could call it was 'wonder'. Serena took a few deep breaths, and couldn't stop herself from laughing a bit, unable to suppress the eager, excited smile that was forming on her face, even as a nervous, unsteady feeling settled in her stomach. The possibility of danger, despite - no, probably because of her newfound life - was like a drug, repelling her with one hand, and yet, at the same time, drawing her in closer with promises of euphoria and adrenaline.

Her life up to now - if you could even call it that - had been... Boring. Painfully so, looking back on it. While the rest of her childhood friends were out and about, experiencing the trials and tribulations of life, she had been shut up in her room, poring over a book or studying or goofing around on the net.

While a life spent screwing around on a cyberdeck might have been ideal before, after coming so close to death and being confronted by her wasted life it just felt... Intolerable. A sense of revulsion came over her like she'd been drinking poison. After coming so close to dying and tasting the sweetness of life - probably for the first time... Serena just laughed awkwardly, and tried to avert her eyes. "I..."

She took a deep breath, and ruffled up her hair a bit. "A-are you serious?" The vampire asked. This was insane - and everyone was insane! Herself included - probably more than either of those two, combined! What the hell was she thinking?! She wasn't a commando, she was a programmer! A cybersecurity technician! "E-even with the augmentation I-"

"Even with the augmentations she can't hit the broad side of a barn." Gabriel cut in with a joke, and Serena just exhaled sharply as she gave him a death stare, all the awkwardness and anxiety having been quickly boiled away through sheer force of choler.

"That's something you're going to have to rectify, Ms. Ramneau." Vincent added, and Serena just groaned. "But, before you reject anything out of hand," He leaned in and pointed to the dataslate she was holding. "Though, you really should read over the contract before deciding anything. The position of a Special Asset Protection Agent is a very valuable one, and..." A small, cold grin came onto the middle-manager's face. "We treat our valuable assets well."

Serena just raised an eyebrow, looking up from the dataslate - what little of it she'd read so far was mostly just legalese mumbo-jumbo of the type she'd need a lawyer to decode. Everyone knew they did that on purpose - despite telling you to read the damn thing, they didn't really want you to understand it. She signed a similar contract for her cybersecurity technician job two years ago and barely understood that one, either. "How well?" She asked. It probably didn't matter too much, the programmer supposed, especially if she had someone well-versed in corporate bullshit give her the bullet points.

"For one..." The middle-manager leaned in again, just a touch too close and too enthusiastic for Serena's comfort, and pointed to the slate once again. "Your new salary is on page 211..."

Awkwardly, and just a bit irritated, Serena scrolled through the dataslate - she knew a hint when she saw one. It felt a bit like a cynical move to her - butter the vampire up with the fact that she's getting paid a bit more to get shot at, though, when she actually got to the prescribed page and discovered how much she was really making, the dark-haired programmer's eyes went wide, and she nearly recoiled, unable to suppress a small smile. "I..." If they were trying to butter her up, she cynically mused. It worked. The stated salary for this new position was almost three times what she made as a cybersecurity technician. Serena just laughed a bit. She guessed putting herself in the line of fire did have to pay pretty well.

"Huh..." Gabriel raised an eyebrow, as he caught a glimpse of the dataslate screen. "I think that's almost as much as I make..."

"I can see you're impressed." Vincent flashed another corporate smile, strategically ignoring the eccentric scientist much more easily than the programmer could. His grin was just a bit too cold, just a bit too wide, but conveying what he meant to adequately and with minimal amounts of terror going up Serena's spine.

"In addition, your position also entitles you to a level-2 security clearance, a class A-2 company apartment at a discounted rate, medical and dental plan, sick leave, paid vacation, pension-" Which, Serena rather pessimistically doubted she'd be able to cash out. "-and and the employee discount also extends to our line of cybernetic prostheses and augmentations, though, I don't think you'll be needing - or wanting using that one in particular." Serena just took a deep breath. In all honesty, the thought didn't really cross her mind - she WAS technically some sort of cyborg now, though, she still didn't have much of a will to really chrome herself up. This was enough.

"Besides that." Vincent cleared his throat, and continued. "Your... nanite-induced abilities, as well as the..." He sighed, as though dealing with an awkward, unwanted situation. "Classified information you've already been privy to as a result of that augmentation essentially guarantee your job security. Informally - and, remember."

He leaned in just a touch again. "Do keep this under wraps - you'll be provided with enough blood to suit your needs."

"There isn't gonna be a..." Serena took a deep breath, fidgeting a bit. It still felt... Awkward to bring up. "A supply problem, then?" She asked.

"We keep a regular stock of blood already." The middle-manager flatly explained, as casually as if he were just telling her they kept a tin of instant coffee in the break room.

"We DO make and test out cybernetic augmentations." The eccentric scientist added, with a playful, sarcastic smile that just put a heavy-lidded look on the programmer's face. "Gotta make sure nobody bleeds out on our watch, you know?"

"In addition..." Vincent took a deep breath, clearly not that amused either at constantly being interrupted. "If it proves necessary, the required... Biological material can be... Sourced on-site."

"Err..." An odd tension came through the room like a cold breeze, and Serena just gave the middle-manager an apprehensive, weird look. "Sourced from... What exactly?"

The middle-manager took another deep breath, and leaned over the desk one more time, pointing towards the dataslate and instructed Serena to "read through article 87, on page 429." Which only seemed to give her a bad feeling as she scrolled through the digital document...

"87.2 - For the duration of employment..." Serena read from the contract, a heavy-lidded, slightly tense look on her face that turned a bit irritated and apprehensive as she read further on. "The employer reserves the rights to the use and/or sale value of the employee's bodily fluids, organs, tissue, bones, blood cells and blood plasma." She just groaned at that. "The aforementioned bodily components may be extracted or modified at the employer's leisure as a condition of employment."

"It's a standard part of the standard employment contract." Vincent added, as casually and emotionlessly as though he was talking about how many vacation days she was entitled to. "You've already had... Experience with the clause that allowed your augmentation to take place, Ms. Ramneau."

"Forced, more like..." Serena groaned under her breath. Even if it had been ultimately life-saving, she still couldn't shake the vague sense of disquiet the damn contract was giving her, especially as she kept reading on, because she noticed there was a bit more to article 87, section 2.

"In addition..." She continued, and her red eyes went wide and her tone became a lot more disturbed and shocked as the vampire read, "As a condition of employment, the employer reserves the exclusive right to any material or immaterial component of the employee, which may or may not exist, may or may not be responsible for and/or the source of consciousness and/or sentience, and may or may not persist... After... Death- YOU OWN MY SOUL?!" She snapped, quickly looking back up from the dataslate, her eyes wide and a disturbed, riled-up, almost disgusted look on her face.

"Oh, don't worry about that." The middle-manager seemed completely unfazed by her outburst, calmly and professionally dismissing her concerns with a wave of the hand. "That's an unimportant clause that never gets excised, anyways. It was in your old contract, too, so don't look so glum." Serena just took in a deep breath, and groaned, turning her gaze away. She didn't really think 'glum' was the right word for how she was feeling in anything but corporate-speak.

"It's a bit of a moot point though, isn't it?" Gabriel piped up, adjusting his glasses as he leaned back in his chair. "Since your employment technically terminates when you die..." Serena just shot him a weird look. He still couldn't reassure her to save his life.

"So..." The vampire just tried to calm herself down, taking a deep breath and shifting again in the chair, once again finding the plush, high-back leather surface just a touch uncomfortable. "I'm getting shuffled around to the commando squad, and I get a whole bunch of benefits and better pay, and all the blood I need-" Her tone was bitter and sarcastic, and she just rolled her eyes and gestured with a wave of her hand. "-and I just owe the company my soul." She just cracked a weary, sardonic, bitter smile. "Is there another catch I should be aware of?" She jokingly asked, taking a bit of Gabriel's playbook.

"Well..." Vincent just cleared his throat, and leaned in towards her in his chair, making Serena sink backwards into the plush leather, another anxious feeling settling in her gut.

The expression on the middle-manager's face seemed to have both gotten even colder - almost dangerously so, a dire, serious look appearing in his eyes. "I've already communicated to you both the... Importance of the secrecy of this project. If ANYTHING were to leak-"

"What?" Serena found her mouth running, cracking wise even as the nervousness and apprehension had her fidgeting in her seat. Maybe she was just trying to dispel the tension in the room, she mused to herself. Or, Gabriel really WAS rubbing off on her... "The general public wouldn't like that you guys employ bloodsucking monsters?"

"That's certainly a part of it, Ms. Ramneau." The middle-manager continued, outwardly unfazed, but Serena could see a slight glint of irritation in the man's eyes, and couldn't quite suppress a tiny grin on her face. Maybe he was also thinking, 'one of them was bad enough'. "But my superiors are more concerned about the technology itself. Cybernetic augmentations are a very... Cutthroat business." He explained.

"If anything about our nanotechnological developments were leaked before it was ready for market, then it would likely spur an arms race we may not be able to keep up in, or, worse, it may prompt one of our corporate rivals to attempt to seize the technology itself so they can reverse-engineer it..."

He shot Serena a very important, dire look, and the vampire's eyes briefly flashed wide open. She just took a deep breath, and fidgeted in the chair a bit. Now, the need for secrecy was feeling a bit less like a pain in the ass and more like a necessity.

"I cannot stress it enough," The middle-manager continued. "Absolutely nothing about your augmentations or your condition is allowed to become public knowledge, even within the company. Outside of anyone with the appropriate clearance and the appropriate 'need to know'. In a more personal matter, I would highly advise against 'refuelling manually' outside of a combat zone - the bite-marks and exsanguination would be... Difficult to explain."

"Well... Er..." Serena just took a deep breath and tugged at her collar. "I mean, what if I kinda have to- like, low on blood, it's a life or death situation-"

"Then tear the guy's throat out and try to make it look like an animal attack." Vincent responded, his tone failing to deviate even a single octave from that cold, professional middle-management voice, like he was giving her a stern warning that she was on track to miss her quarterly performance goals, and Serena just found herself locking up again, a wide-eyed, surprised, and disturbed look on her face. She couldn't help but wonder how many murders he'd organized.

"Err..."

"If you want to keep your job, Ms. Ramneau." The middle-manager added. "I don't think I need to tell you, but due to the amount of necessary secrecy, you are no longer authorized to terminate your own employment."

"So I don't have much of a choice in 'accepting' this promotion, then?" She asked, the mask of amicability and cooperation having slipped right off the middle-manager's face and shattered on the desk below as he just shook his head, and the vampire groaned. So, his comment about rejecting the offer was just a formality, then.

Vincent just shot her a stern, heavy-lidded stare. "That is the case, Ms. Ramneau." He said.

"What happens if I get fired, then?" Serena continued, a heavy, anxious feeling welling up inside her as she gripped the chair's hand-rests. Maybe it was just better to tear the bandage off all at once, she mused, and, by the serious look on his face, Vincent seemed to agree with that.

"You'll be immediately liquidated." The middle-manager flatly replied, and, once again her eyes went wide, a shiver going up her spine - she didn't exactly need him to elaborate on what that meant. It was sort of what she was pessimistically expecting, but she hadn't been expecting the boss to be that... Direct about it, and said so.

Vincent just took a deep breath and reclined back into the office chair, possibly trying to dispel the tension that had just built up in the room like a gas leak. "It's important when discussing sensitive topics like this to have everything neatly laid out. Carrot and stick."

"O..." Serena just needed to take another deep breath. "Kay... So..."

There was a long, awkward pause, a disquieting coldness that even Gabriel couldn't quite figure out how to break. "What now?" She just nervously shrugged her shoulders. "I don't really have much of a choice in this." The vampire groaned. Lately, it was feeling like that, even if she was allowed to live again, she wasn't really 'in charge' of her own life.

"After this, you'll have a few weeks of training to go through. You'll be reporting to the Special Asset Protection Squad's commander, and to me through the Department of Special Projects' liaison officer."

The dark-haired programmer raised an eyebrow. "Who's that?" She asked, and Gabriel just cracked a playful smile as a heavy-lidded expression came onto her face.

"Hey." The liaison officer introduced himself once again with a half-serious wave of the hand, and the vampire just groaned.

"I should have known..." Serena sarcastically mused, as Vincent cleared his throat.

"Now then," The middle-manager continued, getting down to business as he turned towards Gabriel, speaking with a stern, professional tone. "Dr. McGarahann, your primary assignment will still be to find a permanent solution to the, er..." He cleared his throat, briefly looking away in a manner that just made Serena shoot him a weird look. "'blood problem.' In between that, however, I'm going to need you to coordinate cooperative efforts and communication between the Special Asset Protection Squadron and the Department of Special Projects, as well as keep tabs on Ms. Ramneau's health and general well-being, and, if needed, assist her in the field. Can you handle that?"

"Of course, Mr. Steyr." Gabriel responded with that usual upbeat, enthusiastic tone Serena had come to expect of him, though, the dark-haired programmer couldn't help but feel a bit suspicious about the quickness of his response, and the way he was adjusting his necktie... "It shouldn't be much trouble to cram all that into my schedule..."

"Good." Vincent replied, leaning back in his chair, probably just satisfied with getting a positive response at all. "As for a more immediate answer to your question, Ms. Ramneau..."

He turned his attentions back over towards Serena, who snapped right back to attentiveness, almost a bit curious where this was going. "Right now, we're going to be filling in a lot of paperwork, starting with that."

The middle-manager leaned in a bit over the desk and rather casually pointed over towards the dataslate in Serena's hand - displaying a legally binding document that, among other things, pledged her soul to the company and made her unable to leave it outside of a body bag.

A small frown came on her face - everything was irritating her lately. Gabriel's over-eager optimism and now Vincent's cold, corporate stoicism. It really wasn't helping how the days had been ticking down, and, though she hadn't really ever given it that much importance before, it felt like she was getting dangerously close to... That time of the month. Somehow, she felt, neither of them were really giving this change in her life enough importance.

"Sign on the dotted line, Ms. Ramneau." Serena felt a flash of choler blaze through her veins, as a short burst of hot air emitted through clenched teeth. If she was selling her soul to the company store, he could at least say 'please.'

What else could she even do, though? The vampire just groaned, scrolled all the way through the dataslate to the very end of the contract, and with an elegant twist of the stylus, sealed the deal with flowing, cursive script. Serena just took a deep, irritated breath as she handed the dataslate back, and slouched back in her chair.

Everyone was failing to give this due importance, she mused, even herself, but once again these sorts of crazy... Tribulations weren't really turning out the way she thought it would. "I never thought a vampire being forced to sign up with the company commando squad would be this mundane..." She sarcastically added.

"Well," The middle-manager responded, still keeping up that cold, professional demeanour as he stowed the dataslate back in his desk. "I'm sure melodrama is quite amusing, Ms. Ramneau, but it isn't company policy." At that, something broke, all the tension and apprehension and and the vampire couldn't help but break out into a fit of snickering, barely able to conceal her amusement by covering her mouth with a hand. A very

playful, mirthful look came over Gabriel as well, though, Vincent just looked confused - even a bit irritated. "I wasn't making a joke that time." He added.

Serena just needed to take a deep breath and calm down, though, she still couldn't suppress the smile on her face. "I know." She replied, and the professional atmosphere collapsed in its entirety as eccentric scientist just erupted into roaring, cathartic laughter, and, like a disease, the vampire ended up joining him, her mood over the last week swinging horribly back and forth like a pendulum, and she found herself a bit too eager to relieve herself of all the tension and irritation that had accumulated like radioactive fallout and just enjoy herself for once, leaving a progressively more irritated-looking middle-manager just watching the whole display from his chair now that the tables had turned on him.

"It's going to be a long night..." Vincent groaned under his breath...

Serena took a deep breath as she stepped through the sliding doors out from the lobby, exiting the warm, pleasantly lit building and out into the rainy courtyard, a feeling of energy and vigour blazing inside her as she stepped outside for the first time in over two weeks.

The taste of that misty, refreshing night air, the feeling of the coldness brushing her face and tingling her ears, the sturdy, slightly damp concrete under her shoes. It felt almost... She took in another deep breath of air, savouring it like a fine vintage. Intoxicating. The programmer-turned blood-drinking commando almost couldn't believe she was finally able to get out of the office, but here she was.

She slowly walked forwards, out from under the rain-roof and staring up at the darkened, pastel purplish-grey sky and letting the rain fall onto her face and into her hair. A massive, satisfied, relieved grin as the heavenly cascade splattered onto her like a cold, wet kiss from an angel. A stinging, brisk, bracing reminder that she was, in spite of everything that had happened, in spite of the cancer and the insane, experimental technology that kept it in check - and gave her a thirst for blood - that she still yet lived, and Serena found a bout of cathartic, almost manic, but definitely pleased laughter escaping her lips as she stood in the rain, just finally glad to be out of there, and still alive, to boot.

Of course, it only took a few seconds for the rain to go from 'liberating' to 'cold, wet, and unpleasant', and Serena quickly pulled herself back under, wiping her face and hair dry with the end of her scarf, but continuing to breathe deeply, relieved and almost... Happy. Vincent had been right; it had been a long, tedious night filled with paperwork and running back and forth between departments, signing all sorts of agreements and requisitions and contracts and applications, many in duplicate and triplicate.

It was enough to make her head spin, and it had only been made worse by Gabriel suddenly absconding and leaving her to navigate the mountain of red tape on her own. He'd cited that he had to get back to work on fixing her 'blood issue', but from the way he was obviously trying to hide a guilty smile, both the vampire and her new boss could smell it was a bold-faced lie.

Despite how much his demeanour irritated her, Serena almost found herself missing his overpowering positivity and encouragement in those trying hours, and she definitely needed a lot of that while filling out form after form. She'd asked why exactly she needed to fill out three different forms in triplicate just to be able to use a gun, but, apparently the company just needed to cover all legal bases... Still... Serena took another deep breath, still smiling to herself as she slowly made her way towards the auto-rack. It was over.

This whole insane roller-coaster ride of hope and despair, being experimented on and screwing around in the gym to kill time, and - she just groaned again - all that paperwork, but... It was finally over!... Serena just found herself laughing again, as she fished her wallet back out of her pocket. This horrible episode had finally come to an end and she was free to finally... Live.

Or, well, Serena groaned, as she scanned her employee ID into the terminal. Live this new life that had been set up for her, by accident of fate, and without any sort of input or permission on her part, but... She just laughed again, partly bitter, and partly relieved. She was still alive, and, at the end of the day, that's all she realized she really wanted. To be able to savour and appreciate that delectable, juicy fruit of living after having come so close to death from nothing more than poor circumstance.

Now, she was finally back outside, wearing the same leather jacket she'd collapsed in over two weeks ago. As she inputted her commands into the terminal, a warm smile came onto her face as a familiar dark red motorbike emerged out from the machinery of the auto-rack and right in front of her, just in time for the vampire to stow her wallet back in her pants. Time to go home.

The motor hummed reassuringly beneath her as she turned the key - still had some juice in it, even after two weeks of sitting in the auto-rack. Serena wasted little time, slipping her helmet back on and firing up the throttle, speeding away over the wet concrete of the courtyard and the asphalt of the road, throwing a fine mist of water behind her as her scarf trailed out in the breeze, only barely slowing down enough to not plow head-first through the security checkpoint's gate, but after that, after she was blazing through the neon-lit streets of the city.

The night was lit up with a constellation of bright pinks, purples, reds, and blues, bleeding out into the rain, catching off the statues and arches and gargoyles lining the buildings, banners and billboards lighting the colossal towers she was passing through like an ant would a tree. Echoes of music and ribald amusement coming out of the entryways of nightclubs and taverns, warm, orange and yellow glows leaking through the windows of apartment buildings, piercing the mist and gloom of the city night, and Serena just took a deep breath, drinking it all in with a smile on her face.

This really was a city that never slept. Even as she was on her way out of Bathrette's headquarters, she could still see co-workers she never recognized diligently attending to their duties, clerks hard at work in a thought interface, custodians keeping the halls of the castle immaculately clean, guards patrolling the walls in spite of the heavy rain, yet there was something clearly different about the city tonight. Maybe it was a fact of just how late it was - by the time she was finally done with all that paperwork, they'd reached the wee hours of the early morning, and even Vincent looked just about ready to call it a night. Serena, though?...

The vampire took another deep breath of that almost sweet-tasting, misty night air as she powered her bike around a corner, not even really caring where she was going and having drifted off-route almost immediately. She still had energy to burn, even this late at night when it seemed the world around her fell silent.

Even a city that never truly slept seemed to stall. The nightclubs didn't stop the music until somewhere around four in the morning, when even the most ardent party animals finally blacked out, but everything else seemed to slow down, and the streetlamps and neon lights illuminated a mostly empty, misty, rain-covered road and sidewalks utterly devoid of pedestrians. A wry, excited grin crossed her face, the night's cool, misty rain battering down on her helmet. Serena had practically the whole city to herself, and she didn't exactly feel any rush to go back to her apartment.

The vampire rounded another corner, completely ignoring the red light and coming dangerously close to losing one of her side-mirrors to an errant lamp post, but she didn't care. She was kind of playing with fire, here - especially if a Monty's Mounties cruiser came patrolling by, but despite the danger she was putting herself in, recklessly cruising down the rainy, gloomy, neon-lit and gargoyle-adorned city streets in her motorbike just felt... Liberating. Almost triumphant.

Danger was, after all, probably going to be a very common occurrence in this new life she'd been foisted into, so, why not just start here?... The thought of it just made her laugh. That kind of thinking was something a stupid teenager would do, wasn't it?... She sighed, staring wistfully out into the mist ahead of her. It was something she never really got to do. While her classmates were out wrecking stuff and raising hell, the most rebellious thing she'd ever done was smoke in the girls' bathroom with some stupid punk chick. Was it for the better?...

Well, she couldn't really speak for those delinquents but her studiousness had gotten her into a reasonably good school, got a decently paying job, and... She groaned, and shook her head. And it led to her almost dying at twenty-four having done nothing interesting or worthwhile with her life, but... Serena took a deep breath, and just tried to crack a smile, gripping the handlebars harder. It had also led to... This, crazy life of danger and secrecy and drinking blood... She just had to laugh again.

Despite her earlier complaints of mundanity, it really was like she was living a movie. Maybe Gabriel had the right idea, she mused, and she ought to try and think positively more often. Every cloud had a silver lining, didn't it? In spite of a persistent need to drink blood, in spite of the need for secrecy, in spite of being stuck with Bathrette Beautronics under threat of 'liquidation', she was still alive, she'd gotten a promotion beyond her wildest dreams, and... Serena just sardonically laughed at the irony of it all. If she was worried about her life so far being completely boring and utterly pedestrian, then that was officially over. The vampire had a feeling that she was going to be very intimate with danger these days. A satisfied, reassured grin came onto her face, and she took another deep breath of the night's air. For the first time in what seemed like a while, things were looking pretty good...

Although... Serena slowed down a bit as she checked all of her jacket's pockets, swearing under her breath when she found a noticeable absence in her personal articles. Her wallet, phone, and keys had been right where she'd left them but, her packet of Nightsticks and her cheap lighter were gone. Confiscated? Stolen? Just fell out?... Whatever it was, they were missing, and, after two or so weeks of being stressed out and cooped up in Bathrette's headquarters, Serena found she needed a smoke break, badly. The hum of the engine still ringing in her ears, the vampire's red eyes peered out into the mist, trying to find a convenience store or a bar or something that was still open...

CHIK! clicked the flint of the cheap, awful, barely-functional lighter she'd bought. A small, orange flame emitted from the tip and enveloped the end of the black-paper wrapped cigarette, enveloping it in it's conflagration and leaving the tip choked in embers as Serena felt the familiar rush of nicotine for the first time in weeks. She depressed the button, cutting off the supply of fuel into the nozzle and extinguishing the flame, leaving only the glow of her night-stick as she stuffed the lighter back into her pocket and took a deep drag off it, blowing a cloud of smoke out from under the rain-roof and into the darkened, gloomy city streets below, the brick wall she reclined against feeling as relaxing and welcoming as a genuine cotton mattress, the sounds of the rain battering down above and all around her and the cool, still night air felt so... Calming.

It had taken a bit of riding around, but, in the middle of a large block of residential flats, she'd finally happened upon a cigarette machine. Right out in front of a grocer that had evidently closed for the night, but thankfully for her and any other habitual smokers at two in the morning, they'd kept the machine powered, the light-up display on it's red case like the blazing beacon of a lighthouse overlooking the dark, stormy sea all around her.

The streetlights out in front of the store were all burnt out, and, from what little of the tall, monolithic apartment complexes out front she could see in the splash of the cigarette machine showed they were very flat and utilitarian - no gargoyles or arched columns here, and the graffiti painted on the brickwork, the bars in the windows, and even how... Sturdy and fortified the cigarette machine looked told her this was a pretty rough part of town, but Serena found herself a bit far from caring. She blew out another thick cloud of acrid smoke into the rain. Life was too short, after all, to spend it living in fear.

So, she was in a rough neighbourhood, rain pouring down all around her and so dark she could barely see past the splash of the cigarette machine - the streets were already clouded in shadow, and the alleyway to her left was pitch black. Serena just shrugged her shoulders. So, what? Why should she be afraid of the dark, or anything that might hide in the dense, black shadows all around her?

The vampire just laughed to herself a bit. Maybe two weeks ago, there was cause for concern, but now, she practically WAS something that went bump in the night. She took another deep breath of the wet, cold, slightly smoky air around her, still as sweet as honey.

There was another benefit to this, she mused, a cathartic, carefree laugh escaping her mouth. Now she didn't have to worry about getting assailed by random thugs since she could probably just overpower them, even without a weapon.

She probably should have been more disturbed by that. Really, she probably should have been disturbed and even disgusted by the whole situation she'd stumbled into, but right now, as she leaned back against the brick wall, her bike resting right beside her, staring out into the darkness and the rain, the cold air brushing against her skin, and the cigarette just barely warming her up a bit. Still, somehow she just felt so... Secure. At ease, even. Maybe even a bit... Too at ease.

After all, even if she was something more - and less than - human now, she was still in a rough neighbourhood at night, and she wasn't really focused on much of anything. Serena was just... Relaxing, taking it easy - a bit TOO easy. She was just laughing to herself and blowing out big, obnoxious clouds of smoke, and even if she wasn't scared of things that lurked in the shadows all around her, just out of sight, cloaked in the inky black shadows all around her, she definitely was getting their attention.

If Serena hadn't been snickering and laughing to herself like a glue-sniffing teenager she might have heard something go 'bump' in the night, footsteps rapping against the wet concrete and a set of breaths that weren't hers. If she wasn't busy taking drags off her cigarette and staring distantly into the night she might have noticed a sliver of light coming from the alleyway to her left. The splash of the light coming out of the cigarette machine was catching on the razor's edge of a large knife, and the man holding it peered hungrily out of the alleyway, a massive, toothy grin on his shadow-covered face like a shark catching a scent of blood in the water and finding a particularly choice morsel swimming in front of it...

Of course, The vampire wasn't completely oblivious. She was just smoking cigarettes, after all, not shooting ambrosia. Some of it was a bit... Instinctive.

A stillness in the air, a bad feeling creeping up her spine as she raised the cigarette to her mouth, but the presence of another was fast becoming too obvious for even somebody as obviously distracted as her to ignore.

She could feel the change in the air-pressure, she could hear a faint sound of footsteps rapping on the wet concrete beside her, and - The vampire's eyes went wide as she noticed it, goosebumps erupting across her skin and brushing the liner of her jacket, a chill going right up her neck like a cold razor blade as she saw another shadow on the ground, right beside hers-

"HEY-!" She sprung out, acting on instinct, turning suspiciously towards the uninvited presence, still unsure how to react, but when she saw the knife in the man's hand, her course of action became clearer, and her look of surprise turned to a defiant look of indignation and she sprung into action, her veins suddenly burning with adrenaline as she reaching a hand out to grasp her assailant's weapon and take it out of the action while yelling out, "WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK-"

But the man just smiled, and, fast as she was, she hadn't quite been expecting to be outmanoeuvred. Far from what she was expecting, the vampire's assailant was a bit more experienced with melee combat than she was, and Serena's eyes went wide as she found herself grasping empty air with her dominant hand while the man reached around with his free hand, reversing the energy of her tackling-leap and getting the dark-haired programmer in a hold.

Serena nearly panicked, and felt her blood boil as she started to try and push him off, only stalling when she felt the glimmering edge of the man's knife rest right up against her throat.

The colour and choler drained from her face and her pupils contracting as she focused on the cold, silvery surface of the weapon that was just a flick away from tearing her neck open and sending a shower of crimson gore onto the wet concrete beneath them, so, Serena just took a deep breath and loosed her tension just a bit, catching a glimpse of the man in her peripheral vision giving her a smug, cocksure, Cheshire-cat smirk, and Serena just had to fight down the fury and panic burning in her throat in equal measure.

"-I'm doing?" The man completed her sentence, his voice smooth and slick as a velvet glove, and the vampire just clenched her teeth, the sharp, conical incisors in her mouth in her mouth failing to leave any impression, if they were even noticed at all. "I'm just making sure you don't slip out on me." He jokingly responded, and as she got a decent, up-close look at him in the light of the cigarette machine, she felt like recoiling.

Her assailant's voice and his appearance seemed completely disconnected from each-other. The dark-skinned man holding a cold, vicious knife to her throat looked completely strung-out, bloodshot eyes encrusted with rheum, a prickly looking fifteen-o-clock shadow, messy, tangled-up black hair, and a fashion sense the vampire would describe as 'business casual, if it were slept in. For about a week.' He was wearing a grimy, wrinkled pinstripe vest and black, dirt-covered slacks, complimented by a pair of filthy looking leather gloves, crusted with a bit of what Serena was rather pessimistically assuming was dried blood.

The cutpurse looked the very image of a filthy, crusty tramp, but the focused look in his bloodshot eyes and the smoothness of his voice, and the grace with which he plucked the cigarette right from her mouth and took a deep drag from it himself told a very different story... "Thanks." He sarcastically added, to his victim's simultaneous chagrin and unease.

Serena just took in a nervous breath of air. She... Couldn't really be certain how predictable someone like this would be - and whether or not he'd just kill her anyways, even if she complied. Even so, it felt... Galling to be forced to give up anything to him, and the possibility the man might be looking for a little 'something extra' from her was just unacceptable to even consider, but he was the one with the knife, after all.

Even if Gabriel said her augmentations could make her rapidly regenerate from injury, she wasn't about to test if it meant she could survive getting her throat cut. Her mind sort of blanked out, her mouth felt like it was filled with cotton, and, without really thinking about it, Serena just found herself stalling for time by babbling out, "W-Who the hell are you?!" Her tone choleric and irate, masking the apprehension and fear bubbling inside her in equal measure. She took another deep breath. It didn't seem to matter that she was a bloodsucking monster - he'd gotten the drop on her, and now she had to tread carefully...

To her surprise, though... The strung-out looking scoundrel just... Burst out laughing. "You know..." He mused aloud, taking a drag off his pilfered cigarette. "I've robbed a lotta people and you're the first one to ask who I am..." He cracked another wide, sinister grin that left Serena with another chill running down her spine - to say nothing of the less metaphorical chill of the cold steel pressed against her throat. "So, I guess I ought'a tell you a bit about myself..."

"Er-" Serena just stammered, trying to think of a way out of this but drawing a blank and visibly on edge, which just seemed to make her assailant laugh even more.

"You can call me 'Euler', hon." He introduced himself. "Euler... Smith." Serena's panic briefly subsided and she found the courage to shoot him a slightly irritated, heavy-lidded stare. That was probably one of the worst fake names she'd ever heard. "The gentleman thief."

"You don't really seem like much of a gentleman." The vampire rather harshly responded as she pressed just a bit in his overpowering, serpent-like grasp, taking deep, focused breaths of air, sort of running her mouth on instinct as she tried to steady her mind to thoughts of escape and somehow reversing the situation. "Or a thief, really..." She mused, the vampire's eyes going wide as she realized exactly what she was doing.

Thankfully for her, Euler seemed to be taking it in stride, howling with predatory amusement, a playfully psychotic smile as the blade drew in just a bit closer, mere microns away from breaking her skin, and Serena, rather painfully reminded of her current situation, had all the snappiness and choler bled right out of her like as the colour bled out of her complexion, her eyes manically focused on the cold steel right up against her, breathing deeply in and out as Euler just gave her a smug, cocksure look.

"What can I say?" He responded with another laugh - a bit more bitter and caustic this time, and Serena found an uneasy feeling settling in her gut, wondering if he was just going to snap and cut her throat anyways. "Fortunes in Saint Petersburg shift pretty quickly, you know. Today you can be on top of the world, and tomorrow, stone dead. Just a month ago I was swinging in the penthouse lounges of the rich and famous, drinking real wine out of crystal glasses and smoking ambrosia from a silvered hookah, and I spent last night in a 'Hobo Hilton'-"

"A what?"

A heavy-lidded, disappointed expression crossed the cutthroat's face, and Serena nearly recoiled again. "A polyboard box." Euler explained, taking a deep, disappointed breath as he shook his head. "But..." He just laughed again, cracking another vicious, toothy smile. "I'll be right back on top soon enough, I've just...." He sharply exhaled through clenched, smiling, rank-looking teeth. "Gotta get back to work, that's all."

Serena took another deep, tense breath, a chill going up her spine and a leaden weight sinking into her stomach. She didn't like the sound of that. "Work?..." She stammered.

Euler just flashed another wicked, slasher smile as he leaned in a bit, as frigid and sharp as the rain falling down outside the rain-roof - and the knife up against Serena's neck. "Cutting purses and cutting throats." He explained. "I prefer the former, but, you know..." He just laughed a bit, and Serena fought back the urge to squirm. "If it comes down to a 'you or me' situation, I won't flinch." She just shivered a bit, even as a heavy-lidded, slightly annoyed expression came onto her face. That was probably a hint at what he wanted her to do, she supposed.

Once again her mind went blank. It was... Intolerable to hand over her belongings to this strung-out renegade - even disregarding the indignity of it. How the hell was she supposed to get home without her keys, after all? Worse than that - another chill went up Serena's spine, her eyes hyper-fixed on the blade but her mind focused on a more long-term concern.

There were more than just a few spare holonotes in her Wallet. She'd been carrying her employee ID, Drivers' license, a few cred-sticks, and her Social Identification Card, and the dark-haired programmer was deep enough enough in the computer hacker 'scene' to know that, assuming someone knew what they were doing, the identification she'd been carrying on her was enough for someone to start filing credit cards and tax returns in her name. Serena took another deep, tense breath, catching a cocky, but expectant look on Euler's face, the mugger's expression practically saying, "Well?" without any words.

Normally she wouldn't be too worried about some strung-out junkie trying to steal her identity, but there was a certain quality she could feel, a sharpness in his eyes, a sinister quality in his clothes, and a smoothness in his tone that was sending shivers up her spine. This 'Euler' character was anything but a typical mugger. He looked like a dangerous character - moreso than his type usually were, even - and Serena felt like her wallet wasn't the only thing he'd take from her in the long run.

She took in another gulp of cold air through clenched teeth, as Euler pulled in closer and raised an eyebrow, a cattish, wicked sickle of a smile on his face as he finally had enough of her just standing there as panic and choler warred inside her in equal measure, and finally said, "Get on with it, sweetheart. I know I look like I've got all the time in the world..." He just laughed a bit. "But I've got a busy work-night ahead of me..."

What should she do?... What COULD she do?! Her mind felt like it was filled with mist - she could barely THINK with that damn blade held right up against her throat, the rankness of the man's breath and the cold, grimy, wetness of his clothes as he grasped her tightly like a vampire about to drink her dry... She just groaned at the sheer irony of that thought, though, it did little to help her situation or help her thought process.

The most Serena could think of was to wait for a bystander or a Mountie cruiser to happen by, but.... The vampire took a deep breath, only declining to shake her head since she wasn't in the mood for a viking shave. All she could really do was just... Comply for now, and, with a reluctant, almost pained expression on her face, she just reached her gloved hand into her coat and slowly pulled out her wallet - a long, black, flap-open faux-leather design, artfully containing everything Euler would need to start squeezing more money out of her.

A wicked, hungry-looking smile came on the mugger's face, echoed by the tense, nervous expression on the vampire's. The indignity of it all, not to mention the frightening possibilities that awaited her as soon as she handed off her wealth to this morally bankrupt hatchet-man made her feel colder than the rain and the wind ever could, an unsteady feeling in her legs made it hard to stand, a chill going up her spine made it hard to stay still, and a leaden, uncomfortable feeling in her stomach made her feel like throwing up. Her eyes narrowed, her vision seemed to blur at the edges. Her breathing picked up in pitch, her hand shaking uncontrollably as she brought the wallet up closer and closer towards-

Both pairs of eyes went wide, and - for Serena at least - time seemed to slow down as she noticed it. All that anxious shaking and shuddering, combined with the ambient mist and moisture all around them, had let the wallet slowly slip out of her grip, and soon enough, the black-leather case was heading down, gravity pulling it towards the wet concrete, and her mouth went agape as the condition she'd found herself entrapped in shattered like chains breaking apart.

The orderly mugging she'd been victim to suddenly descended into pure chaos, the wallet falling down onto the ground like a single drop of a catalyst falling into a beaker and starting an explosive chemical reaction. Both the assailant and his victim's focuses broke as the distinction blurred just a bit, and a tiny, relieved grin came on Serena's face. The both of them knew this was an opening - and if she wanted to reverse this situation, she'd need to act fast.

Neither of them wasted any time trying to take control and overpower the other. Euler acted on focused, precise instinct, taking the blade of his knife away just a touch to give him enough room to reach down, though, the vampire flashed a wry, repressed, almost desperately manic grin. Serena suddenly found enough leeway to attempt an escape as well, and she struck out in a frenzy, stamping on the mugger's foot, finding herself rewarded with a satisfying yelp as the tables began to turn and she easily broke his grasp and pushed herself out of his embrace, feeling the adrenaline and vigour welling up inside of her as she turned around to face her staggered opponent, a wicked smile on her face, all hopped up on choler and anxiousness as she pulled a fist back and-

Serena felt a foreign sensation that was difficult to really put a finger on - the most she could really compare it to was having the wind knocked out of her through careful application of a punch to the gut, but very, very different, and she found herself suddenly still. Her punch suddenly stalled from behind her, spontaneously robbed of its energy and her nerves robbed of vigour, and Euler just laughed viciously, sending another chill ringing up her spine as caught another look at the knife. Far off to her left, at the very end of the mugger's outstretched arm, the vampire's eyes went wide as she saw a coating of crimson along the blade, shimmering like mercury in the glow of the cigarette machine, it made her aware of the red droplets shimmering in the air in front of her like wax in a lava lamp, and time slowed down as she reflexively reached for her throat.

Her mind short-circuiting and her mouth agape as she felt and saw a sticky wetness oozing out from between her gloved fingers. The vampire panicked, trying to step forwards but finding her legs unsteady and buckling underneath her, she tried to scream, but nothing came out, and she stumbled forwards, speeding down towards the wet concrete below.

She tried desperately to staunch the torrent of blood, to no avail, her body suddenly feeling cold and stiff, all the vigour drained right out of her, barely even able to feel the impact against the wet concrete, and her vision beginning to blur at the edges and go a bit monochrome, yet the redness of the blood spilling out onto the ground - her blood - still looked sickeningly bright even as the rest of the world began to go dim all around her, and she found herself shivering, quaking in fear and coldness and pain and... Anger!

How did this... Happen!? It wasn't fair! With what felt like the last vestiges of her strength, Serena clenched her teeth, a choleric, resentful look on her increasingly pale face. This wasn't... How she was supposed to die! She quivered and shook on the cold, wet concrete, a salty, bitter tear running down her face and being lost in the rain. This was all just... Wrong! Wrong and so damn... Stupid!

With one hand, she tried desperately to stem the blood oozing from her neck and with the other she reached out, her hand grasping for... Something, anything! She'd just... Serena took in one last gasp of air through clenched teeth, a sharp pain in her neck and a cloying feeling in her lungs. Finally started appreciating life! She'd nearly died from cancer, been through that... Horrific nanite-implantation, sold her soul to the company... Again, and now that she'd finally come to terms with it all, now that she could finally understand what it meant to be alive, she was going to die for real! In some stupid accident of fate she'd stumbled into!

The vampire clenched her teeth even harder, a look of fiery, indignant rage on face, the girl's vision swinging violently around and all split into double-images, yet the blood on the ground was clear as day, and it only incensed her more. Why her?! Why did she have to die?! Just when she was just starting to be able to be alive again...

Serena found her hand pushing down against the ground, her vision blurry and her mind unfocused, the coldness of her body suddenly fading out, replaced by a strange, burning sensation that seemed to crawl all over her body like a carpet of ants formed from napalm, but felt especially concentrated in her neck. It was like being covered in fire without the pain, and The vampire felt weak and strangely hollow, yet, she found herself slowly rising up from the wet concrete, as she found herself whispering, "I want to live..."

Euler, meanwhile, hadn't paid Serena too much attention since she collapsed onto the pavement, spilling her lifeblood into the wet concrete beneath them. The gentleman thief just sighed, and produced a very crusty, unsettling-looking handkerchief from his pocket that may have been white once, but had greyed with dirt and browned with blood - more blood, now that he was cleaning off his latest victim's from his knife.

"What a shame..." He mused, sheathing the murder weapon and reaching down to collect his prize. "And she was kinda cute, too." The cutthroat just laughed viciously to himself. "Would'a liked to get to know her a bit better, but well..." He sighed, shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "What can you do? That's just life, eh?" Letting his guard down just a bit after a successful mugging, Euler turned his attentions towards the OTHER target he'd spied out from that darkened alleyway, sizing up Serena's dark red motorbike like it was a choice piece of genuine beefsteak, leaning in and running a filthy gloved finger over the chrome, wondering aloud to himself, "Is that a Honda?..."

An almost impressed look came over the cutthroat - while it didn't exactly hold a candle to some of the vehicles he'd seen in his glory days as a member of high society, it WAS something a lot nicer than he'd expected this random company drone to have. A wicked, but almost excited smile came onto the rogue's face, as he stood fully upright and scanned the bike with his eyes. He could probably get some good money for it at a chop shop, and since he had to drive it there in the first place, what harm would a short little joyride cause? The keys were probably still with the stiff, and, well, since she was probably still warm frisking her could still be an... Euler just closed his eyes and cracked an almost profane, sarcastic laugh he turned around. Enjoyable experience, he mused to himself.

The cutthroat was much less cocksure and composed as he opened his eyes to see his murder victim rising up from the wet, blood-soaked concrete beneath them, her red eyes shimmering in the light, glazed over and feral like a wild beast in the throes of frenzy, and a furious, resentful and strangely... Hungry look on her face, her mouth hanging agape, and Euler's eyes went wide as he finally noticed the long, sharp fangs catching the light of the cigarette machine, and opened his mouth to scream.

Serena struggled to really describe what she was feeling - in fact, as she rose up from the blood-soaked concrete beneath her it was difficult to think at all. A disturbing, agonizing feeling wracked her whole body - it wasn't pain, but it felt similar enough. Her vision was blurry and clouded, splitting and drifting, runny at the edges and washed out in shades of gray - all except for the blood on the floor, and the man standing in front of her, the grimy cutthroat's demeanour having done a complete one-eighty as he turned around to witness her rise, gnarling and gnashing like a hungry predator.

Though her skin felt clammy and cold underneath the blood-soaked jacket she wore, her veins felt like they were on fire, and her very spirit felt... Serena took a few rapid, acrid breaths as she stepped forwards towards her former assailant, snarling as she bore her fangs. It was impossible to think straight, but maybe 'hungry' was the word.

She just felt this... Hollowness inside of her, like a vicious, nightmarish creature was carving her from the inside out, and... The vampire took another step towards her would-be victim, her fangs glimmering in the light of the cigarette machine and her expression glazed over and feral, like a starved beast. She felt the absolute, overpowering need to fill herself back up...

Euler sprung into action, the strung-out renegade's fight-or-flight instinct kicking in, a distinct, palatable sense of danger overcoming him, yet, he chose to strike as he bellowed a wrathful, vengeful cry of war, pumping adrenaline and vigour into his veins as, with little time to draw his weapon, he clasped his hand into a fist and thrust forwards, throwing a magnum punch right into her gut with enough force to knock the wind right out of a grown man, yet the blow ricocheted off her like a pebble thrown against a battle tank, and it just seemed to just make that snarling, predatory, blood-soaked beast even madder.

Too late for him to run away, the vampire grabbed her victim by the shoulders, manhandling the cutthroat as easily as she would a child. The bloodsucker viciously threw him against the wall, the force of the impact sending bits of detritus flying and stunning the gentleman thief, yet his assailant didn't even give him a second of relief.

Driven by that horrific, monstrous hollow feeling inside her, and the nightmarish vigour and agonizing adrenaline burning in her veins, she pushed right up against him, pinning the man to the brickwork with one hand and grasping his head, moving it up to expose his neck with another, the cutthroat's struggle having less effect on her than a stiff breeze. When Euler realized what his former victim was doing, a feeling of dread and abject terror came over him, and, as he noticed her razor-sharp fangs catching the light, he finally found the will to scream, before it was abruptly cut off when Serena leaned in and the fangs hit home, a spray of rich, red blood cascading onto the ground and she drank deeply and greedily...

Exactly when she'd finally snapped out of that frenzy, Serena really couldn't say. All she could really recall after the fact was that time had sort of felt runny, and, one moment she'd decided to open her eyes only to realize that her vision had been restored to colour again, the hollow feeling and that vicious, wicked flush of energy had faded out, she no longer felt any pain, and... Her eyes went wide as she felt it, and tracked her gaze slightly down a bit. That, and she still had her fangs buried up to the metaphorical hilt in her assailant's neck.

Serena screamed, a blind panic overtaking her as she quickly tore herself from the 'kiss', allowing her attacker to simply fall down onto the bloodstained concrete beneath her, her eyes focused on the body as she began to take deep, rapid, hyperventilating breaths and clutched her chest. Her heart was pounding so hard she felt like the organ was going to tear a hole right through her. A pervasive feeling of violation and disgust welled up inside her, the vampire feeling so sick she almost aggressively emptied the contents of her stomach out onto the scene of carnage before her red eyes.

There wasn't any skirting around this - she'd really had a momentary lapse of control and drunk the bastard. The revelation was... Almost debilitating, and Serena had to fight the urge to collapse right then and there. It was one thing to merely crack stupid jokes about it, but...

The vampire needed to take a few deep breaths, feeling the overpowering need to tear her eyes away from the scene of her deeds yet finding herself unable to avert her gaze, the shock of it all simply too powerful to ignore. It was another thing entirely to actually see the grisly results of it... Serena found herself shivering madly, locked in place like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming van, and utterly transfixed on the corpse of the man she'd just drained dry in front of her. She... Serena grasped her head in her hands. She really WAS a bloodsucking monster...

"Aaaaauuugh..." Came a weak, soft moan from beneath her, and the vampire snapped right back to Earth, and she looked down at the cutthroat laying in the blood below her, a massive, soporific, doped-up smile on his face as he lightly twitched, and her disgust took centre-stage as she took a deep, heavy-lidded sigh. So she... HADN'T killed him. At least, not yet. Now that she was able to think a touch more clearly, she felt a bit callously conflicted on whether or not that was a good thing... He HAD cut her throat, after all...

Of course, now that she could think more clearly, she was also made more acutely aware of the situation she'd found herself in. Serena's eyes went wide again, as an uncomfortable thought occurred to her, and her heart picked back up in pitch. The vampire put all the moral implications, the horror at what she'd done and what she'd become and the stress over the night's events, all off to one side and focused on the tangible facts.

She was standing here, covered in blood, in a rough neighbourhood, with the moaning, twitching form of the robber she'd just drank from laying in a pool of blood, much of it hers'. If ANYONE found her like this, she was, to put it politely, absolutely screwed.

A blind, frenzied, yet at the same time focused and goal-driven mania came over her, dumping everything else to the wind. Having a panic attack and an horrific bout of existential dread over her condition and her deeds could wait, she had to get out of here, NOW. Serena did a cursory check of her environment and herself. The gash in her throat where Euler had slashed at it was gone, and she didn't bother to focus on it for long enough to question it. The vampire still had her keyring, and her wallet was merely laying in a pool of blood at her feet, where Euler had dropped it, and she quickly snatched it up and stowed it in her coat.

Serena was able to get a lot of the blood off her face with her scarf, which miraculously remained mostly soaked with brisk, pure rainwater, but there was nothing she could do about the massive, obvious, still wet and dripping red stains on her jacket, and so she just didn't bother, quickly removing the leather garment and tying it around her waist. That mostly obscured the blood, the coldness of the late-fall air and the bitter rain feeling like nothing in comparison to the overpowering, Stygian chill she felt at the possibility of being caught in this monstrous act.

Stepping over the twitching form of her victim, Serena retrieved her helmet from where she'd dropped it with one hand and fished her keys from her pants-pocket with the other, and nervously put it on as she started the bike, the motor coming back to life with a warm, reassuring hum as she took a series of tense, nervous breaths, looking all around her, hoping there weren't any witnesses to this abominable violation of human nature, and finding a strange, desperate flush of piety coming over her, thanking The Lord she was still all alone in this crappy tenement-block neighbourhood.

Ignoring Euler's still twitching form, Serena grasped the handlebars of her bike as hard as she could as she gunned the engine, speeding off into the night, her scarf and coattails trailing behind her, raindrops splashing against her bare forearms and staining her dress shirt, but Serena just clenched her teeth and powered indomitably on, trying her best not to think about the scene of inhuman carnage she'd left behind and just focus on getting as far away from this as possible, speeding back to her apartment as fast as the wheels of her bike would carry her, beyond caring about any sort of danger and just hoping nobody would analyze her too closely, the taste of blood still sticking uncomfortably in her mouth...

By the time Serena clocked into work the next day, she was still a nervous wreck, trying to bury herself into the leather roller-chair in Vincent's office. She was shivering, breathing heavily, and had a shaken-up look in her eyes like she'd just killed someone - which, granted, there was a distinct possibility Euler didn't survive his injuries. Serena still hadn't finished deciding whether to be pitiless or guilty over having possibly killed a cutpurse, so she settled on being an anxious mess.

Gabriel, sitting right beside her once again, looked the most outwardly concerned, even his usual sanguine, cheerful demeanour unable to completely conceal the worried expression on his face. The middle-manager, meanwhile, had an expression somewhere in between irritation and worry, a disappointed look in his eyes that was saying, 'Serena, what am I going to do with you?' Vincent took a deep breath, and reclined back in his armchair as he linked up the fingers of his hands, shoulders on the armrests and asked, "So, is that everything that happened?"

With a deep, unsteady breath, unable to look her new boss in the eyes, Serena just replied, "Yeah..." Vincent just exhaled and shook his head, Gabriel let out a slightly worried little chuckle, and the vampire just recoiled even further, a frazzled, embarrassed expression on her face as she seemingly tried to will herself to vanish.

After her boss had finally gotten her calmed down long enough to sit still, she'd relayed the events of last night, which, at this point, still felt to her like a horrific nightmare. The entire ride back to her apartment was spent in a panicked frenzy, half focused on the road ahead of her and constantly on the lookout for any Mountie cruisers or other corporate security officers who might be driving past her to investigate the carnage, but thankfully this early in the morning there was hardly anyone else out on the road, which also meant she didn't have to watch out for the speed limit, either.

When Serena had finally gotten back to her cluttered, one-room apartment, she barely even caught a wink of sleep, anxiousness and panic burning through her like she'd been hooked up to a live wire, unable to relax or let her guard down for a moment.

For what felt like hours, she sat on her folding mattress in the darkness, wrapped up in a blanket and stripped down to her underwear underneath. Her blood, water, and sweat-soaked clothes were rather hastily ditched in a corner of her apartment, her gaze focused on the door with panic and fear in her eyes, as though any moment a riot squad could burst in and pump her full of lead. All the while, she pumped the room full of smoke, manically burning through the entire packet of cigarettes she'd bought in a vain attempt to calm down.

The dark-haired programmer wasn't certain exactly when she finally passed out from exhaustion, but eventually she was roused from her momentary respite by the blaring of her alarm clock. She felt totally weary and worn-out like she'd been worked over with a two-by-four, her mouth feeling like she'd swallowed an entire ashtray, and as stiff as a corpse, yet she found herself rising from her mattress anyways, breathing heavily, still shivering and panicked, with massive, black bags under her eyes.

It was... Tempting to call in sick, though, that would probably only raise more questions than she was comfortable with, and she... Needed to figure something out about this, and, since she could barely think straight as it was. Serena just found herself going through the motions on autopilot, scrambling some amino-yolks in a fry-pan and toasting up some doughy, chewy carbo-wafers and drowning the whole mess in Hot-flavour sauce, rapidly devouring her breakfast with the desperation of a starved beast; she'd only realized that, after last night and all the stress she put her body through, she was REALLY Hungry.

The vampire quickly threw on something vaguely work-appropriate, going with a slightly wrinkled white dress shirt and tan slacks with a short, black necktie. The issue of finding a laundromat that could get blood out and not ask any questions being a problem for future-Serena, she just threw on an old windbreaker that she'd found in the back of her closet with a stupid-looking green hoodie underneath.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and, momentarily, the panicked feeling receded to be replaced by a temporary feeling of embarrassed irritation as she just groaned. If it weren't for her breasts, she realized, she'd probably have looked like a teenage boy. Her getup had an utter lack of feminine charm, but fashion was about the last thing on her mind at the moment.

All throughout the bitterly cold, cloudy, but thankfully dry morning's drive to work Serena found herself constantly, nervously, even obsessively peering around, as though a whole squadron of Mountie cruisers would pop out of the next corner, straight out of her paranoid nightmares, but, thankfully no such obstacles conspired to put an end to this new life she'd bitterly and desperately grasped for herself. Soon enough, she'd made it to Bathrette's headquarters in one piece, only slightly weirding out the gate guard with her restless, panicky expression, and shaky hand as she gave him her ID card.

Even though she was technically supposed to report directly to the Security department this morning, as soon as the vampire was in the door, out of the cold and into the warmly lit, modernist-designed lobby, Serena stepped right up to the bored, inattentive looking, blonde receptionist who's name she couldn't - and didn't care to - recall and swiftly inserted a dose of insanity into her day with all the grace of a sledgehammer through a plate-glass window. The vampire planted both hands on the desk and, making a split second decision between who she should call for help, decided that maybe optimism was a better policy and, her tone all panicky and shook up, her eyes wide and nervous, told the receptionist she needed to see Gabriel right now.

The receptionist just looked agitated - and very very confused, and it was only when Serena just groaned and tried again with, "I need to see Dr. McGarahann right now, he'll be expecting me... Just do it." The woman at the reception desk just looked... Dubious, but, when she actually reached the eccentric scientist over the phone, her expression just went from confused and agitated to... Even more confused, but the agitation was just replaced with a strange sort of disappointed disdain. "He'll be right down..." She responded.

True to his relayed words, Gabriel's arrival in the lobby was staggeringly swift, the eccentric, ponytailed scientist out of breath and laughing to himself as he arrived, which made Serena wonder if he just had a habit of running to all his urgent appointments at top speed, but she certainly wasn't complaining.

His greeting was amicable enough, with a "Good morning, Serena!" and, under his breath, cracking a joke about whether she actually needed a coffin for a good night's sleep now. Those little jokes were quickly cut off when the tired and restless-looking programmer just dragged him off to a secluded corner of the lobby, and, as frankly as possible, whispered in his ear, "Gabriel, I think I killed somebody."

Contrary to what she was expecting, however, the eccentric scientist just started laughing, and the panicky, restless programmer just felt a flash of white-hot choler running through her veins when Gabriel responded, "Well, I'm glad you came to me first." In a joking, amicable tone that just made Serena clench her teeth. "How's your alibi looking-"

"I'M. SERIOUS!" Serena responded in what was probably the most dramatic, rage-filled whisper possible, as she manically clutched his shoulders and shook him up a bit, her demeanour breaking down a bit as she was at her wits' absolute end. "Somebody tried to mug me last night, and I ended up drinking the bastard's blood."

That... Definitely put a dent in the scientist's jokey, amicable mood, and Gabriel just looked awkward and a bit frazzled as they just stood there, in an awkward silence for a few seconds before he just cleared his throat and, his tone now more subdued, serious, and even a bit worried as he responded, "I think we'd better talk to the boss, then." That's how Serena ended up in Vincent Van Steyr's office once again, attempting to burrow into the chair and relaying the whole story to the both of them, trying not to break down and have a panic attack. As it turns out, possibly killing someone is difficult enough to deal with emotionally BEFORE you factor in the crime against nature Serena committed doing it.

The boss-man, meanwhile, seemed disappointed and concerned, though, his concerns and Serena's didn't exactly overlap, and the vampire needed to do a double-take when she heard him say, "Did you make sure to cover-up your... Refuelling?" When she asked for a clarification, Vincent just groaned and reminded her that he'd said to make any 'fatal field resupply' look like an animal attack, and Serena's eyes just went wide, an embarrassed, agitated expression coming over her, and she just laughed nervously a bit, unable to make eye-contact with the very disappointed-looking middle-manager.

It was very, very difficult to explain to him that, in her panic and desperation, she'd forgotten to finish her victim off and just left the cutthroat writhing and moaning on the blood-soaked concrete behind her. Judging by the deep, irritated groan and the cold look of profound disappointment on the man's face, her boss was definitely not happy with her.

"Ms. Ramneau, I thought I made it very clear..." Vincent sternly told her, tapping his finger on the surface of the desk for emphasis. "About the importance of operational security and just how fine a line we're running on-"

"Oh, come on!" Serena snapped back, half panicked and half irate, her sudden outburst conveniently creating an awkward space of silence for a few seconds to let her try and quickly think up a solution. She wasn't naive enough to assume that she could find an excuse - after all, it technically was a lapse of some extremely warped judgment that she didn't gouge out the man's throat like a werewolf.

She just sort of stammered a bit before the revelation came to her, and then she leaned in and yelled out, "He probably freaking died anyways!" It was a bit of a no-brainer, really, since that WAS what she'd been a bit scared of. "Besides, it wasn't somebody people would've cared about!" She added, the callous side of her ethical mind finding itself dominant. "It was some goddamn alley-stalking junkie mugger! Even if he's alive, who says the police will even listen to what he has to say! He probably has a rap sheet a mile long!"

The middle-manager just took a deep breath, and shook his head again. "If." He reiterated. "If this 'Euler' character still alive, we still have a potential intelligence leak. One that, for the sake of operational security, should be liquidated at the earliest convenience-"

"I err..." Gabriel cut in, laughing a bit nervously as he scratched the back of his neck. "This might be something that we'd better just keep between us." Serena just looked even more nervous, and Vincent just raised an eyebrow. "With all due respect, sir, it might not be completely necessary - Like Serena said, it is more likely than not his stories of 'A vampire drank my blood!' would probably get be dismissed as a bad trip, and," He turned over towards Serena, a slightly more chipper look on his face as he said, "The guy WAS pretty buzzed from getting bitten, wasn't he?"

That just made the both of them look pretty confused, and it took the eccentric scientist a moment to realize his co-conspirators weren't exactly on the same page. "Buzzed?" Serena asked, awkward and suddenly very concerned.

"Well," Gabriel adjusted his eyeglasses, and cracked a smile. "You said the guy was kinda laying on the floor, moaning to himself with a stupid grin on his face, right?"

The Vampire just raised an eyebrow, a nervous and uncertain expression coming over her. "Yeah?..."

"You're going to have to elaborate, Doctor McGarahann." The middle-manager said, taking a deep, disappointed sigh, and the eccentric scientist just laughed a bit as he produced a dataslate from his labcoat and began to thumb through it.

"Well," Gabriel began to explain, as he found the section of his notes he was looking for and passed it to Serena for her own reading pleasure, the vampire just shooting him a weird look. "Like I said, part of what the nanites do is synthesize a series of performance enhancing and stabilizing narcotics to help increase your physical capabilities directly into your bloodstream - a few of them are actually a bit similar chemically similar to morphine-"

"Huh?" A somewhat confused look found itself coming onto Serena's face.

"It was a painkiller popular in the old century, known mostly for it's pleasurable, soporific effects." Vincent explained. "It was synthesized from refined opium found in a now extinct family of plants called poppies, and, for the most part, has been replaced as a painkiller with a number synthetic drugs."

"It's really more comparable to Ambrosia." The eccentric scientist added. "The synthetic stuff just takes the edge off, while Ambrosia has euphoric effects closer to real morphine. Point is," He extended a finger over towards the dark-haired programmer, who was now beginning to look a bit worried.

"All the drugs in your system that are supposed to keep you going longer, make you stronger, keep you from collapsing from the pain, and gave you a burst of adrenaline when you got your throat cut and lost a lot of blood would probably get someone REALLY messed up if there were any cross-contamination. Now, the nanobots in your blood also sort of correct your brain's neural patterns to keep you from being affected by the cocktail of drugs in your bloodstream, but anyone else, well..." He just laughed a bit. "Would probably get one hell of a high from it."

"So... You're saying..." Serena just took a deep breath, an awkward, visibly disquieted and almost disgusted look on her face. "My blood's a drug now, too?"

"Basically." Gabriel responded with a laugh, and Serena just shot him a glare, beginning to rethink her position that 'optimism might be the best way to go about this'. She certainly didn't find it funny. "One of my assistants theorized that any 'cross-contamination' of blood might produce an... Effect not unlike really high-grade Ambrosia, and, well..."

He took a deep breath. "It looks like drinking someone's blood can do that. Whoever you 'feed' on will get a pretty crazy kick from it." The vampire just sighed, and found her gaze shifting towards the floor, her expression agitated and almost nauseous. She couldn't help but feel a distinct sense of discomfort from that.

"So..." She just paused for a bit, her tone unsteady and uncertain. "Was that whole... Thing from the drugs, too?"

Vincent and Gabriel just raised an eyebrow each. "The what?" They responded in unison, then locked eyes, an unspoken... Camaraderie finding itself in the air between them.

"Like..." Serena needed to take another tense, slightly shaky breath before turning over to Gabriel and almost shouting "The fact that I survived getting my throat cut and..." There was another pause, as the vampire found herself forced to internalize and recount what had happened. "The fact that I... Sort of..."

"Sort of what, Ms. Ramneau?" Vincent asked, and, struck dumb with panic and fear and running off about two hours of sleep, Serena just found herself blathering without thinking about it too much.

"Like, what I said! That... Kinda... Frenzy I went into between that guy..." A look of profound discomfort came over her. "Cutting my throat and me drinking his blood. This... Horrible, hollow feeling just kinda sticks out in my mind, and my head still feels all..." She needed another deep breath of air. "Kinda hazy."

"That's... Err..." Gabriel began to look a bit intrigued, which swiftly turned to nervousness and worry when Vincent raised an eyebrow. "Well, it's not a defect, if that's what you're wondering!"

"It sounds like one to me." The middle-manager responded, leaning in a bit, freezing the both of them with his harsh stare. "Are you saying the augmentation induced a lapse of mental control with the, er, test subject, Doctor?"

"Oh, no, no!..." The eccentric scientist just laughed nervously, and adjusted his necktie as Serena gave him a very dubious, slightly awkward, and still very weary and disturbed look. "Well, not by themselves, anyways..."

The vampire just looked more worried, while the middle-manager groaned, looking more disappointed. "Elaborate."

"Well, it's simple." He turned back over towards Serena. "Remember the Emergency Compensation System I added?"

"Err..." Serena just paused, her look of worry beginning to fade, though, now she was looking a bit more confused. "I think you mentioned it a few days ago-"

"Well, it's a firmware package of sorts to those nanobots." Gabriel explained, pointing towards her heart again, and Serena just clenched her teeth, making a mental note to tell him to stop doing that after they were done. "I told you all about them when I first installed them, but, in REALLY simple terms," He cracked a small grin, and Serena just sighed, crossing her arms, feeling another flash of choler come over her. He just HAD to keep rubbing it in, didn't he? "I programmed them to put adrenaline production into overdrive when you're low on blood, to hopefully avoid another episode of you passing out from blood loss - for at least long enough to resupply."

"And that caused the 'lapse', Doctor?" The middle-manager asked, his tone still cold as ice, and a bit disappointed.

"Oh, no, not by itself, no!... Like I said." The scientist responded, still trying to keep up a more energetic, optimistic demeanour, though, Serena could tell from the way his eyes were darting around and from how he adjusted his tie, the cracks were beginning to show. "But, well, the thing is the augmentation ALSO enhances tissue regeneration to almost superhuman levels - that's why Serena's neck was able to stitch itself back together without even scarring."

The vampire's eyes widened, as she snapped back to attention, reflexively putting a hand to her throat, almost astonished to feel... Nothing. Nothing beyond the supple smoothness that she could have expected - no scar tissue, no indentation, not a single indication she'd nearly died. The Vampire took another deep breath, her eyes lidding a bit. Just another horror to add to the menagerie, she cynically mused. "But, well, obviously that sort of expenditure requires a LOT of fuel,"

"Between that and what I'm guessing is a really nasty cut," Gabriel continued, really understating it in Serena's opinion. "She lost a LOT of blood, so the nanites go into overdrive a bit producing adrenaline and drugs, and, even if they try to correct the patterns of brain-activity, well..." He just laughed awkwardly, ruffling up the back of his neck. "It's a very unpredictable organ, so I suppose under those particularly 'stressful' conditions to her system, we should probably expect a bit of deviation in her mental state-"

"She's being transferred to the Special Asset Protection Squad." Vincent snapped back, a profoundly irritated look on his face, his tone as intense and vicious as a bullwhip, making both Gabriel and Serena flinch back. "'Stressful conditions' " The middle-manager even went as far as to strike air-quotes with his fingers. "Are going to be a regular occurrence, Dr. McGarahann."

"-Which is why my team and I are going to address those problems immediately." Gabriel hastily concluded his earlier explanation, Adjusting his tie and laughing nervously, which just made Serena's expression turn a bit irritated and weary, the - former - programmer sighing deeply.

"See to it you do." The middle-manager sternly responded, as he took a deep breath and reclined back in his chair, the cold, stern demeanour beginning to fade out just a bit as he turned back towards Serena. "Now then, Ms. Ramneau, I'm..." He took a deep breath. "Glad you brought this up - make sure from now on if there are any more... Complications, you report them to either me or Doctor McGarahann immediately."

"I... Er..." Serena took another deep breath, a spontaneous sense of dread welling up inside her at that. Maybe it was just her being paranoid, or maybe it was the cold austerity of the middle-manager's tone, but somehow, the thought of self-reporting any more 'complications' was making her a bit anxious, the possibility of... Liquidation never really leaving her head.

"Okay...." She sighed, feeling a bit... Testy. Maybe it was just the implication there might be more problems with those nanobots swimming in her blood. Serena just leaned back in the office chair and groaned, crossing her arms. In spite of how she was trying to take a lesson from her irritating partner-in-crime's optimistic outlook, this whole situation just felt like it was getting worse all the time. Still, she cynically mused. It was certainly still preferable to being dead.

"Good." Vincent just nodded. "Now then... He leaned back in his chair, making a dismissive sort of gesture with his hands as he turned back towards the terminal screen on his desk. "It's been a pleasantly eventful meeting, Ms. Ramneau, but you ARE late for an orientation session in the Security department..." The middle-manager turned his gaze back towards Gabriel, as Serena just took a deep breath, the vampire looking a touch irritated. "Doctor McGarahann, can you ensure she gets there?"

Gabriel just nodded, and rose up from his chair, turning towards Serena with a playful, but expectant smile on his face. "Well?" He said. "I don't know the commando squad's, er, commander very well, but I don't think he's the kind of guy you leave waiting."

Serena just groaned again, but, what else could she do? The vampire just rose up from her seat with a sour, weary look on her face, control over her life was something she was forced to relinquish if she wanted to keep on living, but that didn't mean she had to like it. "Lets' go..." She responded, the programmer and the scientist heading towards the door-

"Hold on a second." Vincent interjected, and the both of them turned back towards him, both intrigued, though, Serena's expression was more overtly concerned, which turned to disquiet and a bit discomforted when he continued. "It is possible this... 'Euler' character died from his injuries, however, if he did survive... Liquidate him immediately."

"Er-"

"Dismissed, Ms. Ramneau." The middle-manager cut her off like they were in the army. Or the mafia, Serena cynically mused. Still, she knew already there wasn't any room for arguing, and, following Gabriel's lead, she just nodded and turned back towards the door, trying not to think about it too much.

The walk out of the Department of Special Projects and into the security department a few wings away was a notably quiet and tense one, with Serena stewing in her thought and, for a while, Gabriel found himself just a bit too... He tugged at his collar. Nervous to really interrupt her. As much as he'd enjoyed playfully ribbing her in the past, the distant, though intense look on her face told him to hold his tongue...

The scientist took a deep breath, and a look of almost surprised intrigue came on Serena's face as she saw that earnest nervousness fade out a bit, a much more collected and serious expression coming onto the normally eccentric and sanguine scientist, snapping her right out of her reverie, an awkward look coming on her face. "Er-"

"Sorry." Gabriel calmly responded, and Serena's eyes went wide, the vampire briefly stopping right in her tracks.

"W-what for?" She nervously asked. Given how... Serious he suddenly looked, it had to have been something... Big... She took a deep breath, finding a low-level feeling of dread welling up inside her as her cynical, sleep-deprived mind turned into overdrive, a thousand insane possibilities - mostly concerning her augmentations - came to her, before the scientist just gave her an earnest laugh, shattering her nightmares once again with a warm, playful, painfully optimistic smile.

"For screwing with you a bit." He took a deep breath, the scientist's expression once again becoming more subdued and... Genuine. "You must be going through a lot."

"I..." There was another long, awkward pause as the scientist and newly promoted company commando stood in the hallway opposite each-other, the vampire needing to take several deep breaths of air, to focus herself and focus her thoughts before just breaking out into a fit of cathartic, nervous laughter. "All this stuff is just insane, isn't it?..."

Gabriel just flashed a smile. "Not the kind of thing that happens every day, does it?"

"Which part?" Serena asked, her tone moody and sarcastic, yet she still wore a cynical smile, part of her associate's optimism rubbing off on her. "Being press-ganged into the commando unit or drinking your freaking mugger?"

"I was gonna say, 'being saved from dying of cancer', but, I guess those two work as well." The eccentric scientist sarcastically responded, prompting the programmer to just take a deep sigh, crossing her arms and looking away, a moody look in her eyes but an embarrassed smile on her face.

"If you wanted me to say thanks," Serena responded, her tone stuck somewhere between amicable and irritated. "You probably should have asked..." There was another long, awkward pause, before she just took a deep breath and added, "Thanks..." as a small smile crawled onto her face.

The scientist just looked a bit awkward and embarrassed, adjusting his necktie again, before Serena just started snickering at his demeanour, and, for once, Gabriel ended up joining her, the two of them heading back down the hallway. "It's intense, isn't it?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, look on the bright side..." Gabriel stretched his arms out. "I don't think you'll ever be bored."

Serena just laughed again, her own demeanour calming down a lot, and, gradually losing a lot of the tension that had accumulated. "That's kinda what I'm afraid of..."

"You can't handle the danger?"

"Nah..." The vampire just cracked a wry smile. "I'm just scared that, after spending my whole freaking life cooped up, I'll like it TOO much..." she responded, and they both broke out in laughter.

With that, things seemed to calm down a bit between the two of them, the tension having been exorcised - at least, on the outside... Serena took another deep breath. After getting a lot of fresh air, breakfast, and getting it off her chest... Twice, she was feeling a bit better, but that disturbed, disquieted feeling hadn't really quite faded yet.

The memory of last night still fresh in her mind, an uncomfortable reminder of who she was now. Serena looked down at the back of her hand, the skin still much healthier and flushed than she'd been prior to collapsing for the first time, though, still a touch more pale than you'd expect. A monster, huh?... She just sighed, and shook her head. It was still all a bit... Difficult to really internalize...

"Hey." She finally piped up, and Gabriel raised an eyebrow once again, a look of playful curiosity coming over the scientists' face.

"Hmm?"

"Sorry for yelling at you." Serena responded, her expression a bit embarrassed and almost reluctant. "Like, when I thought your nanobots didn't work." She couldn't really put her finger on exactly why she decided on this. Maybe his own apology made her feel a bit more... Sympathetic towards that irritating optimist. Maybe she just wanted to feel more... Human, in spite of everything. Maybe she just felt awkward keeping that on her chest as well... She just took a deep breath, and nervously looked towards the floor. He was right in more ways than one, the vampire mused. She still felt all rattled and a bit nervous. It WAS all very... Intense.

Though, Gabriel dispelled that intensity a bit when he broke into another fit of laughter, causing the vampire to just shoot him a little irritated glare. "Don't worry about it!" He added, giving her a friendly smack on the back for good measure that barely succeeded in jostling her - probably the product of her enhanced constitution, she mused. Serena just needed to take another deep breath, more of that awkward, tense feeling washing out, and catching another look of that cheery, sanguine look he wore.

A feeling of irritation, and yet, reassurance came over her, for once. Just look on the bright side of things, she tried telling herself. Don't focus on the negatives. You've got a job people would - and probably do - kill for with great benefits and you didn't get to die of cancer, to boot!... An awkward smile came over her. You just have to drink blood to keep yourself going, and can't leave the company, but... She just shook her head. Maybe don't focus too much on that stuff; just keep looking forwards!... Well, at least she could try to do that.

Still... She sighed, and found a feeling of unease creeping up on her. Even while trying to think positive, it was still... Difficult to truly shake that... Disturbance over the monster she'd become. What would her parents think if they knew? Would it get in the way of her love life? How many people would she have to kill to cover up her... Needs? Already, her boss had given her hell for not finishing off that Euler creep... A chill went up the vampire's spine as she remembered the cold feeling of that blade against her throat, and she just shook her head. She just really hoped that their paths would never, ever cross again...

When Euler finally came to, the experience was far from pleasant, an uncomfortable, pained grimace on his face as a rather familiar sensation of 'coming down' wracked the gentleman thief's body like his nervous system was being flayed with a rusty razor, and it took nearly every iota of willpower he possessed to avoid screaming out in pain. The cutthroat quickly rose, taking in deep breaths of air to steady himself as he clenched his teeth, beads of cold sweat running down his dark-skinned face as he looked all around, gradually beginning to calm as, with a muttered curse escaping his lips, the mugger realized he was in some sort of hospital.

As far as medical facilities he'd wound up in as a result of his misadventures, this was probably one of the most substandard, with peeling blue and white striped wallpaper, gray, worn-looking tiles that might once have been white, and ratty pale curtains drawn to keep the city's lights out.

His fancy clothes had disappeared somewhere, replaced with a thin, slightly uncomfortable blue gown. Judging by the cold, cloying feeling on his wrists that betrayed the handcuffs he was fitted with, his knife and loot were probably long gone, too. Euler just found himself growling in disappointment, and shaking his head. The cutthroat's memories felt like a blurry haze, and his mind still felt weary and full of smoke, but it was obvious that he'd managed to become rather grievously injured after a regular night of robbery and ultraviolence. Euler just shook his head and muttered, "Amateur move..." to himself.

Of course, considering the IV in his arm replenishing a steady stream of blood into his veins, the bulky, outdated-looking medical terminal he was hooked up to with a series of wires and patches, and the hastily-applied webbing of bandages and gauze he could feel in his neck, recoiling to the touch, something... Worse than usual happened last night. An uncertain, but painful memory of some horrific injury there coming into his mind, and the mugger raised an eyebrow, wondering exactly what the hell happened last night? This certainly didn't feel like one of the usual injuries he'd accrued during his lifetime of skulduggery and hedonism, and just touching the damn thing gave him a vague sensation of dread and danger, and yet, at the same time... He took a few deep breaths. Excitement.

In between the agony and horror he could vaguely recall, Euler could feel there was something else underneath. An eager, maniacal grin began to form on the renegade's face. It was a hazy memory, to be sure, but he could clearly recall there was something... Boundlessly pleasurable about the events of the prior night, and what little of it he could recall had felt like a beautiful dream, an ocean of pleasure and demonic delights far in excess of anything else he'd ever experienced...

Catching himself, Euler just shook his head and did his best to banish that train of thought from his mind. It could wait. Right now he ought to be more concerned about his current situation. His heavy-lidded, disappointed eyes drifted back to the handcuffs constraining his wrists. A familiar sensation, one he'd experienced - and escaped from - many times before, but not one he cared to repeat. Obviously, he'd been caught, and he'd need to rectify that error as soon as he could, and there was the matter of his current location.

A hospital, but probably the shabbiest one he'd ever seen. The mugger just groaned, and shook his head. He'd obviously been dragged to some pauper's ward, one of those medical facilities operated by the government or a religious institution, 'for the public benefit' they say. Euler just rolled his eyes. He'd heard enough rumours about the sourcing of discount organs and blood from those unlikely to be missed that he had no desire to stay in this place, even if he was an innocent man.

Euler shifted his seating forwards in the stuffy, uncomfortable hospital bed, focusing his attention on the first obstacle towards regaining his freedom - the handcuffs. Escape was a simple matter - especially since his captors had been kind enough to cuff his hands in front, rather than behind his back. All he'd need was time, a small bit of metal, a bit of elbow grease, and-

"-found the guy in a pool of blood." Came a voice over to his left as the hospital door creaked open, the mugger raising an eyebrow as he turned towards the hospital room's entrance in time to see two burly looking policemen enter, their wide-brimmed campaign hats and long, bulky, red leather overcoats betraying them as members of Monty's Mounties, the security firm contracted to provide law enforcement to this lawless hellhole of a city. Euler just cracked a smile. Hellhole to some, though, to him it was a paradise.

"Forensics is still analyzing the scene, the drugs, and the knife they recovered, but they're fairly certain some of it isn't his." The mugger wasn't very focused on their conversation beyond how they were obviously talking about him, but he'd noticed a detail that intrigued him. They were talking very loudly, but he hadn't heard a lick of their conversation or their approach until the door opened. Euler looked almost a bit eagerly curious. 'Was the room soundproofed?' he mused. If it was, it could make his life a bit easier...

"Forget all that for now." the other policeman cut his partner off, turning his attention - and Euler's - towards the weary, overworked-looking, slightly plump nurse trailing them, the ratty, dark-haired woman's expression turning uncomfortable and flinching as she realized the mugger was staring intensely at her, a small, wicked grin coming to his face. There was just something about her, he mused. In spite of her shabby appearance, she was quite attractive, and he wouldn't have minded getting more acquainted with her in a back-alley after her shift was done, but it wasn't that...

Euler took a deep breath, as he struggled to put his mind to it. There was something else about the nurse that was capturing his attention, and he couldn't quite figure it out. "How's the patient?" The red-haired Mountie asked, shattering Euler's focus on the nurse - to her relief - and bringing him back to the real world, and to more important matters. "Is he well enough to take to the station?"

"Well..." The plump woman just looked down to a very worn, outdated-looking dataslate. "His vitals read fine, though, his injuries... Briefly, she looked back up from the slate, catching Euler's eyes, the cutthroat's gaze meeting hers, and, for just a split second, he cracked another wily, vicious grin, his gaze cold and petrifying, as though stripping her away layer by layer in his head, making her flinch, the nurses' gaze shifting right back down and she cleared her throat. "Should be fully healed by now. I'd... recommend taking him as soon as it's convenient for you, officers."

"It's convenient enough, miss." The first policeman, the one with neat, dark brown hair who'd been the one talking when the door opened turned back towards him with a look of irritable disdain on his face, rather typical of a cop, Euler sardonically mused. Though, he had to admit he'd probably despise the 'scum' too, if he'd been forced to wrangle them for a living. "Now then, you've got a right to remain silent, a right to not self-incriminate, and a right to see a lawyer before-"

"Oh, spare me the ritual, I've been through this whole song and dance before." Euler just rolled his eyes. "I know my rights, officer." He responded, delivering that last word with barely concealed, sarcastic scorn, just making the brown-haired policeman take a deep breath, and shoot him a sardonic, displeased look.

"Good." He responded with a superior-sounding huff, turning over to his partner and saying, "Go warm up the cruiser, Fred. I'll get this scumbag ready for transport." As, all the while, Euler was busy scanning the room for anything he could use.

This being a hospital room, obviously there weren't any weapons or jagged surfaces he could quickly gain access to, though, there was a cheap-looking glass vase with some plastic-looking flowers floating in it, atop a sturdy-looking faux-wood end-table, though, the mugger had his doubts as to how well they could really hold up as improvised weapons, even if... His gaze turned down towards the manacles around his wrists. Even if he could get these off, though, the chain DID look pretty sturdy...

"Christ, finally." 'Fred' replied, and the nurse quickly joined him as the Mountie headed out right back through the door. "I thought this babysitting job would never end." He sardonically mused aloud as the dark-haired one shut the door behind them, before turning back towards his suspect.

"Now get up, boy." He dourly addressed the mugger, who just cracked a cocky, sarcastic smile. "You aren't hurt bad enough that you need a wheelchair."

"I don't know if I can do that." Euler retorted, giving his captor a barely-concealed look of smug condescension. "I might need a bit of assistance getting out of bed."

"If that's the case..." This time, both the cop and the crook found themselves looking all around the room, and a vicious, irritated grin came on the policeman's face, though, the mugger needed to conceal his emotions for his plan to work. They both found what they were looking for, which, in this case, was more of a lack of something. The room didn't have any security cameras. "I can put you in a wheelchair if you'd like..."

"How terrifying." The cutthroat just sarcastically replied as he shrugged his shoulders, laughing a bit to the cop's obvious chagrin, a sardonic smile coming to the man's face at the audacity of the mugger's behaviour. "A threat like that might hold more water if you coppers could ever beat anyone up without a taser gun and four of your friends."

"That's rich coming from a drug-addled cutpurse like you." The Mountie responded, slowly coming forwards, cracking his knuckles, and Euler just had to chuckle a bit. He wasn't so self-deluded he couldn't appreciate the hypocrisy in his words, though, he would need to rectify it if he wanted to remain a free man. A fair fight wasn't really something he looked for, but, right now he couldn't exactly afford to be choosy about his victims. "Now get up," The policeman was close enough to be leaning over the hospital bed, an irritated, impatient look on his eyes underneath the wide brim of his hat. "Before I GET you up, boy."

Euler just cracked a smile. Everything was falling right into place, and this thick-headed enforcer was being surprisingly helpful. "Oh, gladly." The mugger replied, before springing into action, rising up and delivering a savage headbutt to his would-be captor and sending the man staggering back, cursing loudly.

Keeping the tempo going, the cutthroat jumped from the hospital bed, wincing in pain as he tore the IV out and the scanner patches off with his motion, but those would only slow him down. As blood leaked out of the bag and onto the hospital floor he moved in to engage, vaulting over the rail of his bed and, with both handcuffed hands joined together like a war club,, struck the still-reeling policeman over the head, the force of his blow sending the man down to his knees, muttering, "You son of a!-" as his gloved hands reached down for his utility belt, and Euler's eyes widened.

Policemen were expected to get into fights, and, while they were still just regular human beings for the most part, they usually had a suite of tricks and gadgets to stack the deck in their favour, and the mugger's eyes turned over towards the man's stun baton and taser gun. If the cop drew either one, the fight was over, so he needed to end this, fast. Striking out with his bare foot he viciously kicked the patrolman right in the back, knocking the wind out of the man and sending him down to the floor onto his stomach, as he jumped out-

WHAM!

Catching a steel-toed boot right to the face, an instinctive strike on the policeman's part briefly stunning the mugger and sending him down to the floor as the cop turned around with renewed vigour, quickly loosening the stun baton from his belt and grasping it firmly in his hand, quickly manoeuvring over to where Euler was still regaining his footing and striking out, the mugger's eyes going wide before-

CLINK!

Euler breathed a sigh of momentary relief as the policeman's eyes went wide. As it turns out, being cuffed wasn't such a handicap - he'd been able to use the chain to catch his victim's baton by the shaft, the large, cylindrical, head and its eight metal contacts, like the flanges on a medieval mace, coming dangerously close. He knew from rather painful experience that touching any of those metal bits would send a fifty thousand volt shock right through his systems, immobilizing his musculature and making him a sitting duck for whatever mercies the jumped-up, jackbooted goon had in mind, so it was to be avoided at all costs.

Euler struck out again, kicking the policeman right in the chest and sending him back, knocking all the wind out of the man as he dropped the stunstick onto the hospital floor, though, he didn't drop any of his aggression or adrenaline, and, as the mugger powered forwards to try and pin his opponent he caught a vicious, almost desperate left-hook and it was followed up with a boot right to the torso, Euler clenching his teeth, a cold sweat breaking out and staining the hospital gown as the possibility he might lose this fight began to creep up on him, and what that might mean...

With a savage war-cry, the mugger struck out, managing to block the policeman's second follow-up punch with his handcuffs and reversing it, grabbing his hand and pulling him forwards directly into another vicious headbutt, and following it up with another caveman-club over the head with both fists. Euler's breaths turned raggedy and deep, his expression deadly focused even as a small trickle of blood leaked from his nose. He'd survived a shootout with assassins from the Ruby Syndicate. He couldn't lose to this brutish, jackbooted thug... He still had to figure out what had happened last night.

The policeman tried kicking him again, but this time, Euler was ready for it, barely dodging the blow by the skin of his teeth and jumping onto the bastard, pinning him to the floor as he wrapped the chain of his handcuffs around the man's throat like a garrote as the policeman tried to shake him off, delivering a few painful elbows to the ribs, but, Euler stood firm, clenching his teeth and pulling harder, a bead of sweat running down his face as the policeman's struggles began to lower in intensity, becoming weaker and weaker until...

Euler took a deep breath, and wiped the sweat from his brow. Finally, the man's struggles had ceased, and, even as he took the makeshift garrote off, he still just lay there unmoving and unresistant, and the mugger sighed in relief, a small smile coming to his face. That was one obstacle down, though... He leaned in, catching a small whisper of the man still shallowly breathing, a frown coming over him. So, the bastard was still alive - he did look pretty tough. Briefly, the mugger thought of just finishing him off, though, that would take longer, and time was of the essence. He just laughed, and flicked the back of the man's head. "So, you still get to live..." He sarcastically mused. "For now."

The mugger quickly got to work frisking his opponent, going through all the pockets of his tool-belt to find... His eyes lit up, and a relieved breath escaped his lips. Handcuff keys. Soon enough, with a bit of wiggling Euler found himself rubbing the rawness on his wrists where the tight metal cuffs were digging in only moments ago, the restraints re-purposed in keeping his victim's hands together behind his back, as a parting gift, and Euler needed to stand and stretch, taking a few deep breaths as he planned out the rest of his escape. Obviously, a patient like him - especially one who looked a bit roughed up and was currently stemming a nosebleed with the hem of his gown's sleeves - probably wouldn't have free reign to come and go as he pleased, but... Euler's eyes turned back down to the prone form of his defeated adversary... A policeman, on the other hand...

Acquiring a disguise took a bit longer than Euler was expecting - especially since he needed to remove the cuffs to get the man's coat and shirt off, but, by the time he was all done, he looked the very image of a proud, determined Mountie... Well, mostly.

The uniform was a bit big for him, and in the small mirror by the hospital bed the mugger could still see he had a black eye, and, though the nosebleed had mostly abated there was still just a smidge of stubborn, dark brown stains on his face that the combination of spit and his hastily discarded hospital gown had thusfar proven momentarily unable to get out, but... He took a deep breath. It would have to do. Beyond that... Euler cracked a smile as he adjusted his new utility-belt and unhooked his new stun baton. Now he had some actual weapons, and, while he'd definitely miss his knife, in the current situation, fifty-thousand volts of electricity were probably better.

The mugger turned back towards the door, gripping the baton firmly in his hand. Of course, there was more than one cop to deal with, and, it was pretty likely that soon enough, 'Fred' would be coming back to the hospital room, wondering what was taking so long to get the 'scumbag' ready for transport, and... Euler just laughed, as he fiddled with the on/off switch, hearing the ionizing crack as the electrical contacts flared to life...

Soon enough, the door opened again, a confused expression on the second policeman's face that rapidly turned to shock and horror when he saw the man on the other side, dressed in his partner's uniform, an evil, vicious smile on his face. 'Fred' quickly stepped back and reached down for his sidearm, but Euler was a bit quicker, the baton already in full swing by the time his hand clasped around the grip of his pistol-

POW!

A violent-sounding bang erupted as the electrodes made contact, a grimace of pain and terror on the policeman's face as his body tensed up, collapsing towards the floor but stopping in mid-air where Euler caught him by the collar, and, briefly looking up and down the hall and cracking a wry smile to see they were alone, dragged his second victim inside, locking the door behind them and quickly applying another pair of handcuffs.

The mugger took a deep, relieved breath of air and gripping the baton with both hands as he stared down at his would-be-captors, one of them still shallowly breathing into the tiles and the other looking back up at him with a look of abject terror and hatred in his eyes.

The policeman was shouting up a storm that his assailant quickly silenced with some more 'gentle' applications of the stun baton, and Euler finally found a use for that damn hospital gown when he tied it around the man's mouth like a gag. The mugger laughed to himself as he looked down on his victims, holding his stun-stick with both hands, a full-toothed, evil grin on his face. Obviously, he'd need to get out of here as soon as possible, but, after being cooped up in that hospital bed and getting a bit of crap kicked out of him, Euler felt he needed a bit more exercise to get back into the swing of things and, as long as he had this soundproofed isolation room to himself...

He just let forth a bitter, wicked-sounding laugh, practically able to see the fear shimmer in the red-haired policeman's eyes. Oh, he was gonna have some fun with this one. His fault for still being conscious...

As the cutthroat passed through the creaking, squeaky double-doors of the pauper's hospital out onto the rough, worn-down looking streets of the city, underneath the cold, gray, cloudy late-fall skies he stretched out his shoulders and let loose a deep sigh of relief, his muscles all warmed-up and his joints limbered from that little bout of exercise and a relieved, excited smile plastered on his face. Once again, he was free, with what felt like the whole world before him. An excited, wicked laugh escaped his lips. All of it's riches and pleasures once again set before him, ripe for the taking...

Still... Euler felt up the pockets of his pilfered disguise, finding them more disappointingly empty than he'd hoped. He'd need to get back to work first - the gentleman thief had briefly entertained the thought of stealing the police cruiser as well, though, with all the tracking devices law enforcement had on their vehicles these days that seemed like it'd be more trouble than it was worth. So he just had to settle for pinching their wallets and their weapons.

The stun baton in particular felt almost warm to the touch now - he'd been using it 'til it ran out of juice, and a bit more for good measure, and the memory just made the cutthroat feel warm and fuzzy inside... Euler just shook his head and took another deep breath. This was definitely a setback, but it was something he could work around. The mugger just laughed a bit, and stretched out his back some more. He'd be right back on top of the world in no time...

Still... A massive, eager, full-toothed grin came onto his face as he began making his way down the sidewalk, pushing some eager-looking pamphleteer down to the concrete on his way back to the dark alleyways he usually lurked in. There was another little detail to take care of, and the cutthroat's spine shivered with dreadful ecstasy as he recalled the events of last night, and what had made that nurse catch his eye.

While he was walking through the hallways of that hospital like he owned the place, he gave some thought to the issue. He wasn't exactly in any hurry to make his escape, having dealt with those two meddlesome policemen in a way they'd never forget, and the lengthened, casual way he set about making his egress gave the cutthroat plenty of time to collect his thoughts and mull over the events of how he'd ended up in the hospital in the first place. He was out working, that was for certain - would the cops have been there otherwise?

From that burning, almost painful spiked feeling settling at the base of his spine and in his stomach, he was probably still feeling a bit of a comedown... That, or withdrawal - Euler made a mental note to get his hands on some ambrosia as soon as possible, though, he had a distinct feeling that even the best dope in the world would fail to compare with what had happened last night.

He could barely remember it, but, at the same time - a massive, maniacal and almost desperate grin came onto the disguised rogue's face, and he ducked into a shady-looking alleyway. Euler leaned up against the brickwork, taking his hat off and breathing heavily, drops of sweat running down his head once again. At the same time, he could never forget it. That... Unreal, euphoric sensation. They really should have sent a poet, because a thief like him was struggling to put it into words.

It was like he'd slipped past the pearly gates of heaven, or tripped and fell into the sulphurous pits of hell - either worked, really, because it felt like a supernatural fit of pleasure, an ocean of diabolic ecstasy, a drug trip far in excess of searing pain and almost erotic euphoria than anything else he'd ever had before in his life, and... Euler took another deep breath, and let loose a throaty, maniacal, ecstatic laugh. It was like a bug, digging deeply inside him, wracking his nerves from the inside out. He needed more, and... The cutthroat cracked a massive, wicked grin. She could give it to him.

In spite of how blurry his recollections of the night before were, one detail about it stuck with him. When he'd realized it, the eureka moment hit him like a sack of bricks and he'd had to fight down the urge to shout out in triumph in the hospital waiting room. That was what made the nurse catch his eye in the first place - that raven-black hair...

He took another deep breath. He hadn't quite realized it then, but it was the same colour as that girl's. He wasn't really too sure of much of anything about her - he didn't get her name, and could barely remember her face, but that boyishly short cut of black hair stuck out in his mind, and just thinking about him made his skin go cold and clammy and his heart start burning in his chest, inspiring simultaneous terror and passion.

He wasn't sure how, he wasn't sure why, but the cutthroat knew that if he wanted another taste of absolute pleasure... Euler just looked up into the gray, cloudy sky pouring down into the city from the gaps in between the massive tenement blocks and sky-bridges overhead, a maniacal, wicked grin on his face, gripping his stolen baton tightly where it hung from his belt. He'd need to find her again... The cutthroat just laughed wickedly. Of course, he'd find her again...

POSTSCRIPT:

This is... Definitely a new frontier for me. In more ways than one, actually.

I've published stuff before, but this is the first sort of thing that's more traditional in nature. And infinitely more personal. I've been writing stories for a long time but this is the first time I've ever actually published anything outside of my own circle of friends. It's honestly equal parts exciting and nerve-wracking.

This is also the first time I've written anything with more of an intense, horror theme to it. I usually write more overtly comedic stuff with a lighter tone, so this was a very fun opportunity for me to get out of my comfort zone and experiment a bit.

If this postscript feels a bit too brief and thin on the ground, then it's because I honestly don't know what to write! At least when it comes to speeches, addresses, blog posts, the like, I'm generally not the most verbose person out there, and I'm moreso hoping that the story is able to speak for itself, so, I think I'll end this note by saying that I hope you enjoyed this book!

-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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