

Team Demon

Chapter 03

A Samifel Short Story

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

Rat rubbed his face, his fingertips halfway digging into his eyes. When he opened them, his gaze fell right on Ramona Blacken as she sat on his couch. Dotson didn't exist to him, even though he was also in Rat's tiny one-bedroom computer shop of an apartment.

"Let me get this straight," said Rat with exhaustion born of incredulity. "You want me to join up with Alec Walters' old team, to be your digital grease monkey, while you enjoy a new brand of corporate imperialism?"

In the darkness, closer to Ramona than Rat, Dotson groaned, "Rat."

"Oh, I'm sorry, would you prefer corporate fascism?" the hacker challenged sarcastically. When he turned his back on them for a moment, his face became framed in the light from the giant computer monitor right behind him, turning him into a silhouette. The brightest thing in the room, it created a halo effect that didn't fit the grunge of the apartment.

Dotson returned, "No, I'd prefer you to be an adult."

"I'm not with Neo-Bio any longer," Ramona told Rat, sitting across from him on his broken-down couch.

He swiveled towards her in his computer chair, the massive computer rig behind him sweeping over the wall like technological wings. "Yeah, see, that's the thing about corporations, there seems to be surprisingly little evidence to suggest someone ever stops being corporate," he told her. He leaned back and stared at her. "On the rare occasion someone does legit leave, turns out that they were let go just so they could be followed. Corporations don't allow you to leave unless doing so will be advantageous to them."

"So you think they bugged her? They're stalking her every move?" Dotson asked, somewhere between not following and irritated at his paranoia. "Rat, they don't do that kind of thing." Ramona instinctively started to speak, then hedged, averting her eyes. "Wait, they do?" Dotson squeaked in terror. Ramona stuck her hands in her trench coat pockets and pursed her lips to keep from speaking. Dotson suddenly looked down at his suit, afraid of what monitoring devices might have ended up on him.

"Guys, let's just put aside how much I – wow – do I not believe the 'I'm not Neo-Bio' schtick for the moment," Rat allowed. "Let's just focus on the fact that I'm not a racer tech. I'm a malware programmer. I'm a hacker. I'm what corporations fear more than anything." Ramona snickered. Rat glared at her. "I'm an information broker."

"You're an irritant," she told him. "You think Neo-Bio hadn't kicked in your door because you hid your tracks so well?" Ramona snorted in disbelief that bordered on disdain. Her lovely face turning a cold glare on the hacker.

across from her. "Rat, Neo-Bio doesn't even know who you are. Not in a 'you're a phantom they can't pin down' sort of way. In a 'you are a tiny, tiny fish talking trash about a shark'. You aren't worth the effort it would take to open their mouth and eat you."

Dotson saw no evidence of it on Rat's face, but the moment of silence that ensued spelled all too clearly how deep Ramona had gotten under his skin. "Get out," he told both of them.

"You want to be really subversive?" Ramona asked in return, almost defying him. "You really want to undermine the status quo and help make real, lasting change on a platform where everybody will pay attention? Join with us."

"Get out," Rat told her exclusively.

To Dotson's surprise, Ramona sat absolutely still and deadpan told Rat, "No." She said the singular word deliberately as she settled her gaze firmly on Rat. Dotson couldn't tell if she was judging him or intimidating him or merely trying to weigh his true worth, but there was an intense fixation in her stare. She leaned forward on the couch, her elbows on her knees as she closed the distance between her and Rat. "You listen and you listen good. You, Rat, are worthless."

"Ramona," Dotson pressed her.

"Dotson, I'm talking," she silenced him without breaking her glare on Rat.

"You don't come—" Rat began to protest.

"Rat, I'm talking," she silenced him just as fast, just as effortlessly. Her head tilted a bit as her eyes narrowed, like a predator trying to decide if its cornered prey was worth the effort for so tiny a morsel. "You are worthless. Not because you're not smart, not because you're not capable, but because you are a hypocrite and a coward."

Ramona sat back slowly, taking her time and taking up as much space as she wished. "You were friends with the best thing to happen to this city. You were friends with Alec Walters, whose every breath was about finding some way to give just a little bit to everyone around him. But you never really helped him – not really – until he turned his back on all of that and thought only of himself. You didn't really help him until he started acting like the selfish pricks you say are ruining this world."

Ramona scoffed at Rat as she looked him over with disgust. "You rage against the machine of the corporations because they take and take and take, but you don't try to combat that problem; you just try to expose it.

You do the easy part, by confirming the biases of yourself and all those little worms who are just like you.”

Ramona took a slow, deep breath. She brushed her black hair from her eyes and said, “Now, here’s your chance to actually do something of value. Here’s your chance to actually prove you’re not all talk. Here’s your chance to actually do something for others, and to redeem yourself for the part you played in screwing all of us over.”

Rat laughed. Once again, Dotson found himself completely taken aback by the insanity he was seeing. He had thought Rat on the verge of breaking, about to collapse into jabbering tears. Instead, the hacker laughed. “Please,” he sarcastically begged. “Explain to me how, just how, I have screwed ‘all of you’ over.” Before Ramona could answer, it was Rat’s turn to lean forward in his computer chair. “I helped my friend save someone who was important to him. I stepped up when no one...” He scooted forward in his desk chair and leaned forward at Ramona with a big, exaggerated and sarcastic smile. “And I do mean no one – when no one else would. You think because I helped liberate the teat you’d been suckling off of for years, I somehow owe you?” He laughed again, a sickly and disgusted laugh. “The arrogance,” he shouted, practically screamed, “of what you are suggesting is astounding!”

“This is corporatism at its finest,” Rat told them, mainly Ramona. His disdain was intensifying. “You identify a resource that you want and you twist the narrative so it seems like you are the one being generous, that you are the one bestowing the opportunity. Corporations like Neo-Bio convince everyone to hand over their money, their world, their very bodies, and they make it seem like they are heavenly saints doing the populace a favor.” He scoffed in disgust and turned away. In doing so, it was like he noticed Dotson for the first time. He turned his gaze over towards him like a shotgun changing its target. “I might not have been surprised to see Lancer. But you? I thought you were better than this.”

Dotson’s head was down, less a stance of submission, more like a striker ready to slip a blow. “Rat,” Dotson told him gently, “Basin and Castor can’t—”

“Handle the strain?” Rat finished for him. “Oh,” he said, again dripping with sarcasm. “You don’t say.” He again chuckled. “So now, it’s not you who are the benefactor. Now it’s ‘everybody’s got to do their part’? Is that right?” He looked at Ramona but she was just quiet, watching him. “Like how when the world started getting so polluted, rain was toxic, and the animals were choking on the plastic trash they were eating, corporations convinced the people ‘everyone had to do their part’, even though corporations spat out almost all the pollution. ‘Everyone has to do their fair

share', even though the corporations were the ones doing pretty much all of it. 'Don't use napkins' while we waste tons on packaging. 'Brush your teeth in the shower' while we drain entire lakes and bottle the water. Everybody do their part? Go to hell."

Righteous indignation exhausted Rat and he turned in his chair, checking a feed on the impressive computer rig behind him. He mumbled while he was distracted, "Plus you guys have Castor running a 125-line when he could handle a 525 and it would process easier." It was an absent thought, barely even something he said consciously. He clacked on two of the four keyboards on the desk, causing different windows to open on the giant screen.

"A 525-line would overheat his brain," Ramona asserted a little absently, thoughtful eyes facing into the darkness of the tiny apartment.

"Oh my god, that is such an urban legend," Rat groaned. He spun back around and Ramona gave him her strained but full attention. "Just because data is processing through a brain and its cybermates, doesn't mean it's uniform." Ramona crossed her legs and made a bit of a show of listening to him. "By opening up the lines of communication, you actually lessen the strain because you lower the congestion of the data flow."

"But it's still raw data passing through the wires into his brain," Ramona argued.

"Yeah, true but..." Rat's hand dropped abruptly from the point he was going to make. The smile he'd made at the naivety of her point curled into a smile of realization at the game she was playing. "But you're distracting me."

"Distracting you?" Ramona asked, confused and a little insulted. She sat up and let her jacket fall away from her shoulders. "What are you talking about?" She unbuttoned the top two buttons of her shirt, exposing her collar and the skin beneath. "Why would I distract you?" she asked, her voice lowering, hinting at a sultry tone. Rat swallowed. Dotson felt very uncomfortable in the room.

Ramona broke the spell when she stood up. Rat looked ready to protest, only bereft of any meaningful vocabulary. "This is a chance, Rat," she told him sincerely, her eyes cast heavily down upon him. "And you have the opportunity to pretty much name your terms. You want to affect real change? You want to do something that could have lasting impact?" With disdain, she told him, "Now's the time." She turned and left him behind.

Dotson stood as well, but stayed behind as Ramona opened the door. "Rat," he said, facing into the light from the monitor. "She's right."

The hacker took a breath and thought for a moment. He looked up at Ramona and told her, "I'll give it some thought." The gravity of his statement was reflected in his tone.

Ramona said "Thank you" with the same gravity. She turned and departed. Rat and Dotson both watched her go, then glanced at each other. The pair said nothing, leaving everything for a later discussion. Dotson saw himself out without a further word.

Ramona sat at the rusted fast food bench, staring into space. Movement caught her eye and she glanced up at the towering skyscraper a few blocks away. The windows had long ago broken from neglect. On one of the middle floors, a woman stood airing out a blanket. The edges of a shanty town built inside the corporate corpse was visible from that angle. A giant monolith that had once been the heart of a massive business was now just another crumbling husk that the denizens of Duralee used to make it through one more day.

Ramona's eyes dropped down and saw a family gathered around a dumpster. They'd somehow sawed through one side, tearing it open to make a tiny house. The mother was departing and, based off her attire, she was going somewhere that her body would generate revenue. Her cybernetic arm was a polished chrome, not matching the ugly hydraulics of her kids' limbs. Ramona was grateful for the distraction when Dotson arrived.

He set down the tray, some packaged food between them. Underneath the awning, slightly slopped like the brim of a cap, the pair unwrapped the food in silence.

After a few bites, Dotson told Ramona, "Please don't tell me to be quiet like that again." Ramona's brow crinkled in confusion. "At Rat's place," Dotson reminded her. "You were verbally attacking him. I tried to get you to lay off and you just..." He shook his head.

It took Ramona a moment to even process what he was referring to. "Oh!" she said suddenly, before laughing. "I'm sorry," she said, like she wasn't sure. "I was...it's a negotiating tactic."

"How is insulting him a negotiating tactic?" Dotson asked.

"Attack him," she explained simply. "He either crumples, or he lashes out. If he crumples, then he'll be more pliant and willing to talk, or at least to do what I say. But if he lashes out, then he becomes invested. In Rat's case, it gives him a chance to take some digs at the corporations he claims

to hate. I let him," she said and she left it at that, letting Dotson connect the dots.

"You let him and he feels like he gets a win," he realized. Ramona nodded. "You were playing bad cop."

"That's an oversimplification," she confirmed without interest in the nuance. "I didn't get promoted to the Neo-Bio Internal Security Team for nothing."

"So is flashing your cleavage a common NIST tactic?" Dotson teased.

Ramona shrugged harmlessly. "Rat's a guy," she told him. "And besides, he's had a thing for me for years."

Dotson's eyes dropped and he smiled. A small chuckle escaped from him, but he didn't say anything more. He looked out into the harsh light of the day, from the safety of the shade. Ramona noticed but she didn't speak either.

Watching from the owner's lounge, the race was less about the vehicles and more about the speed. So far removed from the track, all Ramona could see as she lounged in the kitchenette chair were whips of movement followed by swirls of air through the smoke and fog. But as the racers turned the corner, the crowd in the stadium seats rose, cheering and hollering to their favorite. Big screens around the stadium showed video feeds of the racers, showing close-ups of the action along the three-mile course.

The glass rattled, the Voice of the Race speaking over the stadium speakers but the words lost, turned into little more than echoes and rumbling sound. Ramona watched the seats more than the race. The top rows were empty, but the majority of the seats were still packed with the huddled masses. Even though she couldn't make out individuals, Ramona could practically see the eager desperation as the race fans desperately clung to the hope of a win. Cheers and words and the roar of motors fused and congealed.

The squeak of the stairs caught Ramona's attention and she turned as John, the track manager, ascended the narrow stairs into the lounge. The squat little man stopped when he spotted Ramona, then continued his ascent. "You ain't an owner." He walked past her into the kitchenette to make some coffee. His yellowed shirt was unbuttoned halfway down in the

heat, the white undershirt obvious. Tufts of graying black hair were sticking out of his collar, matching his unkempt mustache.

Ramona turned and looked out the window, the chair creaking as she rocked back in it. She remarked of the race, "Team Manifold sucks."

John laughed, surprising Ramona and getting a smirk from her. "Yeah, well, they're still one racer ahead of the Aerostars." He hobbled over on a hydraulic leg and looked out at the race. "I tell ya, I hate low-card-only races. Headliner's a Brass League qualifier."

Ramona looked out at the crowds. "Fans are still here."

John shrugged, unimpressed. "Half-priced tickets. Plus, ain't like they got jobs to be at."

Ramona couldn't argue with that, but she pointed, "Bunch of them have signs."

John looked into the distant stands and stared for a moment. His hard face made up of cynical wrinkles softened for a moment, then he smiled again. "Yeah, well, everybody likes to see a winner, especially when they've forgotten what winning feels like. Gets to a point where you don't much care who wins or at what. You just want to see a win." He returned to the coffeemaker while Ramona returned to the race.

The night wind rattled the windows of Ramona's condo. The sloped windows, tinted against the sun, also darkened the lights of the spherical city outside. The protective glass rattled though, as the wind blasted the top of the building. Ramona was mesmerized by the rattling as it caused the city lights to blossom like incandescent flowers, then return to star-like dots when the motion ceased.

Ramona turned back around to the box on the coffee table and pulled out a pair of collapsible batons. She held the familiar weapons and smiled, spun them a few times in her hands, then broke the table when she dropped them because somebody knocked on the door.

"Crap!" Ramona yelped, failing to catch the baton in time. The table was only badly cracked across the center, the heavy metal baton making sort work of the thin wood. Ramona grabbed the top of her head and stared in horror for a second, then looked at the door. She checked the time on the wall clock, then crossed to the door. One glance through the peep hole and she rolled her eyes. "Of course," she mumbled. She unlocked the door and opened it for Rat. "Come in," she told him, already leaving the open door behind.

Rat entered, a little confused. He immediately saw the coffee table's state and couldn't help but tease, "Not a fan of high-end furniture?"

"Yeah," Ramona cringed, looking at the broken table. "I really hope Dotson doesn't care."

Rat shut the door, only securing a pair of the multitude of locks. His hands in the pockets of his trench coat, the cooling vents still going, he looked at the apartment. "So I heard." He surveyed the apartment with some amazement. "Alec really left all of this to Dotson?"

"Left everything to him," said Ramona. She returned to the couch beneath the window, the panes still rattling. She took her sandwich for dinner and had a bite. "So to what do I owe the pleasure? You reconsider? You going to join us?" Rat looked troubled, like he was worried how his response would be received. Ramona quickly headed him off by changing the subject. "How'd you even get in here anyway? There's a doorman and a security code."

"Security code's the easy part," said the hacker, finally looking around the apartment a bit more casually. Trying to find a place to sit, he remained standing, his hands in his coat pockets. "The doorman...well, get a commuter vehicle alarm to go off and pick your spot and it's easy to sneak by. The trick is just to erase the security camera footage of you afterwards." Ramona smirked in acceptance and had another bite. "Since Dotson isn't here, since we're alone, I wanted to talk to you about the real issue."

Ramona set down her sandwich on the paper wrapper. She leaned back and settled a cautious gaze on him. "And what's that?"

"Samifel," said Rat.

Ramona remained deadpan. "Never heard of her."

"Oh come on," Rat groaned. "Sweetheart, I may have been born at night but it wasn't last night." Ramona betrayed nothing; she only sat and watched and waited. Rat finally sighed. He took off his jacket, the cooling fans going silent. He dropped the trench coat on the floor, drawing Ramona's gaze with it. He grabbed a wooden chair from the corner of the room, remarking, "Why's he got so much wood?" Rat set the chair down, continuing to mumble, "This crap's expensive."

"It may have been one of the pieces his mom made," said Ramona, her tone softening a bit. Halfway into sitting down, Rat froze. He looked down at the chair with a totally new perception of it. "Alec's mom was a sculptor before the cancer." The windows rattled, as did the vents, pumping

cool air into the room. "Or, not sculptor, but whatever you call it when it's with wood."

Her eyes grew wet with warm memories that burned to revisit. "She made me a derby car once." Her voice was a ghost, hollow and weak compared to her usual strength. "The other kids, and the proctor, they were all certain it wouldn't do well, that it was going to come in last. It wasn't heavy enough. But since it was crafted and not made out of junk, it was ran smoother. The wheels turned freely." The proud smile caused a tear to fall from her chin. "I still lost but I proved them wrong."

Rat was entranced. "Do you still have it?"

Ramona didn't look away from her memories. "My dad sold it." The nuances of her childhood made her smile again, but it was a hateful, angry smile. "Or rather, he pawned it. He was totally going to buy it back. For real this time. He just needed to get even so he could get his job back."

Rat knew the story all too well. He asked, "Medicine?"

Ramona chuckled at his naivety. "Green line."

"Ah," Rat said awkwardly. "Damn," he muttered with a stunned shake of his head.

Ramona got her sandwich, the paper wrapper sounding like a car crash in the silence of the apartment. She had another bite before asking, "What about Samifel? What did you want to ask?"

Rat was still for a moment, then he scoffed at himself. "You know, I honestly don't remember? I guess maybe I hoped you knew something I didn't." Ramona tried to say something pithy, or even encouraging, but all she could do was shake her head. "It's weird to be so mad at somebody you miss so much."

"Yeah," Ramona agreed. More silence, until she asked, "Are you going to take the job?"

Rat's gaze was just off of Ramona, even when he said, "No."

She nodded, then tried only half-joking, "Please?"

Rat shook his head and said softly, genuinely, "Sorry." He shared the painful silence with her for a moment, then stood and saw himself out. Ramona didn't get up, or even look at him as he left. It was only after the door closed, after she was left alone with the rattling windows and the stifling heat, that she said after Rat, "Take care." It was a hollow gesture, one she knew only mattered to her, not him and certainly not the world.

The metro train opened and out stepped Berri, a metal pipe held across his slender but muscular shoulders. Red cornrows ended in dreadlocks that dangled around his shoulders as he exited the metro car and turned around. Walking backwards, he stated, "We should've done this before now."

"No question," Lancer agreed. The lithe, beautiful man had his long blonde hair pulled up in a knot on the back of his head. He was dressed in a nice suit unlike Berri's blue jeans and t-shirt with torn-off sleeves. "But it's kind of hard to play the concerned friends when you're faced with Castor's only legal family."

"Would you put that down?" Dotson asked Berri, taking the pipe from him. He tossed it away in the trash-strewn metro station as the graffiti-covered train pulled out. "We aren't going to start a fight, and there isn't going to be a fight. We're not here to get revenge or something. We're just here to move Castor in with Lancer. That's it."

Berri asked his teammate, "And your mom's cool with this?"

"Yeah," he shrugged.

"You didn't ask her, did you?"

"It just seemed easier to just show up with him," Lancer admitted nonchalantly.

"Yeah, probably," Berri agreed. He went to pick up the pipe again, but Dotson kicked it farther away, sending it skittering. "Dude!" he half-shouted at Dotson. "Phillip's going to start a fight."

"No, he's not," Dotson insisted, having to speak up over the buzz of a train station light that was flickering on and off. "And even if he might, showing up with weapons would only increase that likelihood."

"Dotson's right," said Ramona as she took the lead ahead of the three. "We've got to play this subtle and simple and low key." As she descended the steps off the metro platform, she tugged on a pair of armored fingerless gloves. "Now, let's go get out hacker," she called like a rallying cry.

The brownstone wasn't so much a building as a pile of rubble that had yet to collapse in on itself. Sections of the exterior wall had fallen away, revealing the support struts and the wires and pipes within. The stairs caved in the middle. The elevator shaft in the very center of the building

was full of dusty cobwebs. A child was crying somewhere. The buzz of ungrounded electrical wires was louder than the advertisements. The few screens that were working showed images in low-def relief, cycling ads from ages ago. The functioning displays were few and far between, though. Most of the screens had been stolen and of those that remained, more than half buzzed and fritzed with half-frozen pictures

On the third floor, Dotson stopped before a door that clashed with the white frame. Once-gold numbers had greened from age. "Shame," Dotson said with a look at the building. "This looks like it could have been nice."

"Yeah, a lot of Duralee is that way," Berri remarked. He reached to rap on the door with his knuckles, then paused. He looked at the others, as if making sure it was okay. Dotson and Ramona waited blankly, Lancer finally urging him with a prompting gesture.

Berri knocked and awkwardness ensued. The four stood on the balcony walkway, the floor sloped slightly towards the decoration that had once been an elevator shaft. Distant children cried and there was some shouting from elsewhere in the building. "Knock again," Dotson encouraged Berri.

"I'm not looking forward to dealing with Phillip," Berri remarked as he knocked again. He waited a moment, then pounded on the door. "Castor?" he called. "Open up, buddy, it's Berri." They heard creaking and saw shadows on the other side of the door. Silence followed. "Castor, man, open up," Berri yelled through the door.

"Castor doesn't want to talk to you losers," Phillip said through the door. His heavy-set voice didn't travel well through the barrier.

"If he says that to us, we'll believe you," Lancer said loudly, stepping aside as an older couple passed the brute squad.

"He said it to me; that's good enough for you," Phillip yelled back petulantly. They could practically see him chuckle at someone else in the apartment.

Dotson pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned. "Why do you have to be so stupid?"

Inside the apartment, Phillip left the door and slapped hands with another racer. He flopped into a bean bag chair in front of a simulator, picking up the primary controller. The two overaged boys were in grungy jeans and tank tops as they faced the display. They were just about to start another game when the door burst in. Both shrieked and half-crawled out of their seats as Dotson stormed in through the kick and walked right passed both of them, sparing them little more than a glare.

Ramona came through the doorway next like she was walking into an octagon. As Phillip and his guest scrambled to their feet, she punched the wall behind her, the armored glove adding more than enough heft to her strike to shake practically the entire wall. "SIT DOWN!" she screamed like a rabid lioness. Both racers dropped back to their seats, terrified. Ramona came over to Phillip and shoved him with her foot, knocking him off the bean bag chair and onto the floor. She stepped on his chest, pinning him to the ground. Her finger jabbed at the other racer, reminding him to stay seated or else.

Lancer came over Phillip, staring down at him with a scowl. "Wh-what are you doing?" Phillip stammered fearfully.

"We're rescuing Castor," Ramona told him. "And so help me, if he isn't here or we don't like the condition we find him in, I'm going to start breaking bones."

Phillip couldn't hide his fear but he tried to affect a harder demeanor. "That s-supposed to scare me?" he asked her. He looked at Lancer. "You going to do the good cop part of the routine now?"

"Oh no," Lancer promised him. "She's the good cop." He popped his knuckles, making Phillip swallow in terror.

"Ramona," Berri called from the back of the apartment.

Ramona glanced down the hall passed the kitchen, then told Lancer, "If he moves, shoot him."

"We don't want to leave a body," Lancer played along convincingly.

"I didn't say where," Ramona said before stepping off Phillip and heading down the hall. A series of tiny rooms waited, each as dilapidated and ugly as the building itself. Sections of walls were missing and wires hung from the ceiling in the kitchen. Mold and stains crept down the roof in the hallway. Tiles were missing from the floor as well. At the far end of the cramped apartment, the smallest room waited. Little more than a closet, it was where she found Berri and Dotson looking in on Castor.

The former Team Demon technician was slumped in a cheap chair, a pillow wedged between his bony shoulder and his drooling jaw. Paper-thin skin was washed out, like he hadn't seen light in days. His hair was long and a few scraggs of facial hair had long been neglected. His crusty eyes were open though, a distant gaze to them as he stared into another world. Trailing down his arms were wires that plugged into a dark gray box next to his feet.

"Aw, man," Berri whispered. He rubbed his eyes, then took Castor's hand. "Buddy..." Dotson was just as beside himself.

Ramona covered her mouth as she looked on. "Can we...can we, unplug him or..." she asked.

Dotson knelt with Berri and the pair looked at the wires between Castor and the box. They shared glances and Berri shook his head. Dotson stood and shook his head. "I don't think so. I think this is an endothermal machine." He thumped the ugly computer with the toe of his boot. "Castor's a galaxy away, but if we unplug him, it'll..."

"It'll be bad," Berri told her.

"It'll be bad, best case scenario," Dotson said. "In this state," he said, gesturing at the pre-corpse before them. "He might flatline right in front of us."

"Could we dive in and join his simulation?" Ramona asked.

Dotson gave it some thought as he looked at his friend. "I mean, it wouldn't really be dangerous, but I don't know what Castor's doing, I don't know how he'll react to me or Berri--"

"I'll do it," said Ramona. The other two looked wary. "He might refuse one of you; he won't refuse me."

Hesitant and unsure, Dotson hedged. He began to protest but Berri stopped him. "Dude, she's right."

Dotson sighed and then backed up. "Okay, do it," he said. "We'll keep an eye on these losers." That statement was punctuated with the sound of Lancer punching somebody in the face.

Dotson and Berri checked back down the hall, prompting Ramona to tell them, "Go. I got this." The pair headed towards the front to provide backup.

Ramona sat cross-legged on the floor, frowning at the dust and fragments of trash in the corners. She dug around the fraction of a room until she found a spare cable. Making sure it fit her, she felt around the back of her neck to find the cyberjack. She plugged the wire into her neck, inhaling through her teeth at the chill it caused. She found the corresponding plug on the computer and plugged herself in. A green light appeared next to the port.

Immediately, a warning flashed over Ramona's vision. Small but distinct bars of red pulsed on the top and bottom of her vision. Firewalls in her cybernetics engaged and a host of anti-virus programs kicked into gear.

"Yeah, yeah, I know I just connected to a computer," she told herself as she willed the warnings away. She got comfortable, shimmying against the door, then breathed out slowly. With a deep breath, she got lost in the darkness inside her closed eyes. When she opened them again, she found a door at the end of a short tunnel.

Ramona walked through the innocuous glass door to find a doctor's waiting room. Inside, a receptionist in a pink nurse's apron was turning a magazine page, reading pleasantly. She was slightly plump, with a pink hat complete with white circle and red cross atop curly red hair. She looked up from her magazine in the spotless office behind the window and smiled as Ramona entered. "Can I help you?" she asked in a happy tone.

"Yeah," Ramona said absently, turning around. She looked back the way she'd come. Instead of finding a dark hallway, she was at the glass doors of an old-world office. Rain was drizzling behind her on the steps of a sidewalk. There was no road in sight, only a pristine idyllic garden of a world with a giant sky. Occasionally, lightning flashed behind big, vibrant clouds. Rumbles of thunder followed almost immediately. Ramona glanced around the simulated doctor's office, trying to get some idea of what she was looking at. Subdued pastel walls and sturdy but well-worn furniture filled the spacious room. Posters were made up of happy people encouraging healthy behaviors. It made Ramona smirk cynically.

She turned, first her head then her whole body, back to the nurse. "I'm, uh, I'm looking for..." She approached the receptionist. "I'm looking for Castor Manzine."

The woman sat up stiffly just a bit, pushing the magazine away from the center of her desk. "I'm afraid that I can't give out information like that," she said, like she was genuinely apologetic.

Ramona smiled. She looked up and activated a menu in her vision. She searched quickly for some options before holding up her hand. In doing so, a generic law enforcement badge appeared in a digital swirl. "I'm afraid I must insist."

The simulated woman seemed concerned but not quite intimidated. "I'm afraid you'll need a warrant."

"Lady, listen," Ramona started. "I don't have the patience, or the disposition for this. I need to find Castor and if I don't—"

The door to her right opened. Both Ramona and the receptionist turned when Castor exited. He was standing up straight, a little thicker, a little taller, a little healthier, but still him. He spotted Ramona and froze. Ramona was stunned as well, seeing a man behind Castor. The older

gentleman had a white lab coat and a stethoscope around his neck, but he didn't look familiar. "What's going on?"

"How did you get here?" Castor asked her, his voice stammering. "You shouldn't, you're not, you shouldn't, can't...be here...in here." He backed away from Ramona, shaking his head with increasing fervor until it seemed like he'd throw himself off his feet.

"Honey, are you okay?" asked the receptionist. She started to stand.

Ramona ignored the nurse and neared Castor. He recoiled from her. "Castor, I need to talk to you," Ramona said firmly.

"Am I going mad?" he asked himself. He let out a sickly laugh, tears beginning to dribble from his face. "I am," he beamed with pride as he started to cry. "I'm finally going mad. I've finally snapped."

"Computer, freeze program," Ramona said aloud. Nothing happened. Ramona looked at the nurse and she crossed her arms, glaring at Ramona. "Don't get snippy with me," she told the nurse. She looked up again and accessed the menu in her vision. Finding what she was looking for, she gave an exaggerated blink.

The rain stopped. The receptionist and the doctor both became as still as paintings. Even the air took on a thick, saturated feel. Ramona shifted her weight and looked at Castor expectantly. She crossed her arms for good measure. Still teary-eyed, he stared at her for a long time, not comprehending what he was looking at. "Castor, I'm real. I'm really here."

He turned suddenly. "Wait!" Ramona yelled as she chased for him. He passed through the door into the back of the office, Ramona right behind him. As they passed the threshold, they found themselves walking into the waiting room, just as Ramona had done moments ago. The rain was still drizzling, and the receptionist was behind a glass screen to their left. Ramona was disoriented for a second, glancing back and forth between where she'd just arrived and where she thought she had just left.

"Hi," Castor told the receptionist, wiping his cheeks with his eyes. "I have an appointment with Dr Ray."

"Oh, hey, honey," said the receptionist, as affectionate as if he were her own child. She reached across the gap for Castor and squeezed his hand. "You feeling bad?"

"Yeah," he told her, nodding weakly.

"Do you want some crackers?" she asked thoughtfully.

"Could I, please?" he asked, almost crying at the kindness.

"Of course, honey," said the receptionist. She opened a metal drawer and pulled out a package of crackers, stacked neatly in a group of six. She slid them across the tiny lip of the window and patted them as she smiled at Castor.

"Th-thank you," he stuttered. He didn't walk so much as shuffle towards the chairs and he sat down, with the package of crackers practically clutched to his chest. He stole a few glances at Ramona's feet, trying to not let on that he was checking to see if she was still there. He sat down in the waiting room seat and clutched the crackers. He didn't open the package.

A flash of lightning caught Ramona's eye and she looked out as the drizzling rain intensified. Waves of splattering drops went sweeping down the pavement of the parking lot. Flowers in the grass fluttered and the small, young trees jostled in the mild afternoon storm.

Ramona very carefully approached Castor. He'd torn open the package now and was nibbling on the first cracker, staring vacantly. "I need you to come out," she said slowly. He shook his head like a dashboard bobble, looked at her, and then shook his head again. "Cas, we need you."

"Y-you're not, not real," he told himself.

"Why do you say that?" Ramona asked. She slid into the seat nearest to him on the row of chairs against the far wall. She started to reach to touch him, but hesitated. She put her hand on her knee and remained still.

"Ramona left," he breathed, eyes fixed down. He took another timid bite of the cracker.

Uncertain, she looked around at the office. "What is this place?" she asked. Castor shrugged distantly. "No, really, I want to know. I'm curious."

"Before my dad got custody, my mom brought me to a therapist," Castor said. "It was nice."

"Yeah, but this isn't Duralee," said Ramona, looking outside at the rain and the sky.

Castor shrugged again. "The office didn't look like this either, but so what?" The door next to Castor began to open. The older man in the lab coat and the stethoscope began to step out when everything froze. The rain, the lightning, the man, everything. Castor sat back and dropped the crackers on the floor. Eyes watered up and he stepped on the crackers. At his size, he had to work to fully crunch them, grinding them into the thin carpet. His lower lip trembled, even as the rest of his face stayed as distant and placid as his gaze.

"I'm really me," Ramona told him. "I'm really Ramona." Castor didn't respond except to stare into the forward distance. "I got fired from Neo-Bio. I'm re-joining the team."

"Because Alec left," Castor said.

Ramona was conflicted in responding. She chose with some hesitation, "That's one reason." She again started to reach for him, but held off. "We need you, Cas."

He shook his head and looked away from her. "T-too h-hard."

"Racing?" Ramona asked him, leaning not so much to force him to see her but to make the option more available to him.

"Being," he said, his voice a ghost. "M-my brain fills up and, and..." He started to chew on his thumbnail.

Ramona very gently guided his hand from his mouth. "And?"

"And I'm tired of being broken," he said. In silence, Ramona absently rubbed his back. Castor kicked the table lightly, but did little more than jostle it.

"Did you know I have dyscalculia?" said Ramona. She looked at Castor and noticed him glance at her out of the corner of his eyes. "Do you know what that is?"

He tried to chew on his thumbnail again but Ramona gently pushed his hand away before it could reach his mouth. "It's like dyslexia, but for numbers," he said quietly, still facing into the distance.

"Yeah," she nodded. "I never got it fixed as a kid and by the time I was a racer..." She just shrugged. "I still got it."

Castor didn't say anything for a moment, only stared at the floor. "I never noticed," he whispered.

Ramona smiled. "Basin handled a lot of that, when we were racing. Plus, you know...and it's nothing like what you deal with." She brushed the back of his hair, picking out a piece of dusty fuzz. She let him stare for a moment longer, then said, "Time to go." She stood up and took a step towards the door. She looked expectantly back at him. He clearly didn't want to, but he stood when she extended her hand back to him. Taking his hand, she led him through the door.

Ramona pushed open the door of the small white building, exiting one step ahead of Dotson. The others were outside in the small brick area, a circle for waiting. Berri and Lancer were standing, while Basin was over against the knee-high wall, the endothermal machine the focus of his attention. As soon as Dotson and Ramona exited, though, Berri smacked Basin's knee and he stood.

"They accepted him," Dotson told the others. "They've already got him plugged into a malware scrub."

"This is a high-end place," Basin half-marveled as he joined the team by the entrance. "How'd you get them to take him?"

"Money's money," Dotson said. "And thanks to Alec, we've got a little bit of a reserve for once."

"Plus, between him being on a Gold Sovereign Cup team, and me being a Neo-Bio security agent, they wanted to help," Ramona told him.

"Yeah, but you aren't Neo-Bio anymore," said Berri.

"It'll take them a little bit to figure that out," Lancer deduced and Ramona nodded, tight-lipped.

"So what is this thing?" Dotson asked to the computer still on the knee-high wall. "I've seen endotherals, but..." He shook his head warily of it.

"It's heavily partitioned to include a buffer system as well as a sync-sequencer," Basin explained. "Because Castor's brain processes information so damn differently, normal endotherals won't work for more than, like, ten minutes before they unravel. Hell, normal computers won't work for him. But he rigged this thing to resequence and realign 65 thousand times per second or something."

"That way, the illusion of his simulated reality would go unphased," Berri elaborated. Lancer nodded like he was following.

"It's pretty clever, actually. He should patent it," Basin chuckled cynically, glancing around at their perimeter in the corporate suburb. Fewer businesses were closed. The streetlights still worked, and none flickered on in the abrasive daylight.

"And it was a therapist office?" Lancer asked Ramona. She nodded. "People usually use these things for sex simulations."

"Did Phillip ever say how long he'd been in there?" Basin asked.

Lancer griped, "I'm not entirely sure Phillip remembered he was there until we knocked." The circle of five fell into an awkward and apprehensive silence.

"Okay, so, cool," Berri said abruptly, with forced optimism. "We got Castor in rehab. I mean, don't get me wrong, that's a serious win, but, like, what's the plan now?"

"Cyber-detox takes about a week," said Basin. "You got to flush out all the malware, do an entire system decode. It's not that different from running a system sweep on your computer while going through physical detox for your body. You've got defrag the brain, which is the really tricky part."

"Is Castor going to be okay?" Dotson asked pointedly.

"Castor's going to be fine," Ramona promised him. "Until he gets out. Once he's out..." She looked at the co-leader and tried to remain confident. "Until then, we've got to figure out what we're going to do. What Team Demon is doing next."

In the garage, Ramona sat on an ice chest, watching the race. The feed was displayed on all the computer screens in the room, showing an incomplete but up-close view of the action taking place levels upon levels above them. On her thigh, she scribbled in a digital notepad. On the far end of the garage, Lancer and Dotson had the hood of Lancer's racer lifted up, the pair talking over some proposed changes.

The garage smelled like steel, oil, and hope. It smelled like power and potential, hydraulics and grease. The stairs outside the garage door rattled as Team Exelion headed down, to begin prepping for their race later in the afternoon. Doing so caused the bolts in the pan at Ramona's feet to rattle, which mixed with the rumble of the race as it passed by on the track above.

Berri came over to Ramona and smacked her lightly on the knee a few times. "Move." Ramona didn't take her eyes off the screen. She half-stood, hovering over the ice chest long enough for Berri to fish out a drink. He shut the chest and pushed it back under Ramona's butt and she sat back down. With a spritz, Berri had a sip and asked, "Are there any chips left?" Ramona burped. "So that's a no." He pulled over a rolling stool from the corner of the garage and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Taking notes," she said. "It's been a couple of minutes since I last raced. I don't want to take any longer than I have to getting my groove back." Berri seemed amused by the notion but he stayed quiet. His silence

spoke more than his words and Ramona finally glanced from the race. "What?" she asked, irritated.

"Nothing," he insisted unconvincingly.

Ramona weighed whether she wanted to start a fight or not, but before she could decide, the door to the garage opened. In walked Alice Decker. The woman looked like she was playing dress-up as a femme fatale, from the riding boots to the fingerless gloves. Her hair was cropped short, almost shaved and she'd changed the color of her sclera to contrast with the iris. Dotson and Lancer both stood up, as surprised by her dynamic attire as her unexpected appearance. "Dotson," said the corporate power broker. She turned her gaze towards Ramona. "Ms Blacken, may I have a word?"

"Is the word bitch?" Ramona grumbled just loudly enough for Berri to hear, causing him to snort on his soda. The pair crossed the garage and stepped outside with Decker together. As they exited, Alice shut the door completely. "I'm glad I caught you all at the track. Since Team Hyper and Team Redline were racing, I was afraid you'd take the day off. Everybody else has," she added with a sidelong look back up the stairs.

"What's up, Alice?" asked Ramona, crossing her arms.

"I want to discuss your offer," she said pointedly. "I'm willing to manage the team."

Dotson beamed immediately. "Oh my god, that's great!" Ramona was neither so immediately or thoroughly enthused.

"Hold up, hold up," Alice stopped him. To both of them, she said, "I have some stipulations."

"Well yeah," Dotson said, totally understanding.

"Well yeah," Ramona said, totally expecting.

"I—" Alice stopped, not quite processing their diametric response. "I want partial ownership of the team. Cut of winnings and my name is attached."

Dotson's enthusiasm was a little muted, but he still nodded. "That seems fair," he said, turning to Ramona like he was expecting her to confirm or correct him.

She kept her hands off. "It's your team," was all she would say.

"Secondly, I'm not going to be running this thing like a charity like Alec did," Alice went on. "I'll negotiate takes on winning, I won't be waving fees just because the local soup kitchens are running low on admission

tickets." Ramona and Dotson both accepted that right off the bat. "Third, I will not be doing anything illegal. We're not fixing races, we're not transporting chems through city connectors, nothing like that. Clear?"

"Actually, I'm a little relieved to hear you say that," Dotson told her. "I've already gotten offers from Amendola and a few others."

"Great! Then we understand each other," Alice said with a smile. "Fourth, I want Lancer."

The reaction rebounded between Dotson and Ramona a few times, going from confusion, to realization, to further confusion, to surprise, and then settling on appalled disgust. "What?" Alice told them. "I want to get laid and he's really good at it. And he's got an ass you could bounce a coin off of."

"I..." That was all Dotson could manage to say.

"You want us to whore one of our racers to you, just so you'll manage the team?" Ramona said, utterly stunned. "Bitch, get to stepping." Ramona jammed her finger up the stairs and glared like she was ready to put that finger through Alice's eye.

"Talk it over," Alice told the pair, not quite speaking aloud the words. She waved cattily at them both as she started up the steps. She got halfway up the first flight before calling down, "Lancer's in my bed tonight or the deal is off." She disappeared above.

"What the holy hell?" Dotson gapped at Alice once she was out of earshot.

"You know," Ramona said, just as astonished. "I honestly can't decide if I don't get what Decker sees in her, or if it makes total sense." Dotson agreed with a disassociated nod.

When they returned to the garage, their faces pale in horror, Berri and Lancer both knew something was up. "What happened?" Berri called, muting all the screens simultaneously. He got up and joined Lancer in meeting them at the door. "What she'd say? Is she going to get Decker to manage us?"

"She's going to manage," Dotson said. He looked at Lancer and told him, "But only if you sleep with her."

Stunning the other three, Lancer exclaimed with relief, "Is that all?"

Berri's eyes blanched open. Ramona did a double-take. Dotson about responded, froze, realized he had heard that polar opposite reaction, then recalibrated entirely. "What?" he stumbled.

"Yeah, what?" Ramona agreed.

Lancer shrugged. "I'm cool with it." Three pairs of eyes stared at him. "What?" he asked back. "She's hot."

"So you're cool with...?" Ramona gestured vaguely.

"You are a slut," Dotson realized, slightly dumbfounded.

"Yeah," Lancer confirmed, like he assumed everybody knew it.

"Wow, okay, I thought this was going to be a bigger issue, but whatever," Ramona accepted. She patted the still-surprised Dotson on the shoulder. "Your team," she reminded him again before she headed back to her seat on the ice chest. She was about to sit when the garage door opened again. "Oh my god, what now?" she grumbled.

John came in, carrying a paper clipboard with receipts instead of proper paper. He walked right between Dotson and Lancer, either indifferent to or hiding the delight of forcing them to step aside. "Hey, Ramona, we got an issue," he called caustically.

"And you walked all the way down here to bring it up with me? I'm touched," she remarked, fishing out a bottle from the ice chest. "You want one?" she asked as she shut the chest.

Taking that as a litmus test of his welcome, John scowled. "Look, Telerbots just sent me a message. They want to know when they can announce Team Demon's next race."

"Not soon," she said. "The Gold Sovereign Cup season is over."

"Yeah, but you're Gold Sovereign in name only, sweetie," John told her. "Alec and the boys beat one team one time. Lots of people say that's a fluke. Team Demon's top-ranked about as much as Dotson runs this place and I didn't come to see him, now did I?"

"Nobody in Duralee says it was a fluke," Berri puffed at John.

"Duralee ain't the only city that matters, Red," John told him, unimpressed with his machismo. "Not when it comes to racing." He went back to Ramona. "Now look, I'm not trying to be an ass here, but I've bought you as much time as I can. I can't deflect no more. Aleverton wants answers, Telerbots wants info, and everybody is waiting to hear something from us about Team Demon. You got to give me something. Something real."

Dotson walked around John. Nearly twice his height, Dotson didn't muscle his way into the conversation but did physically make his presence known. The squat man with the pencil-thin mustache looked up at him,

then at Ramona, then waited for either of them to respond. Ramona looked across the garage at Lancer and Berri, then at Dotson, demonstrating that she was waiting on him. Dotson asked John, "Do they know?"

The track manager searched his brain, trying to figure out which of a dozen secrets he was asking. "About Walters?" he finally guessed. Dotson nodded, almost remorsefully. "Yeah," John colluded. "Aleverton definitely knows. Telerbots? I don't know for sure, but probably. It's a safe bet. The rumors have been flying all over town. I think most people think somebody on the team died." His callous tone reverberated in the garage. "Won't be long before Team Devastator tries to spin that to their credit," he snickered cynically. "I don't think they could get the win annulled but..."

"But you wouldn't put it past them to try," Dotson accepted. John nodded.

Ramona looked into the bottle for a second, then developed a quizzical look. "Announce that Team Demon has come into new management. Announce that we will be holding try-outs shortly for a fifth team member."

"Try-outs?" John asked, making sure he'd heard properly.

"Team Demon will be returning to a five-racer spread," Ramona told him. "After that, we'll take some time to calibrate our new racer. When they're ready, we'll hit the exhibition circuit for some races before the start of the season."

"Lot of big words in there," John told her. He looked at Dotson who reflected his confidence in Ramona with an absolute nod. John accepted it. "Okay, fine then. But what if they ask about Alec Walters? What should I say?"

Ramona let out a sudden sigh, almost like she was trying to keep from choking. "Alec Walters has left...no," she decided. She fixed a predator look on John and told him, "Team Demon is operating under its original team captain."

Again, John checked with Dotson and again, Dotson backed Ramona completely. "Okay," John accepted, far from convinced. He turned and departed.

As he left, Ramona looked at the screen and saw the results of the just-finishing race. The door shut and Dotson turned to her, whispering, "Castor's in rehab and Basin can barely function, much less run a race. How are we going to do this?"

Ramona exhaled, worriedly, but promised him, "We'll find a way."

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