

Team Demon

Chapter 01

A Samifel Short Story

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

"Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents, which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant."

- Horace, *Satires 2*

"I don't know where Alec Walters is," said Ramona Blacken.

Seated at attention in the very middle of the room, floor-to-ceiling windows circling her vision, Ramona worked to focus on the men and women at the semicircle table between her and the windows. "I don't know why he broke into Neo-Bio," Ramona went on. "I don't know why he accessed those machines, I don't know why he...he used them in that way."

"In that way," spoke up the man directly across from her. Thom Duvall, the leader of NIST. A clipped tone to his words underscored his anger. In a pressed suit every bit as crisp as his attitude, he set interlaced fingers forward on the white table. "You understand that he connected a cloning unit with the spectral cartographer. Their software is incompatible. Completely," Thom emphasized, his face resting against his hand. He sat like a hawk, poised and patient. He was picking spots in Ramona's answers, sizing her up like a mugger would size up a victim.

His look wasn't unlike those of the people around the table. Eleven men and women sat in the semi-circular table in the sterile white room. The window behind Thom, like all the windows in the room, showed the hard radiation from the artificial sun. Through the haze, the far side of Duralee was lost to distance and smog. It became nothing more but the indistinct distance, a vague openness that Ramona's eye could mistake for a sky.

Those around the table were predatory like Thom. Their eyes were sharp and keen minds, trained to sniff out weakness and exploit it, and their gaze was united on her. Expensive haircuts and semi-useful jewelry, top-end cybernetics and cutting-edge fashion, but none of it hid their bloodthirsty demeanors. Data tablets covered the table that Ramona sat before but not at. She had no access to such reminders or resources. She faced the combined might of the entire Neo-Bio Corporation determined to fix all their blame upon her.

Ramona's expression softened, not in sympathy but in disinterest. "Thom, what do you want?"

The man stiffened. "For the purposes of this review, it is inappropriate for you to refer to me by my first—"

"Alec is smart," Ramona assured him. Her confidence wavered. "Was smart," she corrected half-heartedly. Her eyes fell to her hands, her skin

darker than those across the table from her. She was born a few shades darker than all of them, but a childhood spent in the toxic light of the artificial sun had intensified the difference. It contrasted with the light brown security uniform she wore now. It wasn't a uniform befitting her rank in NIST, the Neo-Bio Internal Security Team. It was the uniform given to the rankless, those who would be disposed of shortly.

One of the women to Ramona's right sat forward. "You say that like he is gone."

Ramona chortled. "He's not in the city. We'd have found him." She glared at Thom and corrected, "Excuse me. YOU would have found him."

"Is that a declaration of your termination of your position here at Neo-Bio?" asked a man to her left. "Your role as assistant to NIST leadership is not lightly thrown away."

"The Neo-Bio Internal Security Team is our most important security assist," said the woman who had spoken just a moment ago. "They are the bedrock of this corporation. Without NIST, our absolute confidence in our security would be called into question, would be compromised."

"Can't have that, now can we?" Ramona whispered to herself, fighting not to give in to bitterness and street acumen.

"What was that?" asked Thom, picking up on her mumble only from his fixation.

Ramona looked up from her thoughts and stared right back at Thom. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" she asked him specifically. She smiled sardonically. "It's nice to have the importance of NIST - it's oh-so-crucial nature - spelled out over and over and over again." She turned her eyes on the corporate suits in the room and barely contained her sneer.

"So you recognize the importance of NIST's work," the woman pushed. Ramona nodded, more of an acceptance than a confirmation. "Then you can appreciate why these steps must be taken." The woman smiled the most inauthentic smile Ramona had ever seen. "We aren't singling you out."

Ramona's eyes glazed over and she shook her head. She looked out passed Thom's head, through the windows. Outside was the spanning city that was her home: Duralee. The wretched city was a garish, filthy brown, the color of yellowed materials and rust. At this height, inside the Neo-Bio main offices, Ramona could make out the curvature of the city. The endless urban expanse gently sloped upwards until it completed a sphere, with the city surface following the interior.

"I've been around enough," Ramona said quietly, her eyes dropped off the city. "I know how this is going to go down." She looked at Thom, looked right into his eyes, looked right through him. "I've been on that side

of the table more than once.” She shook her head at the inevitability of it all. “I don’t want to quit. I don’t want to be fired. But I know I don’t really have a say in it, do I?”

Before any of the other experts could recite prepared lines for just such an assertion, Thom spoke ahead of them. “You aided a thief,” he told Ramona personally. She said nothing. “You helped distract our security forces, on the night when they were already stretched thin thanks to the racing championship that you two organized. All of this so that he could violate the sanctity of the Neo-Bio Corporate Complex.” Ramona snickered at the word ‘sanctity’. “This further allowed him access to top-secret technolo—”

“Alec Walters, a respected leader in the community and the owner and captain of the most decorated racing team at the Duralee Track, came to me with a business opportunity that Neo-Bio could NOT ignore,” Ramona snapped. Her glare was so intense that raising her head caused her short-clipped hair at her chin to shake, the shimmer from the lights on her dark locks doing nothing to mute the burning anger in her eyes. “He had arranged an unheard-of business opportunity: to bring a Gold Sovereign Cup team to the local track and compete against a local team. To have our name attached to a Gold Sovereign Cup race, win or lose, is beyond invaluable.” She laughed. “We made more per minute off that race – a race Alec Walters arranged – than we lost in the entire evening trying to apprehend Alec. As for helping obscure him, I’m the one who ascertained the compromised sensors that helped him gain access to the complex. I’m the one who risked exposure to pursue him. I’m the one who – in my own, personal vehicle – tried to run him off the road as he made his escape.” She sat back, leaning against the chair and crossing her legs. “If you were to ask me – and I note, after two weeks of hearings, you still have not – I would say everything connected to this inquiry has been a huge waste of resources.”

“That’s enough, Ramona,” Thom ordered.

“Alec Walters did no harm to this company,” she told the collected board of well-to-do corporate types. “He broke in so he could use a machine we had mothballed. He broke in after multiple attempts to pay to use these machines which we had mothballed.”

“Ramona,” Thom barked, louder.

“We could have just charged him and he’d have paid it,” she kept on, indifferent to Thom’s protests. “He made us a fortune and then did little more than ignore the ‘do not walk on the grass’ sign. Shame. On. Him.”

“RAMONA!” screamed Thom, leaping up abruptly, on the verge of losing the last vestiges of control. “I won’t be ignored or dismissed, you

arrogant little bitch!" Ramona very deliberately took her time rolling her head towards Thom, making him wait before she confirmed that he had her attention.

Thom's eyes twitched, a vein throbbing in his forehead. His face flushed with rage, he stated for all the world to know, "Alec Walters broke our law. There is no breaking our law." Ramona sighed slowly, disinterested. Around the table, the others watched the nonverbal exchange between the two, afraid a murder was about to be witnessed. "That thief violated our company, sullied our resources, and undermined our authority as the future of this city!" He seethed, panting hatefully. Around the table, others were looking at the corporate leader who had broken with decorum.

Ramona was unperturbed. Eyes locked on Thom, she smirked with disdain. Her gaze rolled slowly off him and she looked at the others around the table. All well-dressed, all well-maintained, all corporate. "If you're going to fire me, fire me," she told them. "If you're going to demote me, demote me. Just get it over with." She looked right at Thom. "I'm simply sick and tired of hearing you talk."

Ramona walked passed the empty assistant's desk outside her office, noting the sterile work space that had been vacant for half a month. She slowed only for a moment as she hoped for the best for her assistant, then headed passed.

With a large, empty box in her arms, Ramona pulled open the manual door to her office with no trouble. Inside was a spacious office, much taller than it was wide. The pristine space looked out over a sweeping vista of the gorgeous and cultivated Neo-Bio campus. The healthy and green corporate space clashed with the ugly brown and rusted husk of a city beyond. The red tint to the windows made the artifice of the city of Duralee seem even more unnatural. A few plumes of smoke from the factors between her building and the edge of Neo-Bio's corporate perimeter disrupted the view.

Despite its size, Ramona's office lacked most hallmarks of a personal space. A framed poster to her left, showing the wear of age, proclaimed Team Demon the Duralee Track's Bronze Sovereign Cup Champions. A handful of framed photos dotted the mostly-empty shelves by her desk. All the photos were of Ramona and her friends and family.

One photo caught her eye. On top of a filing cabinet, the steel frame matched the sleek form of the furniture in her office. In the photo, Ramona was dressed in the Neo-Bio cap and gown, showing that she had completed their rigorous initiation and education program. She was arm-in-arm with Alec Walters, both of them smiling. Taller than Ramona by half a head, Alec had lost a bit of his urban tan but still had the permanently-squinted eyes of

city life. The data ports need for racing were visible between the muscles of his neck. Most of all, however, she fixated on the smile of her friend.

Ramona slapped the picture face-down, angry. The office door opened behind her. Ramona barely had to glance back before she clamped her eyes shut and worked to summon the strength not to start throwing hands.

"We're going to find Walters," Thom told her as he let himself into her office. His suit jacket was unbuttoned, his hands in his pants pockets. Creases of fabric were about as casual as he got. "It won't make the public news when we do."

Ramona just nodded. She choked up as she began to collect her photos, placing them carefully but quickly in the box she'd carried in. Once the shelf was emptied, she set about removing her few personal belongings from her desk, a task that took only minutes. "All my passwords have been changed, so my replacement shouldn't have any problems getting into my files."

"We'll have to go through them," said Thom. "Make sure you and Alec didn't—"

"Oh my god, what is wrong with you?!" Ramona yelled, whirling around at Thom. "For the last time, just like the first, just like the hundredth, I did not help Alec. I did not aid Alec. I did not..." She gave up. She turned and resumed clearing out her office. "I tried to capture him. When that didn't work, I tried to stop him. When that didn't work, I—" She choked up. "I tried to kill him." She stopped and spun around to Thom. "I tried to run him over in my own Specter. My. Own. Specter. A car that was completely totaled, I might add, and for which I have not received one ounce of compensation." She continued packing up her things. "Asking me the same question, again and again, is not going to change the answer. It's not going to change the fact that I did not – DID NOT – help Alec."

Thom only allowed, "We'll see what he says." Ramona scoffed quietly, by which Thom was equally amused and insulted. "You doubt we'll find him."

"Neo-Bio has a lot of resources," Ramona allowed. To Thom, she said, "But Alec has intelligence."

A shimmering sign of humanity appeared in Thom's eyes as he stared at Ramona. "You betrayed us," he leveled at her.

"I did everything I could," she countered, returning his glare. "Neo-Bio is betraying me." She turned and walked across her large office, the light of the day coming in through the windows separating her and Thom. "Just like Alec." She took down her framed poster but paused. "At least he had a good reason."

As she returned to the desk and her box of belongings, Thom asked her, "Why did Walters betray you?"

Ramona turned to her former boss, surprised by his tone. Only a hint softer, it was a question, not an interrogation. Without thinking, the name almost escaped Ramona's lips. "Sam--" She caught herself, swallowed, and answered instead, "Same thing anyone betrays their city for."

"And that is?" pushed Thom, his hard tone returned

"If you knew, I wouldn't need to say it," she said. She stood up straight, her box in her arms. "And if you don't know what it is, saying it wouldn't make any sense to you." She walked around Thom, leaving her office for the last time. "Get the light, would you?" she asked as she left him behind.

Ramona's pictures rattled in the plastic bin labeled 'Neo-Bio Resident Removal'. The letters were bright and vivid, so much so they shone back at Ramona in the reflection of the metro window. The rusted train car vibrated painfully, kicking up and down as it rumbled ungracefully along the tracks. A gap in the door opposite Ramona let in the caustic daytime heat. Several bags from fast food stalls were crumbled and ruined by residue, collected in the corners. The metro smelled of spray paint fumes and baked mold.

As the train rounded a turned towards the next station, a divider wall flashed by. A solid block of posters advertising the match between Team Demon and Team Devastator were still vibrant. More than two weeks removed from the titanic match, the posters were still all over the metro stop. The doors opened with gasps of pressure and the squeal of rusted metal. Exhausted people came and went. Meanwhile, Ramona looked at the metro stop like it was an art gallery. Posters of the epic race dotted walls and pillars, covered some windows and even a few of the screens that played advertisements nonstop.

As the metro car kicked into motion again, the doors sliding closed and a mechanical voice coming unintelligibly over the speakers, Ramona realized she hadn't noticed which station they were leaving. She looked up at the digital map, part of which had been magnetized into uselessness. She saw the complicated network of stops and courses and tracks and routes and all the multitude of places there were for her to go.

And she had no place to go.

Ramona looked down at the hard box in her lap, slowly realizing she carried everything to her name. A panic hit her. She instinctively clutched the box closer to her as she looked around the metro car with a totally

different gaze. Survival instincts buried deep thanks to a civilized, corporate life, returned to her. Paranoia and territorialism struck her.

“No, let go!” yelled a girl’s voice.

Ramona turned sharply and saw a young girl fighting with an older boy. The pair were tugging on a stuffed animal, an old and raggedy thing. The boy’s artificial leg hissed as actuators dug his metal foot into the ground. His height as well as his cybernetics gave him better leverage. He pulled and the girl yelled before she smacked him with a hand missing a finger. Their mother, whom Ramona hadn’t noticed because her complexion matched the graffiti and trash of the metro car, sat forward and hit them both. She chastised them and then sat back, allowing them to renew their fight, albeit more quietly.

Desperate, Ramona got off at the next stop. She didn’t care what it was, just to get away from the rush of urban sensations she had forgotten. Before the metro car had even come to a complete stop, she rose and carried the box to the door.

As the doors slid apart, Ramona was struck with a sobering realization. On the sign directly before the doors, a blue arrow – faded and covered in graffiti – announced the direction out and towards the Duralee Track.

As the double doors of the metro closed behind her, Ramona turned around in the cavernous metro stop. One of the hubs of public transportation in the city, it was situated a block away from the track. A dozen small business stalls dotted the metro stop, none of which were operating. Trash had collected in the corners of the cement stop, as had a few of the city’s homeless population.

Ramona’s footsteps proceeded her as she headed up the steps to street level. She exited out into the harsh daylight but didn’t need to look around. She followed the specter of her own thoughts towards the Duralee Track.

A massive cement structure, huge pillars held up the center stands high above. Wide, open halls would lead crowds through the ticketing booths, through the security checkpoints, through the vendors and concessions, into the tens of thousands of seats beyond. Only now, they were empty. The great, towering spaces were still. Grand entrances, big enough for the hopes and dreams of the depressed, were vacuous. Long halls divided by massive pillars that would hold up the sky, empty save for echoes. Advertisements rolled on screens with cracked and fritzing monitors. Speakers buzzed, the roll of automatic advertisements lost to the dusty air. Silent but not noiseless, lit and yet filled with shadows, time had done nothing to Ramona’s memory of the enduring monolith of the track.

Ramona breathed the air, taking in the scent of crowds and dust, people and the city, oil and machinery. The scents of home. The clack of shoes weighed down by her possessions echoing ahead of her, Ramona walked paths that her feet remembered but her mind did not.

She arrived at a ticket desk, but found the terminal empty. She stood on her toes and looked through transparent window. Someone was asleep in the stall, a jacket pulled over them. Concluding it was a worker, Ramona slipped passed. She glanced up at a harmless security camera as she did, but then kept on. She wound through stone steps, the metal railing rattling as she passed. She spotted security in the distance, large men with obvious cybernetics. She heard one say, "She's fine", recognizing Ramona from ages passed. It only added to a growing sense of isolation from the present. She turned up a familiar stairwell and into the stadium she ascended, only to find her way into the bright daylight that looked out over the track.

A seven-mile circuit, the Duralee Track was made up of multiple obstacle courses that would test the teams of drivers as they fought for position. A large gap existed at the northern end of the track where a pair of loops over ten stories tall were being moved off the track, to be replaced with another obstacle for the new season. Nearer obstacles were familiar, not just to Ramona's eyes but also her reflexes.

Hot wind blew off the track, winding along the steps. The chain link fencing rattled at the base of the lonely seats. Across from her, inside the center of the track, a high-rise sat silent and dark. Behind the glass windows, the well-stocked and well-maintained box seats for the corporate account holders and other wealthy looked out from a better vantage than the city dwellers could ever hope to glimpse. A strange bitterness set into Ramona as she looked at the windows, trying to find the Neo-Bio box. All she could see was the painful orange reflection of the artificial sun at the very center of the city.

Ramona's head led her in turning and she looked up to the height of the seats, to where the track offices waited, quiet and dark.

Ramona walked slowly up the stairs into the meeting room. In the kitchenette opposite her, John paced. The track owner had an external phone in his hand, and he was turned away from the stairs. In ugly brown pants and a striped blue-and-white shirt, suspenders and an unkempt mustache completed the look of a short-statured scam artist. The hiss of hydraulics and the brass-plated hand did nothing to dissuade that impression.

The track owner glanced at Ramona, ready to yell at whoever was disturbing him. Instead, anger melted away when he finally recognized her.

"Mona," he said. Into the phone, he said, "I'll call you back." Whoever he was talking to say something snide, because he followed it with, "Yes, I will, I swear!" Another comment, less snide and more vulgar. "Yes, this time I mean it." He clicked the phone off and looked at Ramona as she set her box on the dinette table. Wobbly legs struggled with the trivial weight. "Fancy meeting you here," he said in a city accent. He glanced at the box and read off of it, "Resident Removal. That mean Neo-Bio gave you the pink slip?"

"Something like that," Ramona said as she paced in the office she had once known like a second home. Her mind drew incomplete memories off every detail.

"I thought corporations didn't fire; you just...disappeared," said John. He turned back to the kitchenette and continued brewing coffee.

"There are different protocols," was all Ramona would say. She came to the edge of the kitchenette, where the ancient carpeting was stapled into the warping tiles. "Besides, some corporate types think exile is worse than death." John only chortled. "Who was that?"

"On the phone?" asked John. "Oh, that was Hazel. He's interested in booking Team Demon to do an appearance at his track in Pozal."

"Another city. That's...exciting," Ramona said. John shrugged indifferently. "Well, I mean, the Duralee Track's got the hot commodity right now. Team Demon just beat Team Devastator, the Gold Sovereign Champs."

"Yeah, which debatably makes Team Demon a Gold Sovereign team, but maybe not," John told her. "The League is still reviewing the rules. And in the meantime, everybody and everything is in disarray. We got Bronze teams challenging Copper teams, Iron teams saying they can beat the Steel teams. It's chaos." He tried the coffee and approved of its minimal awfulness. He applied a liberal amount of seasoning from a hip flask he made no effort to hide. "Great time to be a fan. Oh, it's so exciting!" He was sarcastic. "Lousy time to have to actually run things." He had some coffee and remarked, "And run them, I do."

He began to shuffle towards the windows that looked out at the track. Grime had collected in the corners but the daily radiation had burned the center of the windows rather clear. "Now that Alec just up and disappeared, we're not even sure Team Demon's going to race again." He faced through the window at the track. "The furlough that they're recovering isn't going to hold much longer." He turned back around to Ramona. He glanced at her box of belongings, then at her. "Neo-Bio kicked you out." It wasn't a question, but a precursor. A prompt. "You know what they did with Alec?" Ramona was confused. "Rumor has it that Neo-Bio grabbed him for some reason."

"Neo-Bio's looking for him too," she told John. "If they find him, I'll be the last to know about it. I doubt anybody will know about it."

"Where'd he go?" John asked.

Ramona shook her head. "I have no idea."

John took his time staring at and through Ramona. He had another sip of coffee. "I'm not sure I believe you." His bluntness took Ramona by surprise. She readied to defend herself but John continued. "Neo-Bio might hang on to Alec and use him somehow. Team Demon's valuable. You said yourself: they're the hot commodity. Nothing corporations like more than a hot commodity."

Ramona stood still as John began to approach her from the window. "Right now," he told her with words loaded like a gun with no safety, "things are hanging on by momentum and inertia."

"Those are the same..." Ramona just kept quiet.

"Everybody's waiting for something to happen," John practically accused Ramona. "Everybody's waiting for Alec's next miracle and when it gets out that he's gone, there's gonna be hell to pay."

"The track has other teams, John," Ramona reminded him.

"I'm not talking about the track!" he yelled suddenly, startling her. His face flushed, his eyes shook with more fear than anger. "I'm talking about Duralee. I'm talking about the city. I'm talking about this stinky, rotten, ugly city. This city's more than this track but this track is its heart and if this heart quits a-beating..." He paced backwards from Ramona. "You think people are gonna be okay when they learn that Team Demon disbanded right after winning the biggest race in history?" He smiled a grin of crooked teeth as yellowed as the sky. "You look out that window and tell me these people can handle a letdown like that."

Ramona couldn't stop herself from looking out and seeing far beyond the track. The city extended into the haze, as if the endless slums and corporate retreats melded into the haze and pollution. "The team disbanded?" she asked, her voice a ghost.

John nodded. Callously, he added, "Now imagine how them out there are gonna feel." He nodded to the stadium when he said that. He turned and began to depart. "Maybe they'll riot. Or maybe they'll all just sit down and finally not get up again." He sniffed back some congestion as he descended the stairs. "Personally, I give the city a month. Maybe less."

Ramona was left staring through her own reflection.

In the garage doorway, Ramona teared up nostalgically at the smell of engine grease and motor oil.

The familiar scents were coupled with those of rust, metal, rubber tires, and hard-working but inefficient cooling jets from the wall vents. The air hummed with electricity and the whirl of cooling fans on computers that dotted the garage.

Four vehicles slumbered in the nearest of five bays, each divided by a thick, solid pillar. The floor was a textured mix of metal plating and cement. Chemical stains dotted the ground, especially under the vehicles. Towered tool cabinets on rollers were all locked and pushed to the walls. Their metal paint was chipped from age but mostly use. The diagnostic computers were in sleep mode. The garage was stagnant.

Nearest was the large, boxy tank of a racer. Six wheels, with four in the back, it was the heaviest and largest but not lacking for speed. In the middle were the two standard racers. Four wheels, low to the ground, and everything one could want in a vehicle. Lastly, at the next-to-last space, a three-wheeled racer. What very little it lacked in stability and power, it made up for with maneuverability to spare. All four racers were black with red highlights, the colors of Team Demon.

Ramona was hesitant to break the seal on the memories but willed herself to step into the garage. She looked around at the oil-stained floor, dust and debris blown in and clumped among the clutter here and there. She set her box of belongings onto a rolling seat used to work on engines. Making sure the balance would keep her things from falling, Ramona left the box and stepped further into her own past. Instinctively, she reached to wind up her black hair, only to remember it was no longer passed her shoulders but cut short. She touched the back of her neck as if to remind her of the time that had passed since she'd last been down here. Her fingers rubbed against the cyberjack at the base of her neck and she lingered there, fingers brushing the edge of cool metal.

"We missed you."

Dotson stood in the doorway, an arm leaning on each side. With the light from the stairwell outside, he was rendered a partial silhouette. Ramona smiled at her friend and approached. "It's good to see you." They embraced and hugged just a second longer than customary. Rather than greet each other, for a second, they leaned on one another, supported one another. Grieved together.

When he finally drew back, Dotson looked over Ramona and smiled, overjoyed and bittersweet at the same time. "I've got to be honest, I've never been so glad to see you. Like, ever."

Her own plight forgotten for a moment, Ramona grew worried. "Why, what's going on?"

"Well, you're Neo-Bio security. You know Alec's disappeared," Dotson told her.

"Yeah, but I'm not Neo-Bio security. Or, not anymore." She glanced at her box.

Dotson followed her glance and then reeled. "Holy crap." He wrestled with that for a moment. He turned to Ramona, about to bombard her with platitudes and offers for help but she stopped him.

"I'm...I'll be...let's, one emergency at a time," she said. "You go first. You said...what's going on? Beyond Alec...leaving." She choked up just a bit to say it aloud.

Dotson backed up from her, his hands in his pockets. At a loss for what else to say, he summarized it for her. "He left me everything."

Ramona's eyes opened wide, then her jaw dropped. "He WHAT?"

Dotson nodded. "Yeah. Everything, and I mean everything." He sat back on the hood of the first vehicle. "The racers, the team, the garage." He laughed. "He even left me his apartment." He laughed again, almost delirious at the implications.

For a moment, the fortune at play was forgotten and Ramona felt her heart break yet again. "I guess he really isn't coming back." Rage entered Ramona's mind. Her jaw clinched tight enough that her teeth began to grind. "I hope she's worth it, Alec," she whispered spitefully.

Dotson looked up, not sure if she'd spoken. Ramona hedged off him asking by saying, "Hell of a fortune, Dotson," she said.

"Yeah," he confirmed at the understatement. "I don't know what to do with it. I don't even...I don't even know where to start." Ramona turned away. She hugged her elbows to her side. She tried to speak but it was unsettling to her to see Dotson's handsome, chiseled face so morose. "Lancer thinks we should call it," he told Ramona. "He thinks we should sell the vehicles, sell the team, and just..." He shook his head, staring off.

"And Berri?" asked Ramona.

"The opposite." Dotson chuckled. "I guess Berri's always been the anti-Lancer. He thinks we should stick it out. Recruit two or three new members for Team Demon and try to soldier on." Dotson laughed again, an edge of paranoia and fear in his laugh. "I mean, we did just beat the Gold Sovereign Cup Champions. The track manager is already fielding requests to book us at other venues." Dotson admitted to her, "I don't know what to do, Ramona."

Ramona's instincts kicked in warily. "Well," she said, partitioning off her emotions, "it sounds like you've got a fortune handed to you. You can hire somebody to advise you. I'd recommend Decker. He's got the corporate contacts. He's always been a good guy and he's about the only person I'd trust to not take the money and run."

Dotson looked up at Ramona and admitted, confessed, "Ramona, I need help." She readied to chastise him for putting her in such a spot. "I need YOUR help," he stated absolutely.

The honesty was too much for her. Ramona punched him in the arm, nearly knocking him off the racer's hood. The strike made Dotson wince and inhale sharply but he didn't otherwise respond. "Dammit, you come at me like this?!" Ramona yelled, her professional, corporate demeanor gone. "You come at me, like this, after he left?! After he abandoned us?!"

Dotson chewed on lashing out. His square jaw clinched and he struggled to keep from exploding at her. "The same might be said for you," he told her as patiently as he could.

That stung and Ramona backed up from him. "When I left Team Demon, I pursued a different career." Dotson's placid face told her the difference was immaterial to him. "I gave notice. I let you know in advance. And I was still in Duralee."

Dotson told her, "You were part of our team, you were part of our family." He tossed his hand up, vaguely at the door. "And then you weren't."

"So I was just the trendsetter," Ramona said unfairly. Dotson didn't respond to the barbed comment. She regretted it immediately and had to look away from Dotson, to avoid his hurt expression. "I'm sorry, Dotson. I really am. I'm sorry he left. I'm sorry you got saddled with this. But this isn't my world anymore." She started to leave, but hedged at the door. "I'm...I'm not a racer anymore."

"Yeah," he acknowledged. But then he nodded towards her box of things. "But you're not Neo-Bio Security either." She looked over her shoulder at him and he pled. "I need help."

"Dotson," she lamented warily, looking away from him. "Don't do this. Don't try to pin your hopes of..." She paced from her, the clack of her steps on the garage floor echoing off every metal surface. "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know...anything." She laughed her own sick, heartbroken chuckle.

"I do," he told her. Their eyes met. "I know this team matters. I know it's important. It's not just...it's more than just a sports team to this city, to these people. I can't let it just fall apart. I won't."

"Alec left," Ramona said, not even a whisper.

"Alec wasn't the team," Dotson insisted, more determined than certain. "He owned it, he was the captain, but...but he wasn't the team. He wasn't Team Demon."

Ramona snickered, disgusted in the presence of optimism. "Sounds like you've made up your mind." Dotson gave her observation a thought and realized she was right. Ramona faced the stairwell out, the metal grated steps that wound up and down the long vertical shaft. She took another deep breath and backpedaled into the garage. "What do you want?" she asked. "Not 'help'. Don't say 'help'. Specifically. What do you want?"

Focusing, Dotson considered the task at hand. "Help me convince Lancer to stay on. He was Team Demon's playmaker. We can't replace him. After that, help me audition new drivers. The team operator, Basin, he knows his stuff and he's good at taking command of a situation on the track, but he doesn't have the instincts for the team dynamic."

"Do you plan to recruit from other Steel Teams?" Ramona asked.

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so. The Steel Sovereign Cup League is the first pro rank. By the time you're there, you've been racing for a while and you're probably with a team that's got corporate sponsorship which might transfer with a contract. Too much trouble, especially for a racer who probably already is used to working a certain way. No, I think we go to the amateurs."

"The Iron League?" asked Ramona.

Dotson nodded. "We recruit from the Iron League," he told her, knowing her willingness had a time limit. "Anybody from Steel or higher will be set in their ways. We need somebody who has some skill but whom can adjust and join the team. We can't start from scratch, so that means the person has to learn to work with us, less the other way around."

Ramona thought about it and nodded. She took off her Neo-Bio security jacket and pulled over a rolling stool for engine work. She sat in front of Dotson who returned to the hood of his own vehicle. "We'll need a manager."

"We will?" Dotson asked, then grinned. Ramona seemed confused. "I wasn't sure there was a 'we'. And I wasn't sure you would be part of the team."

Ramona hedged and could feel her face go flush with embarrassment. She looked at the tri-cycle in the docking bay and finally let out a laugh. "Well, I mean...it was originally MY racer."

The way she swallowed as she stared at the racer scared Dotson, and he wasn't sure why. Rather than push the sensitive issue, he returned to the task at hand. "For manager, I think that role pretty much has to go to Decker. I can reach out to him," Dotson said as his only viable option. "And as for the team, I was thinking we hold an open audition. Let some kids run the course and see what they do." He expected Ramona to counter but she nodded, agreeing with the decision. "Those that look promising, we invite back and have them run the course with the team. Whittle the list, rinse and repeat, until we've got something that cooks."

Ramona continued to nod. She shrugged and told Dotson, "Sounds like you know what you're doing."

"I need you to watch the races," he told her, refuting her confident assessment of his skills. "I need you to see what I can't that he...that he could." She looked away again. Rushing to stay focused, Dotson laughed as he said, "But it all starts with convincing Lancer not to quit."

Ramona stood up and said, "Let's go see him."

Dotson panicked a little. "What, now?"

Ramona started for the door, picking up her jacket as she walked. "No time like the present, Dotson." He glanced at her box still on the rolling seat and couldn't help but smirk. Unaccustomed to optimism in recent days, he embraced it as he rushed after her.

Dotson's rapping went unanswered. He waited for a moment on the front step of the suburban house, then knocked again. "I'm sure he was home," he said, bending to the side to peek in through the adjacent window. Ramona watched him fret, then sighed when he knocked again. "I'm not sure where he could—"

Ramona banged on the door with an open hand and yelled powerfully, "Open up, Lancer! We know you're in there!"

Dotson winced at the volume. "Do they teach you that in security school?"

"No, that's natural talent," she assured him without hesitation. She smacked the door again, loud enough for the impact to echo across the neighborhood. A pleasant road in the middle of a cultivated neighborhood, the house looked like it should belong to a middle-class family instead of a racer.

The door parted a crack and a thin but muscled man was behind it. A beautiful face perfectly between masculine and androgynous was framed by

shoulder-length blonde hair. His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open as he said in surprise, "Ramona?"

"In the flesh," she told him with a smile.

Lancer seemed hesitant to believe her, but he stepped forward and gave her a hug. He looked to Dotson and his expression warped in stunned shock. Dotson only nodded, agreeing. "C-come inside," Lancer told them both, gesturing for them to follow him.

Through the door was a suburban home meant for a small family. A sunroof let in filtered sunlight, cleaning the radiation so the glow felt pristine and clear. The solid beam fell on an old woman who sat in a lotus position on a small rock garden in what had been the living room. "Oh!" Ramona exclaimed. "We didn't disturb your mom, did we?"

"No, she's been taking meditation very seriously," Lancer told them. "She's oblivious to the world while she's meditating." He guided the two of them down the hall to the back of the house where a spotless kitchen looked out over a patch of land with actual soil. A few fragments of dried, dead grass remained but otherwise, the yard was a dustbowl.

"What happened?" asked Dotson as he approached the window.

"The storm killed the grass," Lancer reported. "The night after the race, it rained so heavily, most of the grass drowned. We're not used to getting rain like that." He shrugged narrow shoulders. "I bought the wrong kind."

Ramona saw her chance. "Well, we've got an opportunity to help you pay for reseeding it."

"Yeah, it'll be easy to pay for it once I sell my racer," Lancer told her, knowing where this was going already. To Dotson, he said, "Come on, man. We've been over this. I'm done." He clapped his hands together. "I'm out."

"We need you," Dotson pressed.

"Castor's living his brother," Lancer began to rattle off.

"Castor's what?!" Ramona balked. She swung around on Dotson. "You're letting him move back in with Dylan and the rest of those losers from Team Synthesis?!"

"We'll deal with Castor," Dotson said, as much to Ramona as Lancer. "Basin too, assuming he hasn't drunk himself into a stupor." Ramona scowled at Dotson, just barely keeping from throwing a punch. "Berri's still in," Dotson told Lancer. "I am too. Decker's going to manage."

"Did he say he would?" Lancer demanded, insistent on clarity. "Did he actually say those words, to you. 'Dotson, I am going to manage Team Demon'?"

Ramona checked with Dotson and saw him hedge. Angry in her own right but desperate not to lose the momentum, she said, "Yes." Lancer was as surprised as Dotson. "Decker's going to manage. He's on-board. There's some stuff he's got to clear up with Ars Technologica; declare secondary employment, list possible conflicts, stuff like that. But Decker's in." The momentum took her. "I am too," she announced.

Lancer's face went so wide in surprise, he did a double-take. "Wait, what?!" He looked at Dotson who was trying to seem pleased and not overly delighted. "I-I thought you just brought her to persuade me."

Ramona nodded to both her old friends. "I'm...I'm going to leave Neo-Bio," she half-lied to Lancer. "I'm going to come back as the team captain." She smirked and gave an uncertain look. "I mean, that is, if you guys will let me."

"Holy crap," Lancer whispered. He looked to Dotson. He hid his surprise and looked expectantly at his friend. Lancer grew tense, then looked towards the front of his house. He finally sighed and closed his eyes. "Alright," he acquiesced.

"Yeah!" Dotson shouted, startling Ramona. He grabbed Lancer around the shoulders, hugging him tightly. "Oh thank you, man!"

"Yeah, but you've got to deal with Berri," Lancer told Dotson as he wedged himself free of the hug. To Ramona, he told her, "He's not going to be thrilled that you're re-joining."

Ramona only shrugged. "Yeah, well. He doesn't have to be thrilled; he just has to stay on the track." Three friends shared a moment of hope.

The afternoon was alight with fires coming from a towering building. Once the site of a mid-level corporation, the multi-story structure of cement and metal was now a shanty town. Tattered blankets and cheap materials made up the homes that were now on fire. The poisonous glow was visible across the entire city, the black smoke rising up towards the bright light of the artificial sun.

Ramona and Dotson both looked to their left, watching the flames burn as they walked. The air was buffeted by the heat and the shouting as survivors tried to escape with what few valuables they had to their name. Nearby shantytowns watched in horror, knowing stray embers could mean their communities were next. The corpses of previous dried-out husks that had once meant jobs and livelihoods were a promise of how the tower would soon look.

Dotson coughed as some of the smoke billowed in their direction. He faced away until the urban winds carried the black smoke in a new direction.

Relieved, he found himself looking at Ramona. She noticed and smiled on the left side. He averted his gaze and looked upwards, the sky above them almost obscuring the city that rose up in the distance. Dotson asked, "How much of that did you make up on the spot?"

"Huh?" asked Ramona.

"You haven't talked to Decker," he explained. "And are you really in? Are you really back on the team?"

"Decker'll come around," Ramona assured him and she kept walking. Dotson did as well, but he looked back at the flaming structure they were passing. Worry filled him as guilt spread about just walking by. He turned and caught up with Ramona, leaving the fire to burn itself out.

The wall next to Berri's door was mottled with tiny black speckles, like a poor paintjob that had been forgotten halfway through repair. The sound of data streams was coming through the thin walls and the floor felt unsteady at more points than not. Dotson knocked again, rapping a few times on the door, the frame itself rattling. "Berri, it's Dotson. Open up, man."

"Did you call him?" Ramona asked.

"His phone charges by the minute, him and the caller," Dotson said. "He keeps it off most of the time anyway." Ramona nodded.

The door opened and Berri halfway stepped out. He fixed entirely on Ramona, his expression that of angered shock. "What's she doing here?"

"We need to talk," Dotson told Berri.

"Not with her we don't," Berri insisted.

Ramona tried. "Berri, I want to—"

"You left!" he yelled at her.

Berri opened the door completely and stepped out, fixating on Ramona. He asked in disgust, "What's she doing here?!" The question was for Dotson alone.

Rather than let herself be muscled out of the discussion, Ramona addressed Berri and his issues straight on. "I had a chance!" she stated emphatically and loudly. "I had the chance to go work for a corporation. I had the chance to make real money and make lasting change."

"Change for yourself," Berri accused. "We were a team! And he le—you left us!"

"He left me too, Berri!" Ramona yelled back. Her eyes watered up as she looked him up and down like she was reconnecting with a long-lost sibling. "Look, I'm sorry that I went to work for Neo-Bio. I thought it was the chance of a lifetime. I really did. And I didn't know how bad it felt to you. But I know now. Oh god, I know now." She wiped her tears away with her palm. "I don't think you're ever going to get Alec back. But you got me back. And if you don't trust me, fine. That's fine. But give me the chance to get that trust back."

"You don't deserve that chance," Berri said, stepping right in Ramona's face.

"None of us like being abandoned, Berri," Dotson said, a little too loudly so as to get his attention. "I was there when Ramona left the first time. I was here with you when we realized Alec left us. How do you think the fans are going to feel when Team Demon leaves them?"

"We can still save the team," Berri told Dotson, looking from Ramona for the first time. "You own it. It's all in your name. We just got to get Lancer, and some new guys. We can survive losing a member." He turned and buried his glare right into Ramona. "We've done it before."

"Berri," Ramona told him, her tone hardening. "I'm back on the team now. You need to just accept it." Dotson was about to question Ramona's tone when Berri punched her. The blow knocked Berri's red dreadlocks around his neck and into his face as Ramona slammed back into the opposite wall.

Dotson exclaimed in surprise. He was about to move when Ramona kicked off the hallway wall and tackled Berri at the waist, knocking him into his apartment. Dotson sighed as a neighbor's door opened. A young girl peeked out to find out what the noise was. She looked at Dotson. He waved and said, "Domestic dispute." She only went back inside. Dotson sighed as, through the door, Berri yelled, "Quit it, quit it!"

Dotson slipped into the messy apartment as Berri and Ramona wrestled for position. He stepped over the pair as Berri tried a submission hold he'd seen once long ago, while Ramona had already countered it. They both shouted and exclaimed in pain, hitting for pain more than damage. Dotson crossed the apartment into the kitchen and opened the fridge. Seeing few edible options, he called, "Do you have any fruit?"

"Ow!" Berri yelled. "Top shelf! Ow! That's my nipple!"

Dotson opened the shelf next to the fridge and discovered a half-full bag of dried apple chips. He took it down and had a bite. Deeming them acceptable, he returned to the living room where the match was still underway. He unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat down on an ottoman that

clashed with the chair before it. He had a few more chips and waited things out.

It took Berri and Ramona a few minutes before they were both panting and out of breath. Ramona had an ugly black eye beginning to form and Berri's nose was bleeding, red blood dribbling into his red dreadlocks. Both were bruised all over and their clothes sported a few rips. They were scowling and glaring, hatred seething between them. "We done?" asked Dotson.

"You left!" Berri yelled up at Ramona.

"No, guess not," Dotson accepted with an eyeroll.

"I had to leave!" Ramona yelled as she got on top of Berri. A split lip was resurrecting a childhood lisp. "I couldn't let the chance slip by."

"We needed you!" Berri yelled, punching Ramona again, hurting her but not doing any damage.

"And that's part of why I'm back!" she yelled. She pulled off of him, huffing and glaring, just like he did at her. She checked her nose and confirmed it was bloodied but not actively bleeding. She wiped her blood on his sleeveless shirt.

"Just like that?" Berri asked, laughing incredulously. He slapped her hand away. "You expect us to welcome you back, just like that?"

Dotson was about to speak, but Ramona simply smiled and asked, "Would you want it any other way?"

The answer was Berri's slow, resisted, unwitting smile.

The door opened, letting in a line of light that widened. The noise from the hallway ads echoed into the small space. The ceiling sloped dramatically due to the surface of the roof, it hid the condo's deceptive size. A couch sat underneath the UV-tinted windows, a rug laid out over the floor. There were no ads in the private space, no video players or news feeds. Only a stark silence that was rare in city life.

Ramona stepped inside, her Neo-Bio box in her hands. She set it down and clicked the light switch, but no illumination came. "When I got the notice of ownership, I suspended the utilities," Dotson told Ramona as he shut the door behind her. The dusk light was burning down on the city, the radiation from the artificial sun slowly dwindling. "I messaged the companies. They all get turned on at midnight."

Ramona approached the windows and looked out on the city. She could see the curve of the city from that elevated vantage. With the daylight dwindling, it was easier to see into the far distance. The buildings

and streets, the manufacturing centers and trash dumps, all rising with the curve of the city. She smiled as she enjoyed minor vertigo until she reached the edge of the windows and looked at the distant side of the spherical city like it was a real sky. "I kind of like it like this." She exhaled deeply. "A fresh start."

Looking around the living space, she was amazed at the furniture and electronics still in place. It was clear the home hadn't been lived in for several weeks but it felt far from abandoned. "It's weird, to be in Alec's...to be here, knowing he isn't." She turned around to Dotson and asked, "Are you really okay with letting me stay here like this?"

He gestured noncommittally. "I mean..." He looked around at the three-room home. "I only learned this place was mine last week. I didn't even have the...strength, I guess, to..." He looked at the place like it was the corpse of a friend. He admitted, "I certainly don't have any plans for it."

"Well...thank you seems inadequate but thank you," said Ramona. "I don't think I even have enough money to rent a room for the night, much less until I can find a job." Her eyes trialed out to the city beyond the windows and she felt a pang of terror at the prospect of even finding a job to pursue.

"Let me guess: unpaid leave ate all your savings?" Dotson asked. Ramona neither confirmed nor denied it. "Aren't you going to get severance pay or something?" he asked. "I mean, you were at Neo-Bio for years."

"Corporations run by different rules," she told him, like she was admitting a truth she'd turned a blind eye to. "They're garnishing my wages and savings to pay for the investigation into my termination. When it's all said and done, they'll send me a bill for the remainder."

Dotson just scoffed. "Geez."

"Yeah," she nodded. "And there's going to be hoops to jump through to get the bills formally observed. Because if I don't, once I pay them off, Neo-Bio can be like 'oh, we forgot the other half of the charges'." Ramona turned back to him and smiled sardonically. "The fun is just beginning."

"Joy," he said with a deadpan. He extended a key. "Well, you can..." Ramona took the key from him, curious about his averted eyes. "I mean, the place is paid for. And so's my place, so..." Dotson stepped back awkwardly.

Ramona's eyes narrowed, her smile curling. "Errol, what is it?" The use of his first name threw him and he stammered. "Come on. Out with it."

"I'm glad you're back," he admitted with a whisper. "I-I missed you." Once he'd finally said it aloud, he glanced at her, checking her reaction.

Now it was Ramona who stiffened. She swallowed hard and wanted to speak but had no idea what to say. "I..." was all she managed.

Dotson, his eyes averted like a nervous school boy, turned away. "It's a nice place," he told her, leaving her behind to wrestle with the realization. "I, uh, I was always curious why Alec kept it after his parents died but, I mean, I have to admit that it's really nice. Owning – actually owning – property in Duralee's not a small thing either."

He went into the next of the three rooms in sequence. "He owns several of the garage spaces, too. There are two commuters – an Aja two-door and a BTX 300. I don't know what happened to his Specter." In the front room, Ramona was still trying to unwrap the emotions Dotson had revealed.

Back in the final room, where the small single bed sat, Dotson found the wooden desk where Alec wrote in a paper notepad. Bereft of all other fixtures, the desk seemed to exist solely for the notepad. Curious, Dotson opened the pages to find pages of hand-written notes. Cursive and print lettering paired off, almost like it had come from two different people.

Unable to stop himself, Dotson read through page after page, discovering whole conversations carried out in the notebook. He then flipped to the front of the journal. "Hey, Ramona?" he called. She appeared in the doorway and, as he turned to her, she saw the notepad. Her hands dropped, as did her jaw. Dotson asked her, "Who's Samifel?"

If you'd like to know what the heck is going on and who all these people are, check out [Samifel](#), available now in ebook or in print. You can also find much more by RVA at:

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