

Sweet Dreams

A Creative Honors Thesis

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Abstract

In science fiction and cyberpunk genres, there's an absence of complex, non-trope characters. Female characters, specifically, are written as auxiliary to the primary male. They are simplified objects, absent of true subjectivity. Seeking to resolve this absence, I chose to write and illustrate a creative honors thesis that integrates many disciplines: creative writing, art, and technology. This project serves as a capstone to my academic experience, as well as a challenge to create the highest quality manuscript with illustrations. The content of this creative thesis is a feminist themed science fiction/cyberpunk novella. It explores themes of technology and the modes through which technology reinforces social divisions of inequality. This includes the commercialization of 'female' resources. By playing with, and pushing against, gendered tropes in science fiction/cyberpunk, this thesis makes a valuable, female-driven addition to the existing canon. Ultimately, this helps to bring women into these genres and, in a very modest way, helps the overall feminist movement.



The curved beams bowed with just enough tension where they interlocked, they held each other in an embrace. Blanch brushed her fingers across the rail. Touching the smooth oak veneer set ripples afloat in her chest. The *Bonnie* was beautiful. Her dream was inevitable now that she'd seen the boat. It rocked calmly in the water.

"You look so happy," Mike said. He stood next to her. He put his hands in his pockets and his leather jacket creaked against the movement. "I don't know why it always surprises me when you have real feelings," he mused.

"It does?" She glanced at him. His hair was cut tight on the sides and long enough to be slicked back, but he let it hang in blond wisps around his face, like he didn't even notice it there. Bugged her. Made her cheeks tickle.

He grinned, one of his face's natural poses, even though his neural-regulator turned off real joy.

"I think this is the one," Blanch said. She tapped the *Bonnie's* side.

"I've never thought about sailing, but I'd like to," Mike said. He put his hand on the rail, across from hers. The late afternoon sun reached through his scraggly hair, casting strips of light against his cheek. It made him look more heroic, maybe even handsome.

She slipped her Coltel smartphone out of her jeans' pocket and took a few steps back on the dock. It was a gorgeous view. She captured a photo. The craft was white, with natural stained railings and masts, a modest deck and a cozy cabin. The sky and ocean met in a straight line behind it. Waves lapped inside her chest. The boat was small and perfect

for just one. That was the best part, enforced solitude, and the comfort of the rolling cerulean rocking her into peace of mind.

“Why’re you into the ocean so much?” Mike asked.

She tucked her phone back into her jeans. “Don’t know if I can really explain. You’ve never been un-regulated, have you?” she asked.

“No.”

She popped her pinky knuckles to stop herself from pushing his hair out of his face. “I guess, think about it like eating. You get hungry, you eat, then you get full. Always one or the other extreme.”

“And that’s a metaphor for your feelings? What, happiness and sadness?”

“That’s normal life, every day.”

“And the ocean is?”

“Having just enough to eat, never being really hungry, always being satisfied.”

Mike’s lips twitched, he held back a smile. “I’ve listened to your emotion-stream before, I’ve got an idea what your good times and your bad times feel like. I don’t get it. It doesn’t seem that bad. And you always get through it.”

“I don’t want to ‘get through it.’ I want peace of mind.”

“If you want peace of mind, why not get regulated again?”

She shook her head. “That’s numbness.”

He looked down at his gray shoes. “If it makes you happy, it makes me happy, too.”

Blanch snorted a laugh. “Get your regulator turned off and I’ll believe you.”

Mike touched the small of her back as they walked back to the parking lot. He followed her to her Ducati. She threw her leg over it and sat.

“Thanks for letting me come with you,” Mike said. “This was nice. I’m glad you found your dreamboat.”

Blanch looked over at him. He had a permanent crook in his posture, a bend to his shoulders that propped him forward. “Listen—”

“Yeah?” Mike stepped closer.

“The last couple years have pretty much been a godsend for me. I’m really thankful for the opportunity you gave me to found Sensory Broadcasts with you. It’s basically my freedom. It’s finally enough to let me get my boat.”

He smiled a warm, open, deceptively feeling smile at her and the light caught his eyes.

She took a deep breath. “Mike—”

“Yes?”

“I think I’m ready to cash out. I’d like to collect my portion of the company.”

He was suddenly still, watching her. The whites around the edges of his pale blue eyes showed. His jaw loosened. He nodded, and nodded again. “What’s your plan?” he asked.

She glanced over his shoulder at the dock and the ocean beyond. “I think I’m going to work on my sea-legs.”

“What does that mean?” Mike asked. She wondered if that was the edge of something sharp in his tone. He glanced over his shoulder, following her gaze.

“Ideally? I’d like to move out of my apartment, stay on the boat. Maybe sail down the coast, spend some time in South America, maybe. I don’t know,” she said.

He nodded emptily. His countenance had changed quickly. He tugged on the collar of his polo. His phantom mood swings irritated her. “I’ll get that paperwork together for you, but, it’s almost seven—shouldn’t you be getting ready for your shift?”

She glanced at her Coltél’s screen. The clock read 18:43. “Yeah, it’s about time.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to it,” he said abruptly.

Mike went to his car on the other side of the lot. He stopped at his door and looked back at her. Awkward. Should she smile or wave or something? He turned away and got in his car.

Blanch sat for a minute. The sound of Mike’s engine came to life. She closed her eyes and let the sea-spattered air wash over her for a moment more. The sun hung low on the horizon and night would be coming soon.

* * *

The glass door squealed open and she stepped into the wash of neon light. She stopped by the convenience store to get a bite before her shift. In hindsight, she should have known Mike would be a dick.

The back isle had pre-packaged meals from several local shops. Tonight, the selection was good: gourmet beef and gruyere with apple slices, salmon fillets with mango chutney, and a spiced split pea soup.

Her Coltél vibrated in her pocket. It flashed a reminder: set broadcast. She pulled up the Sensory Broadcasts app that connected to her neural-regulator, read its signal, and allowed her to make her emotion-stream available online. There was a timer that counted

down sixty remaining seconds; the end of Tori's broadcast. After that, Blanch would be on. She pressed the queue button and it pulled up a reading of her emotions being recorded by her neural-regulator. They'd go live as soon as Tori was off. She slipped her Coltel away and grabbed a sandwich.

A gaunt, strong-jawed boy stood near the register, looking at her quietly. His eyes were deep set; his pale skin dappled a tired maroon. He could have been seventeen, but he looked world-worn and stood with a slump. He stared at her. His green eyes glinted. He just stood there. The glow panels implanted in his throat pulsed gently.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She balanced the sandwich in one hand, slipped out her phone, and checked her broadcast. It was live. The ticker counted up from a minute fifty-nine seconds. A text message blinked in her notification bar, waiting to be read. She glanced back up, and the boy was gone.

'Due to unsatisfactory performance and the fact that you're a goddamn cunt, I'm reinvesting your portion of the company into internal improvement. I'll cut you a check for your last two weeks. Love, Mike.'

The magic of experiencing emotion was in small little moments like this. She knew what Mike had just done: waited until she was on the air to upset her. If you're going to fight, might as well make a profit on it. She clenched her teeth. The phone went back in her pocket. She went to the counter; she dropped the sandwich on the glass, forcing the shake out of her fingers and into a deep breath. She pulled her wallet out.

"Excuse me," the crow-like cashier said, clearing his throat. "You're causing a scene."

Blanch bristled. She wasn't even crying. If the boy were Mike, she'd punch him.

The cashier flinched. His shoulders hitched together. He glanced at her, then the register, and back. He looked god-awful uncomfortable.

“I just want this sandwich,” Blanch said. She placed her hands on the counter and leaned forward. The cashier drew himself back. His gaze darted to her hands. His fingers slipped under the lip of the counter. The door to the back office opened and an older woman came out. She wore a pearl necklace and fitted jeans. She looked commanding enough to be the franchise owner. Blanch didn’t notice her handgun until she lifted it.

Blanch raised her hands. Wetness rolled down her left cheek.

“Get out before we have to shoot you.”

She kept her hands up and went for the door. Her hands, elbows, shoulders, and chest shook. Her disabled regulator recorded her feelings and relayed them out to her listeners silently. She left the store.

She slipped around the corner next to the parking lot. She leaned against the wall, tilting her head back. She grabbed her phone and looked at Mike’s message. The black text seemed to burn into the flat screen.

‘Where are you right now? We need to talk about this,’ she texted him.

The message popped up, a few seconds later it dimmed—he’d read it. She watched the display. The fingers of strain wrapped around her sternum and squeezed. Sharp pains pinched down her chest. No response came. She gripped the phone in her palm. Her eyes burned.

She threw it against the wall. It clattered to the ground.

“Excuse me,” someone said.

The worn-out boy from inside picked up her Colt with one wide-palmed hand and held it out to her. It was cracked, but still displayed the conversation with Mike. She looked at him with every raw ounce of anger she had in her. The boy didn't so much as blink. She took the phone from him.

"What?" she asked. She let her feelings free in the night air. She refused to put on her false-calm mask again.

But he didn't flinch. He held up a bag in his other hand. "I got that sandwich for you," he said.

She rocked back on her heels, got a better look at him. Now that he was close she could appreciate the finesse in his throat glow-panels. They were aesthetic mods installed by an artist. Three neon squares that pulsated in harmony with his speech patterns.

She took it from him. "Who are you? Or, what do you want from me?" she asked. Her stomach growled.

"You probably don't remember me, but I knew you back when you worked the desk at Blue Grade Shield & Patriotism."

She looked up at him one more time. The worn eyes were the eyes of a kid assassin who came back from his first job with chunks of person drying in his hair. She remembered him well.

"Really?" she asked.

Blanch had the pleasure of serving paperwork behind a desk. The most glorious job in the company. This kid had started with Blue Grade Shield & Patriotism around the time that Blanch applied for field duty and been declined—around the time she quit. She didn't regret the money she'd put into martial arts training, firearm practice, ammunition, tactical

books, she just regretted being rejected. Blue Grade had a tendency to take kids into the program a lot easier.

“What’re you doing here?” she asked.

“I’m on a job.”

“Figured. When are you guys ever not on a job? You still an assassin?”

“Upgraded to senior field agent,” he said.

“Congrats.” She walked past him towards her Ducati. He followed, a friendly ghost.

“What’s your target?” she asked. She opened the rucksack attached to her bike and slid the sandwich in for safe keeping.

When he didn’t respond, she glanced over at him. His jaw flared and he clenched his teeth. There was something raw in his expression, she couldn’t put her finger on why it seemed different.

“It’s Sensory Broadcasts,” he said, holding eye contact.

She took a deep breath to steady herself. She went into business mode. She needed more information. “Tell me your name again?”

“It’s Gabe.”

“Right, Gabe, what kind of a job is it?” she asked. The question-and-answer format reminded her of filing reports for field agents.

“Torture, non-deadly,” he answered, easily.

He seemed willing to share. So she asked a bigger question. “Who hired Blue Grade for it?”

“Some fat cat, that doesn’t matter. You need to get out of town, get your girls somewhere safe. Once it starts, well, I don’t know if I can do anything to help,” he said.

She put her hand on her bike, it reassured her, and looked back at the boy. There was a silence around him, the tiniest buffer protecting him from the rest of the world. It looked like a pretty possibility that he was hiding something, but she didn't think he was straight lying. He felt honest.

"Doesn't the company monitor your actions?" she asked.

"Don't worry—they don't track my voice activity, so they have no idea I'm here."

"This isn't sanctioned behavior. You can't tell me you're allowed to be here, I know how shit works at Blue Grade."

He paused, looking down at his Chuck Taylors.

"Tell me," Blanch pushed.

"It's personal."

"Tell me."

"It's not—"

"If there's anyone in the whole world who won't report you, it's me. I'm ex-Blue Grade and I've paid off my regulator. They have nothing over me, and I sure as hell have no love for them."

Light caught his eyes. "You paid off your regulator? That's impossible. How much did it cost you? How'd you do it?"

"Sensory Broadcasts. I make a lot."

"How come girls get stuck doing it, then?"

Blanch bristled. It wasn't worth fighting over. She held her tongue. "The only people who work as emotional broadcasters are people who have to pay off their regulator. Most people can't afford to do it. I'm an owner, and frugal, so—"

“I want to quit.” Gabe interrupted her.

She couldn't stop the smile. Of course that was this boy's story. “So, why haven't you? Why're you here, breaking every protocol to tell a mark that they're a mark?” She put her palm on the bike's handlebars.

“Blanch—you need to leave town. I can tell you exactly what will happen if you don't.”

She searched her mind. He'd been special. Why had he been special? He'd had a signature that got the senior agents cackling. What had it been?

“What?” she asked.

“I'll cut out your tongue.”

Oh, yes, that was it. Gabe would look good with blood splattered across his face.

She felt the familiar urge to hold her gun. Her Springfield 1911 was at home, though. The skin beneath his eyes was sunken, aged, and matched the hunch of his shoulders. He moved slowly. She didn't doubt he was capable and strong, but she did.

He lifted his hand, bringing it to rest on her shoulder. Her skin crawled.

“Please get out of town?” he asked, gentleness in his face.

“Fuck.” Blanch shook. “Thanks, I guess.”

“I hope to never see you again,” he said. He took his hand back.

It would be an enjoyable night for her listeners. She slipped on her helmet and dialed Mike through the built-in headset. She revved her engine and took off. There was no answer.

* * *

The first thing a good field agent does is take phones out of the picture. She tried the girls anyway. Tori, Tara, Ursula, Chloe, and Samantha. No answer. Blanch white knuckled the handlebars and leaned into her Ducati's acceleration.

She tried Mike four more times, no answer. He was avoiding her. He likely thought she was blind with rage—hell, she would have been if the kid hadn't warned her, and Mike was being a bitch about it. She went to his apartment, first. It was fifteen stories up, second to top floor, and locked. She banged on the door for ten minutes until a neighbor came into the hall, wiped old makeup from beneath her eyes, and told Blanch to fuck off. She shot the woman a dirty look and shoved her hands in her pockets. With her shoulders pulled up to her ears, she sulked through the monitor-lined hallways. Three different digital salespeople queried Blanch as she passed. She ignored them. Mike still lived in the advertising-heavy discount housing-tower, even though he'd made enough money to upgrade to peace of mind. Stomping down the fifteen flights towards the street, she queued up his number.

It rang.

"Answer, Mike."

It kept ringing.

She kicked through the door onto the street and threw her leg over her Ducati.

The line clicked over to his voicemail. She disconnected it.

Her Coltel buzzed, registering an incoming message. She swiped to the notification panel. A text message blinked at her. It was Mike.

'I don't want to talk to you right now. My decision is final. I reinvested your half into Sensory Broadcasts, so, it's gone.'



She input a response. *'Where are you? Forget my half. Girls are in danger. Need to get them off air.'*

The message clicked into the system. Its icon dimmed to show that he had seen it. She waited. The whirring of tires on cement poured down from the nearby highway. The air smelled like moldy wool and stale detergent—the smell of rain and the city.

Blanch locked the screen. If Mike was baiting her, she'd have to play his game. She'd skip the normal stop at the diner where he liked to do paperwork and the card shop where he blew off steam with collectible gaming cards, and go straight for work—take a gamble that she knew where he'd think she'd look last. If he was there and the agents were already engaged, well, she couldn't just walk away.

* * *

Raindrops pitter-pattered on the neon sign for Mike's. She hated that damn thing, but he insisted. People like pink and blue side by side, makes them think about men and women side by side. It was late. The foyer was empty. She could see the glistening bar-top but nothing more. The thumping of post-retro-body-fluid-electro music came from inside. Bar stools splayed across the floor.

Jaw practically rattling, she crouched into a steady-stance. She'd taken hundreds of classes for this. She reached to the back of her belt, but there was no gun. Once upon a time she carried her 1911 with her everywhere. Silence would have to suffice.

With her knees bent, she crept forward. She edged around the corner onto the main floor. An array of blood splatter painted the slate carpet. A thin legged body lay strewn across the closest of three stages.

Blanch held her breath and inched closer. It was Chloe, one of the new girls. Chloe's stomach hung open, puckered at the edges of a wide wound. It smelled like shit and blood. Blanch rolled back onto her heels, clasping a hand over her mouth.

She felt movement behind her, too close. The body had distracted her. She turned. Elbow up, she threw her weight into a swing. A hand grabbed her jacket's collar. Her elbow flung wide, missing. She twisted to grab for the hand holding her. Her fingers closed on empty air.

Metal prongs touched cold against the back of her neck. She threw her body forward. Her captor's grip faltered. Only a breath separated the back of her neck from the crackling of a stunner. The heel of his hand jarred her spine. Chest first, she fell into the blood on the stage. She slipped her foot back, hooking toes around his sturdy ankle and kicked forward.

He fell, weight on her back. His hand slipped across the bloody stage by her face.

A well placed blow would put him in the hospital. She gripped his wrist, held him immobile, and thrust her boot back into his knee. She missed. He crawled up to kneel over her spine. His knees dug into the back of her arms.

The prongs prodded her neck, insistent this time. Blinding sensation stopped her, her teeth reflex-clamped shut. All her years of martial arts classes went out the window. Her neural regulator lit up with electrical current. Pain radiated out through her chest. Her

face jerked against the stage. Blood got in her mouth. The sudden burden of her numb limbs stopped her. Her muscles wouldn't respond.

All she could do was stare at Chloe's mangled body inches from her nose.

A strong hand—too strong to be Mike—grabbed her hair and yanked her across the floor. Her head cocked chin to chest as he dragged her. She couldn't see anything but the carpet beneath her boots and the bar as it receded away. He grunted at something—someone—his hoarse tone hung thick in the air. He dragged her across a pile of corpses. Her feet thumped across the mangled faces of Tara, Tori, and Ursula.

She choked. Where was Mike? Where was fucking Mike? She must have messed up. Should have gone to the diner or the card shop.

Her toes began to tingle. Sensation was on its way back after the stun-shock delivered to her nervous system. She opened her mouth and uttered a gurgle. It was the neural regulator—it was wired to everything.

He pulled her into the back restroom. What had once been a normal facility with stalls was now open space spotted with three toilets. One lie cracked with a large puddle spreading on the floor. He tossed her next to one of the porcelain fixtures. He pushed her head down against the seat. The sharp bite of cuffs locked her hands around the cool pipe.

She opened her mouth to speak. A jumble of vowels came out. One hand pressed her cheek into the seat, forcing her to face the room.

"Take a deep breath," he whispered to her. His breath smelled like a half-smoked cigarette. Blanch wish she'd never quit.

Another man entered the room. He came with a body in tow. She recognized the body by its narrow tilted hips. It was Samantha. The man wore a red and white striped

running jacket embroidered with a giant scripted 'Hank'. He was thick with add-ons. The delicate layer of skin on his hands and throat pulsed with alternating blue and green glowing racetracks. A smear of blood in the shape of a hand print ran across his cheek and lips.

Hank looked at Blanch, and then behind her and grinned. "What took you so long to get here? I've been having all the fun without you."

"Just getting the straggler."

"Good thing you got the fat bitch. She's supposed to be the best broadcaster in the bunch," Hank said. "Are you ready for an adventure?"

Hank turned back to Samantha's crumpled body. With a firm smack, he woke her up. She came to, screaming. He lifted her wrists up with a pulley, hoisting her into the air.

"Let me go—" She gagged on her own words. "Let me go let me go—"

"Watch careful, now," Hank said.

Samantha opened her mouth, her ribs expanding, and cried a hoarse scream. Hank snatched a knife from the sink. He took it to her back. He sliced her with a jerk of his arm. She hung screaming in an unending line of noise. Blood dripped from behind her, long rivulets cascading down her inner thigh. He dropped the knife and pressed his arm in. Into her body. Blanch couldn't look away. She watched him push his arm into her torso. She could hear the thick wet sound of spine and innards adjusting to him. Samantha's entire body convulsed. He pulled out a small bundle of wires with long organic extenders attached. It was Samantha's aesthetic mod power relay. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she fell limp. Blanch stared, eyes dry from strained watching. She couldn't get a full breath.

Hank held his bloody hand out and away from his clean jacket. Ecstasy painted his face. "You're scared, doe. I can feel it, and damn, it's so sweet."

"Fuck you," she sputtered.

"Let's kick it up a notch," Hank said.

The pressure on her cheek lifted. She craned her neck to come face to face with sad-eyed Gabe. With sunken cheeks and a cigarette tucked behind his ear, she recognized him. She remembered him well.

He looked stiff like he wanted to say something.

How hard it must have been to wash the dried blood out of his hair.

"You don't want to do this," she said to him.

"What the hell is she talking about, Gabe?" Hank asked.

Gabe looked up from her to Hank. He clenched his jaw, putting on impatience. "I have no idea," he said. There was a flavor of gravel in his voice. He was playing hard.

Blanch ached, wishing she were him—a field agent with a sly skill for manipulation.

"Is she broadcasting?" Gabe asked.

"Oh yes," Hank said.

"Good," Gabe said flatly.

He pulled something from his back pocket and placed his left hand over Blanch's jaw, holding her face in the hollow of his palm. The remnants of rubbing alcohol and cigarettes reeked under his fingernails.

"We're going to burn you out," Hank said. "Then we're going to fix you, little cat."

Gabe adjusted an odd metal contraption in his right hand. It looked like an oversized retainer. He put it between her lips, twisting a silver lever, cranking her mouth open. She

fought against it, but she couldn't get her mouth closed. Drool pooled at the corner and spilled over her lower lip. She mumbled useless syllables, trying to say, 'no.' He stuck his acrid fingers into her mouth, snatching her tongue. The rubbing alcohol he'd cleaned with burned her tongue and throat.

Hank came close, crouching by her side and running his hands up her distressed blue jeans.

And then the boy Gabe disappeared completely into his façade.

"You know those sweet dreams where you try to scream but you can't?" he asked.

She slammed the handcuffs against the toilet seat as hard as she could. She flailed and kicked at Hank and Gabe. Hank stumbled out of her reach and leaned against the sinks, laughing. He fumbled a stunner from his pocket. He climbed around the back of the toilet where Blanch couldn't kick him.

She kicked Gabe's knee instead. He slipped back out of her way, letting her tongue go. With one firm stomp, he rolled her hips. She faced away from him, jarred at an uncomfortable angle, arms hugging the toilet. Gabe grabbed the hem of her shirt and jacket with icy hands, pushing it up and exposing her back. Cooperating like long-time partners, Hank put the cool prongs of the stunner at the base of her spine and delivered a deadening shock. Her legs twitched violently and then numbed.

Open-mouthed and drooling, with the device locked between her jaws, she screamed.

"You always were the artist, Gabe," Hank said as if admitting a long kept secret. He was definitely jacked in to her emotion stream; she could hear the edge of moan in his voice. "Give her your best shot."

Gabe wrapped his arms around Blanch's waist and straightened her out, correcting the painful pose. She stared up at him. He looked down into her face with masked vulnerability. The slight pique of his brow, the place in the center where they tugged together, the unmoving valley of his sealed lips, the sheen of blankness across his eyes—the pieces all added up to a mental state she knew inside out. Schizophrenic, hyper-vigilant, disconnected in the extreme.

She didn't want the next thing to happen. She couldn't stop it. She couldn't make him stop. He reached into her mouth again and snatched her tongue. She needed him to stop. He pulled her tongue past her teeth. She couldn't stop it. From his pocket he drew an old style razor. Stop. He looked down at her through the filter of breaking, beautiful green eyes.

Stop. She contracted her tongue but it stuck in his sharp pinch.

Gabe's expression shifted. Whatever brief honesty she'd seen faded into a sleek mask of cool. "Did you know in the world of emotion broadcasting you are famous?" he asked. He paused, looking through her for a moment. "I read there is a link between the best emotional broadcasters and the destitute poor. Did you know there's a statistical likelihood that orphans fucked over by the foster system will become broadcasters?" he asked.

He knew too much about her. Even the haze of fear couldn't blur her realization: he really had grown up to be a true professional. Like all the kids brought into Blue Grade, he'd learned psychological warfare and internalized the motto: "a little bit of research goes a long way." He'd done his research on her.

"Stop talking and do it," Hack groaned, running his hands over his shaved head. The green panel implants in his wrists flickered vigorously.

Gabe placed the razor against her tongue. The cool steel hurt, the sharp edge drawing a line of fresh blood. Watching it hurt. She tried to turn her brain off, to escape. To think about something else. She needed to escape.

His brows hitched together, his breath caught in his throat. "You ready?" he asked.

No.

He hesitated.

Something clicked in his eyes and he pulled the cut in one fluid movement. Hot blood filled her mouth. She screamed in the back of her throat, then gurgled, then choked. With a frown, he held her tongue up for her to see. It dropped to the floor with a wet slap.

Gabe turned away and walked towards Hank. Blanch buckled forward. Her blood spurted through her lips and across the ground.

"What's wrong with you tonight, man?" Hank asked in a voice that was too far away.

She was losing her hold; she couldn't stop the black splotches filling her vision from taking over.

* * *

When Blanch left Blue Grade Shield & Patriotism it took her seventeen months to adjust to life without the possibility of becoming an agent. She made a list of things she did not need to do on a daily basis: 1) carry a firearm, 2) monitor the Blue Grade activity feed, 3) practice punches, kicks, or evasive maneuvers, 4) drink, 6) lock all doors, and 7) field strip and clean her Springfield 1911. Eventually, she weaned herself of some of these habits, but she still cleaned the handgun anyway.

* * *

Everything smelled like Lysol and bleach and it made Blanch want to vomit, but it woke her up. When she tried to lift her head, it rolled heavy to the side. She squinted into the sharpness of light. The bite of metal cuffs into her wrists told her she was bound. The damp bandana in her mouth told her she was gagged. The bandana was more than damp, though, it was soaked. The dribble of wetness down the front of her shirt indicated that. She heard the low rumble of a voice over a comm.

Fuzzy thoughts came and went. She was confused why she wasn't in pain.

The bandana pinched the corners of her mouth. She strained her jaw open and tongued the fabric.

Only, she couldn't.

A vomit-reflex rose in her throat. She swallowed against it. She didn't want to choke or infect her wound. Neither sounded pleasant. Holding her breath for a count of ten, she thought about the sunlight reflecting off the veneer of the Bonnie. The rocking, lapping, playful ocean.

She squinted again, letting her eyes adjust to the rough halogens. There were two walls lined with brushed tin shelves stacked with white labeled cleaning supplies and torture implements. The voice from the room next door was loud enough to hear it.

"I doubt he lost control. He didn't kill the alpha broadcaster—" Hank's voice said.

There was a buzz-crackle. The voice on the comm responded, "Sparing Miss Pace is not completely unexpected, he knew her when he was a rookie agent. Although not ideal,

his reaction is within the spectrum of acceptable responses. Moving on, the total body count came to?”

“Four, one critically injured, and Pace.”

“Four, noted. Duration?” the dispatcher queried. Blanch recognized the conversation format. Hank was filing a report on Gabe.

“From entry to now, a total of three hundred—” he paused, “three hundred twenty one minutes.”

“Engagement is currently active?”

“Yes, sir. Final asset, alpha broadcaster, plus one injured are still breathing.” Alpha broadcaster—that was Blanch. Number one emotional, the top performer/broadcaster of Sensory Broadcasts.

“Noted.”

“Sir, designation clean-up requested. I have seen too much evidence that something’s very wrong with Gabe’s regulator.”

“Request denied. Your evidence is largely circumstantial. Your partner’s status report has been filed. Your assignment is business as usual until HQ analyzes the information and determines the proper measures.”

“Yes, sir.”

“As usual, should matters escalate, activate your SOS.”

“Yes, sir.”

The comm sputtered and cut off. It was silent other than the shrill whines of a rotating chair rocking back and forth. The chair squeaked. Hank’s loafers tapped across the floor. She shut her eyes and let her head roll forward.

Her sanity melted and collapsed, orchestrated to the consistent clicking of hand-crafted soles on tile. Psychological warfare. PTSD was the most influential agent in torture. As a mercenary you had to do two things: plant the seeds of shell-shock in your victims' head and protect yourself from it with a state-of-the-art neural-regulator. That's why kids could do the dirty Blue Shield work: the regulator protected them. Until something broke or someone had a technical malfunction. PTSD was the fastest way to take a superstar agent from hero to zero.

Hank knelt in front of her. She rolled her head back and peered down the length of her nose at him. His eyebrows raised and his corded neck seemed to bulge. There were small dots tattooed on his chin in the shape of a hexagon. He mustered a smile and Blanch saw something kind there.

"Welcome back, doe." He patted her knees. "You're a lot calmer today, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"It's cause you've seen Blue Grade reports before, isn't it? You know how this works."

She shrugged.

"I've got something to show you—" Hank said. He reached into his tight pocket and brought out his Pentec phone. He flipped through some apps, pulling up an image. He showed her the screen.

There was a photo of Hank and Gabe holding Blanch's limp body upright in the chair. The gag in her mouth was dark red with blood, and the same drooling red spilled down the front of her shirt. Hank held her collar down off her right shoulder, revealing the Phobos Elite Team tattoo on her dark skin. He held his other fist up in victory.

Gabe held Blanch's other shoulder propped up. He wasn't posing for the camera like Hank. Instead, he was watching her. One of his hands pressed into the tenderness at the base of her head. He cradled the backward arch of her neck. He looked exhausted. Blanch could feel that tiredness in her bones.

Hack flipped through a few more photos. "That first one is the best. Guys in Helix Team and Phobos Team won't believe this. I thought this was a cut and dried job, you know? But, shit, finding a Phobos fangirl. They're going to laugh their asses off."

She wanted to take her 1911 to his face. Feel the gratifying click of metal between his teeth. Ruin his friendly smile. Let bullets splatter his gray brain tissue on the wall.

"How'd a paper-pushing girl like you manage to get out of the company with top-dollar tech still hardwired in your brain, anyway?" Hank asked.

Blanch pulled her lips into a snarl, biting the gag and showing him her teeth.

"Oh, right," he said, "Forgot, you can't talk."

There was a rustling down the hall. A door sighed shut. She craned her neck, but she could only see the dimly lit half-glow from a computer screen in the room beyond. She had no idea where she was. Probably a kill room.

Hank stood and disappeared into the other room. His loafers click, click, clicked.

Blanch looked around for a window. There were four equal walls, a half wall with an enclave behind it, but no windows. There was tile from floor to ceiling, six by six rows of halogens, and the lone metal-framed chair where she sat. Her wrists were cuffed to a rung in the seat, her ankles bound to the legs.

It was a class-A restraint set up. She expected no less from Blue Grade. They had a reputation, and they employed consistently high-quality soldiers in every class. Blanch had

met some of the footsoldiers, private security guards, and tactical officers—even at the lower pay level, they made the company proud.

She shifted the rear legs of the chair to the left. The area behind the half-wall was just out of sight. She caught a glimpse of brushed steel counters and an industrial deep-basin sink. There was a cot and a body behind the alcove.

“She awake?” Gabe’s voice came.

Hank grunted an affirmative.

Gabe stepped into the door, leaning in the steel frame, thin arms crossed. Blanch saw it in the way he folded his hands over his chest, defending himself. That was the gesture of a kid.

“I’m going to grab food,” Hank called.

“I’ve got second watch,” Gabe answered.

The outer door slammed shut. Gabe pulled a breath through his teeth. His shoulders tightened. He approached her side. He reached down and pulled the gag from her lips. His fingertips still smelled sharp.

She stretched her jaw, and tried for a syllable. Jumbled vowels came out.

He pushed several tendrils of hair from her face with his raw fingertips. He didn’t speak, didn’t rub it in her face. She kept waiting for the sound of her own voice, but held her lips shut against failure.

Opening his mouth, Gabe put one finger against his tongue. He reached into his pocket and pulled a flip blade out. Rustling around in his other pocket, he fumbled out a butane lighter. With an easy flick, it flared. It hissed, glowed blue, and leaked fluid into the air. He used it to cure the length of the blade.

Blanch watched his face. His brows were knit, no sign of mal intent. His expression was quiet. Gentle. From this close, she noticed slight premature wrinkles around the edges of his bright young eyes.

Gabe showed her what he wanted; he opened his mouth and extended his tongue. He then tapped her lips and waited.

He was right. Her wound needed attention if she wanted to avoid infection.

Her chapped lips were suddenly heavy and unwilling to open. But even as every reflex said 'no,' she mustered the strength and parted her lips. She extended what was left of her tongue. It grazed across her lower teeth and the pain she felt came dully.

He set the lighter aside and slid his rubbing-alcohol-fingertips around her stub. He pinched and she felt blood squeeze out. Gingerly, he brought the blade to her lips. She cringed. She couldn't help it. She could see him cutting off her tongue a thousand times. And now, he could slice her whole mouth apart if he wanted.

She rolled her eyes back and looked into the searing light of the halogen above.

He pressed the flat side of the blade against her missing tongue. The burning sensation came quick and followed readily by the stench of searing flesh. Blanch choked a cry from the back of her throat. Her tongue clenched and slipped from Gabe's fingers, but it was alright, the cauterization was done. He withdrew his fingers in a graceful lurch.

She clamped her lips shut on the heat. The roof of her mouth burned. Tears filled her eyes and rolled down through the tacky drying blood on her cheeks. Her skin tingled from shoulders to scalp. She slumped forward in her bindings, her entire body weak.

Sticky emotion rose like a willowy ghost inside of her, reaching muculent fingers through her ribs, between her lungs, and compressing her heart. It crushed her. Crying was

her body's futile attempt to exorcise it, so she cried. A reel of information played in the back of her mind. She shouldn't have let herself get into this situation. Not a surprise Blue Grade declined her application for field agent, she couldn't even handle a disaster when she knew it was coming. Going to the club to warn everyone was a mistake. It was all a mistake. If she'd been field agent material, she could have avoided it.

Gabe watched her intently. The glow from his throat mods cast a light on the underside of his chin and jaw. He didn't shift uncomfortably, or look away. He just let her cry. Embarrassed and ashamed, she hung her head and let the feelings wrack through her. The shame passed and she realized she felt a deeper thing. As soon as she let the feeling rule, it changed.

It felt like the edge of dawn on the ocean. Light filtered through water and sparkingly pure. Sadness lifted from her chest and spread through her like a rolling mist. It was calm and quiet.

Gabe walked away, rustled around in the other room, ran a faucet, and came back with a glass of water. He held it up to her lips. She drank. It cleansed and grounded her. When he set the glass aside, she looked up and caught his gaze.

With a calm focus, she nodded to Gabe. She moved her gaze from his face down over her shoulder towards her wrists.

His eyes widened. He knew. Blanch was sure. He paused. The tendons in his cheeks flared. He shook his head, 'no.'

If she could just speak.

"We're being monitored. I can't." Gabe pressed a red-knuckled hand against his forehead. "I know, you think I'm an idiot."

Blanch shook her head and jostled her locked wrists.

“Pace, I can’t. Being with Blue Grade is too important.”

Blanch bolstered herself, and said, “Please.” She sounded like a deaf speaker who couldn’t communicate at all. It was humiliating. She clamped her mouth shut and looked away.

He put his palm on her shoulder and knelt by her seat. “Pace, you have to believe me that if I could take this all back, I would.”

The waver in his voice caught her attention. She turned to find his eyes glistening. Wet-work burnout was never pretty. She’d filled a six month stint on burnout report filing back in the day. She’d never heard about agents ever burning out so hard their emotions showed.

It made her stomach weak to realize Gabe’s tears weren’t pathetic, they were real.

He hung his head and leaned in close, security camera safely behind him. “One-seven-four, three-eight-five, two-two-seven-two,” he said in a low voice.

He stood and stretched his shoulders. “I need a cigarette.”

And then he was gone. As soon as the door shut, Blanch craned her neck to see her handcuffs. They were digital. Gabe had given her the code. She pressed her wrists together and stretched her fingers to reach the input panel. She dialed in 174-385-2272. It beeped and popped open.

Blanch’s hands shook. She leaned forward and tugged at the bindings around her ankles. She stood up and stepped away from the chair. A chill wave of liberty gushed down to her toes; she sighed. It felt so damn good.

Oh, shit. She was still broadcasting.

Think fast.

She strode to the half wall and looked over it. There was a cot and on it, eyes closed, there lay Samantha. Her torso was wrapped in gauze that blossomed red at her spine. Blanch wasn't sure if she was strong enough to carry the girl.

Blanch went in to the other room. There were a series of tactical supply boxes stored on a steel desk. The room was like the perfect kill-room, just like the ones she'd read about before, except better. Either Blue Grade had upgraded their off-site facilities, or this was set up by an impeccable agent. One wall was a monitor split into multiple segments: several life-stream feeds, there was a cam that showed the torture room, another where she saw Gabe on the sidewalk smoking, and a news feed of updates from agents on other active engagements. She tapped the feed with Gabe on it, activating its sound.

She kept an eye on the screen and began checking the tactical supplies. She was looking for something to arm herself with.

A minor-keyed electric tune beeped and Gabe pulled out his phone. He looked at the screen, touched it, and put it to his ear. "Yeah?"

Blanch could hear Hank's raised voice from the speaker inset in the phone. "The alpha broadcaster just flooded her stream with... relief? I can't quite tell."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just messing with her head," Gabe said.

"Fucking with her? You're full of shit, Gabe. Tell me what's going on before we both get in more trouble than we need."

"Calm down. I told her that I was going to let her go, got her real excited." Gabe paused. "Wait till I let her down, it's going to be a huge fucking fall. A nip of psychological torture."

Blanch opened the last tactical box. There were no firearms. She settled for a combat knife. Her phone was in a mesh container. She powered it up.

“You are walking a thin line,” Hank’s voice said. “Let her down now, I’m not willing to take any risks.”

Gabe took a long drag of his cigarette. Blanch was pretty sure Hank wanted to hear despair, suffering, anger, something bad on her emotion-stream. Too bad she couldn’t fake an emotion like that. Feeling wouldn’t be a finite resource if you could fake it.

“Yeah, okay, but let me hang up and take care of it,” Gabe said.

“I’m coming back,” Hank’s voice said.

“No—don’t worry about it. I’ve got this.”

Fifteen, no, sixteen new messages popped up. She queued up Mike’s number.

It rang. Blanch realized she couldn’t speak. She cut the line.

“You are fucking crooked, Gabe. You killed too many broadcasters last night. And then you stop for an old Blue Grade ex-paper-pusher? You’re off the rails, wrong. And I’m not going to let you destroy my career with yours,” Hank’s voice buzzed.

“Calm down, man. You’re confused. You’re coming down from the shit last night. Take a deep breath.”

“I’m not fucking taking stimulants.”

She queued up a message for Mike. She hoped he was reading her messages. *‘Company mercs torturing us. Sam’s alive. Trying to get out. Dunno where we are. Try to go to Central Hospital.’*

“Fine. I’m going to take care of the alpha,” Gabe said.

“Don’t fucking let anything happen to her, you know this is not a casualty-friendly job.”

Blanch didn’t wait to hear the rest of the conversation. She hooked the knife into her belt and went back for Samantha. She lifted the girl up by her shoulders.

Samantha’s neck arched back and her jaw hung loose. Her skin was rough with the topography of drying blood. Blanch shook her. Her pink lids fluttered. She slapped the girl across her face. Chips of clotted blood exploded into the air. Samantha shrieked. Blanch clamped a hand over her mouth. She gestured for her to be silent. In the silence, Blanch heard a much worse sound—the sigh of the door from the joining room to the outside.

She hooked a hand under Samantha’s armpit and pulled her from the cot. The girl’s weight fell forward against unwilling legs. Blanch dipped her shoulder under her arm and lifted her dead weight up. Samantha’s head rolled forward.

“What’s going on?” she asked in a slurred voice.

Blanch said nothing.

Gabe appeared in the doorway. He held a Heckler & Koch USP at his side. It had a suppressor attached to the barrel, doubling its length. It wasn’t a bad choice, but it made her wish she had her 1911.

Blanch helped Samantha onto the steel chair before turning to Gabe. He didn’t approach, or raise his sidearm. He stood and watched her, shoulder propped against the metal frame.

She stalked toward him. He flinched and stood up straight. She grabbed the knife from her belt and threw it at his shoulder. He feinted back. She cleared the space in two long steps. She reached across with her left hand. The gun was in her grasp. Just as he

recovered, she brought her right hand up. The heel of her hand contacted his nose. In perfect timing, his grip loosened. She squared her hips and kicked into his stomach. He fell backwards. She had the gun and a cocky grin. The classes paid off.

She felt masterful, shrewdly dominant. Hank would know for sure.

Gabe pinched his nose, glistening blood slick down the front of his taupe t-shirt. The light from his throat mods pulsed red. He stood, hunched, and took one tentative step towards her. He looked like a submissive dog.

Something was wrong. She couldn't put her finger on it. He wasn't really advancing; he certainly wasn't using any of his combat training. He looked up over his bloody nose to her, made eye contact, and leaned heavily against the doorframe. She squeezed the USPs grip. She gestured him out of the way. He half-smiled through the blood at her and shook his head. She thought about shooting him, but that felt wrong. At once, she clicked the safety on and hit him over the head. One quick blow with the butt of his own gun and he collapsed forward.

She looked down at his slumped body. The waves in her chest swelled. He'd be okay. She hoped for a minute that he'd just quit the company. She hooked the USP into her belt and rolled him over. She pulled his key from his pocket.

Samantha half sat in the chair, slumped over. Her eyes were wild with so much white. Blanch hooked her shoulder under the girl's arm again and hoisted her up. Samantha wasn't much help, her steps dragged across the blood splatted tiles.

The exit door was on the opposite side of the monitoring room. When Blanch pushed it open, warm dawn broke into the small space. The honey-pink light entered through her eyes and bolstered her. She felt stronger.



She pressed the button on Gabe's key. The headlights on a slate Dodge blinked. Its handle unlocked under her touch. She loaded Samantha into the passenger seat. They were in a parking lot at an old business complex somewhere on the outskirts of the city. In the distance she saw the skyward arch of the main highway. Behind it rose the cluster of downtown. The skyscrapers appeared to be plated in gold—giant geometric monoliths always present, always witness. The traffic on the streets passed by lazily, too early for a commute rush. Blanch checked her phone: 5:52am. She'd lost six hours.

The distinct growling of a muscled up engine revved somewhere down the street. Blanch keyed the ignition and threw the Dodge into first. It responded cooperatively and handled like something much newer. That told her what Gabe did with his free time to ward off those demons. She took off away from the main street and down a side road. Three turns and the parking lot wasn't even in sight anymore. She adjusted the rearview. The street was empty.

Samantha lay slumped in the passenger seat and worse for her wear. Blanch wasn't sure how the girl was alive without any medical attention, but she wasn't going to take it for granted. She pulled around two more side streets before spilling out onto the highway and kicking the Dodge into a purring fourth.

Central Hospital wasn't far.

* * *

Blanch rolled into the emergency drop-off. She laid on the horn. Let it go and go. Thirty seconds, the sliding doors opened. Five more, the nurses opened the door.

One plump-cheeked nurse looked up at her, both hands under Samantha's back.
"What's her name? What happened to her?"

No talking. Blanch gripped the steering wheel and looked straight ahead.

"Forget it," the nurse said.

They hoisted Samantha onto a rolling cot. Blanch held onto the gearshift. As soon as the door closed, she pulled around the east side. The sunlight reflected off the hospital's metal beams. The parking lot here was packed. She saw a similar Dodge and parked the vehicle there.

She trudged in. The dawn was hot on her back.

Light spread through the glass doors and across the lobby floor. Mike sat in a blue plastic seat. He blended into the scattered long-faced people waiting. He propped his forehead in his hands, his disheveled strawberry blonde hair separated between his ten fingers. When the door opened, he looked up to see her. He jumped to his feet and came to her. He looked concerned, his eyebrows pinched in the middle. It was a trick of the regulator, though, the aftershock of muted emotions showing up like itches in a ghost limb.

Mike took her face in his hands and he looked her over. "I'm so sorry," he said. She didn't get why he felt like he needed to apologize. His eyes were almost blue in the halogen light. "Are you alright?"

Strange. When he looked at her she felt the weight of the meat on her face. Her cheeks were iron and unwilling to move. Her face was a mask and her lips were the lock. He ran a thumb under her left eye.

"Blanch, you look horrible. I went to the club and I saw all the girls. It was—"

She nodded, the slightest tip of her chin forward.

“I can’t believe how much blood—” he said lowly. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if they’d killed you, too.”

His face was not like hers. It was soft wax. She could’ve said things to change its shape.

“Why are you so quiet? What’s wrong?”

There was a freckle by his left eye. It watched her. He pinched his rosy lips into a firm pucker. He thought she was being childish.

His judging expression played like a reel in a movie displayed on a monitor wall in an apartment from a high-rise across the street. If she couldn’t lift a finger, how could she take the stairs down to the ground, cross the street, make it to the 10th floor, and knock on the door to have him shut off the movie?

He crossed his arms over his chest. The early morning light was even easier on his features than the sunset the night before. Pretty, for a moment. Pretty, and frustrated. She took a leap off the 100th floor.

She opened her mouth and showed him her tongue.

He flinched first, then turned green. No surprise. But the pinched lips loosened. The movie shut off. He covered his mouth with his hand.

“They tortured you?” Mike asked, a little too loud.

She sunk back into herself and crossed her arms. The back of her arms felt icy.

The nurse looked up over the counter at them. “Do you need to file a police report?”

Mike turned towards the nurse. She had pretty hair. He went for the counter. Blanch’s frown deepened, drying into stone. She knew no charges were ever filed by the district attorney against one of the big four security agencies. Maybe Mike didn’t. Blue

Grade Shield & Patriotism was invincible. She hugged herself tighter. The stagnant air rolled her back on her heels. She swayed in place.

“Yes, please, we would. Do you have the paperwork for that here, in house?” Mike asked.

She hefted her tired hand. Placed it on Mike’s shoulder. He turned away from the doe-eyed nurse and back to Blanch.

It’s not worth it.

“I’ll take care of this. I owe you a massive apology. For everything. I want to make up for what a jackass I’ve been, but I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

She shook her head.

He held her hand and rubbed her thumb until the nurse pushed the paperwork across the counter.

They went up to the urgent care wing on the fourth floor. The hospital reminded her of sitting on a cold metal table while doctors took measurements and fit her for her neural regulator at age sixteen. Un-fashionably late to the show.

Samantha was groggy, but awake. Her eyelids were thick, puffy from being rubbed.

“Blanch—” Samantha’s voice cracked.

“Don’t worry, you’re safe now.” Mike placed a hand on her leg under the blanket.

“What happened?”

“You were tortured.”

“I know,” Samantha’s voice broke. “Why would they do something like that?”

Mike rubbed his hands together. “They were probably hired by one of our subscribers.”

“Like, a deranged fan?”

“Maybe,” Mike said, rubbing his stubble. “Or just to get the best stream. Pump a healthy dose of fear out. Give the audience something more intense to listen to.”

Samantha’s eyes welled up with tears. She looked to Blanch, vulnerable or afraid.

The door to the room slid open with a *tsh*. The murmur of hospital activity filtered in from outside. A tall doctor with a closely shaved head came in. She lifted her tablet from under her arm and read from the screen. “Blanch Pace?”

“Yes, this is her,” Mike said.

“I’m Doctor Lang. If you would come with me,” she instructed. She turned and left the room. Blanch watched her go.

“Blanch, please, go with her,” Mike said.

Blanch sat down on the edge of Samantha’s bed.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

The weight of her cheeks and brow anchored her frown. She wasn’t moving.

Mike went to her. “Hear me out, okay?” Mike begged. He squeezed her shoulders between his hands. “I was a jackass to you last night. I reacted childishly to your resignation.” He held onto her shoulders like a lifeboat. The skin on his face and throat were clean and unmodified. He had a small stud in one ear. It was a conservative look for a successful business man.

“I know the boat is your dream. But, somewhere in the last couple years, I started to hope that working with me would become your dream. The only thing I ever wanted was to spend my time with you,” he said.

He dropped his hands to run them through his scraggly blond hair.

“But, like every free person, you deserve to pursue your freedom,” Mike said. He scratched the back of his neck. “So, I didn’t invest your portion of the company like I said. I’m sorry that I lied to you. But I will give you your cash.”

Blanch crossed her arms over her chest.

“I promise, Blanch. I’m not pulling your chain.”

She examined him carefully. It was hard not to be skeptical. Somewhere under the earnest of his confession had to be some sort of gambit. Mike always had an angle.

“I want to help you, and in a small way, assuage my guilt. So, let me pay for the operation to have your neural-regulator turned back on. Go back to a normal life, you know? Enjoy your time on the sea without the trauma of these emotions.”

She stood and paced over to the window. She looked down over the parking lot. The Dodge was still there, untouched. She knew the way she’d been feeling since they escaped indicated a larger issue. Trauma was probably the best word for it.

There were stagnant images, violence clinging to her. The bodies piled up in the hallway, the way her boots dragged across their faces, how her heel caught on Tori’s nose and twisted her already broken neck too far. The smell of the toilet—not too recently washed—with her face hard against the seat. The wet sound when Hank slid his hand into Samantha’s torso.

“Hold on—what is that?” Mike asked.

Blanch glanced over her shoulder at him.

“Is that gun yours?”

She pulled the Mike’s USP from her belt. It was hefty with a suppressor. She tucked it back and shrugged.

Mike's face processed surprise, then realization. "If you don't get regulated, I don't think it would be a responsible decision to give you that large sum of money. You're clearly fucked up from it."

Blanch turned back toward the parking lot. She wondered if that Dodge would come in the nightmares she'd inevitably have. Mike had no experience to qualify that statement, save a healthy dose of pop-psychology from Dr. Haysworth's primetime talk show. But, his guess was right. PTSD. She flattened the stub of her tongue in her mouth. It hurt.

She could remember what the silence felt like. It might be nice, after so many years, to take solitude in the lack of emotion. She nodded a 'fine.'

Outside the window, Blanch noticed two unfamiliar men poking around the Dodge.

* * *

Blanch held a suitcase in one hand, the oblong key in the other, standing on the doorstep of everything while the lapping of water on dock-posts softly serenaded her. She squeezed the electronic key until the steel plated corners bit into her palm, and then loosened her vice grip. It hurt, sure, but it felt curious. Everything felt curious.

Being out of the hospital especially felt curious, even though they'd only held her for less than a week.

The regulator didn't actually buzz, but she heard it humming anyway.

The unlock button clicked under her thumb. The hatch to the Bonnie ticked open. Inside, Blanch set her things down and opened all the windows. The cabin was tiny. Sunset light brought with it a hot eddy.

The waves swayed carelessly and the boat was finally hers.

She sat on a stool in the hold, on the railing on the deck, on the stairs below deck, and still felt antsy. She considered taking the Bonnie out, but ended up riding to the nearest liquor store for a Glenlivet 21 year. The sun set and she sat straddling the bow with a classy glass in hand. She swirled the spherical ice cubes around. She watched the condensation of liquor.

The fancy houseboat docked at the next spot was alive with the laughing and drinking of the terminally unpoor. Women wore sparkling dresses and men raised their fantastic beverages.

Blanch watched them until the sun was completely set. Even at their loudest, the partiers were quiet, insignificant. Normal was irritation. This was not normal. She waited for the tiniest annoyance, but it never came. She turned to her boat. She ran her hands across the smooth railings, her railings. The Bonnie glistened in the dark, just another place, like any other place. Blanch kicked her glass against the cabin wall. It shattered. She listened to the symphony of lapping waters, the silence of the next boat.

She grabbed a folding chair off the deck and hurled it into the cabin's glass window. Smashing it repeatedly, the chair buckled under the pressure. She threw it overboard and went inside. Tipping the coffee table, kicking chairs, breaking windows, ripping curtains, she tore through the room until she was panting out of breath. Her body was tired, she felt that. She lay on the scrunched carpet and stared at the ceiling. Where was the sweet release of tears?

It was so dark, that the white plaster ceiling had become a non-committal gray. She pressed her hands to her forehead. This absence was thicker than air. Suffocating. She

wanted to vomit. If she could think about something else—she might not end. She thought about Gabe and her tongue. She brushed the rough stub against the roof of her mouth. It scratched. Its surface was lumpy and still healing. The regulator buzzed back and forth between her ears, thick inside her head.

She imagined the smell of rubbing alcohol. She listened for the wet slap of her tongue dropped to the bathroom tile. She threw her arms wide, stretched out across the wrecked floor of her boat, her precious boat.

The wet slap.

She pulled up her Coltel. She thumbed back to her archived conversation with Mike. *'Due to unsatisfactory performance and the fact that you're a goddamn cunt, I'm reinvesting your portion of the company into internal improvement. I'll cut you a check for your last two weeks. Love, Mike.'* She read it twice. She only felt drunk.

The bottle of Glenlivet was still perched on the bow. She scrambled to her feet. Knocked over a folded chair. She went back out for her fine liquor. The amber seared the inside of her mouth. It went down smooth. She gripped the rail to try and settle the swaying of her shoulders. She stared into the bottle and wondered how Mike had known they were Blue Grade. It was unlikely that Samantha had been awake enough to gather that information, not as cozy with death's door as she got that night—no she didn't think she would've known. The Glenlivet agreed.

The music from the next boat swelled, overflowing with the squeal of electrographied saxophones. A jazzy singer laid down throaty lyrics in an homage to the last century. Blanch threw her bottle at their boat.

A half word filled her mouth. She shouted incoherent vowels.

It sounded like the keening of a horrific monster. The ladies turned and looked past the expanse of water to see what was wrong with her. Blanch went inside, liquor-less and without the smallest care.

* * *

It was 4:13 AM and Mike's blue and pink sign consumed the sky. Blanch lingered in its light. The door handle was cold under her fingertips. She glanced back. Her motorcycle sat, agile next to the corporate cleaning van parked next to it.

Her hand should have been shaking, but it wasn't.

She went inside to find the cleaning crew in full operation. Fragments of broken furniture huddled near the door, waiting to be taken away. A uniformed man walked into the room with a steam-cleaner in his arms, he noticed Blanch, and went about his work. Another worker scrubbed the stage where Chloe's body had been strewn.

The main lights were on, flooding the room with a stark wash. Shadows vanished and the dings, scrapes, and fraying embroidery became visible. All the glory was gone. Everything needed a repair, but Mike was a lazy fuck.

The back hallway led to the restrooms and to Mike's office. The bodies were gone. She lingered and gazed at the open threshold to the restroom. She gathered herself. Mike's office first. She'd investigate the space after.

His office was wood paneled with mauve carpet. His computer terminal bathed the desk in white. His chair squeaked under her weight. She stretched her knuckles and gestured in front of the screen. The interface popped up.

Okay, so she'd maybe trusted Mike too much. But his console's password was 'Pace', she wasn't the only one guilty of hubris. The financial records showed no business expenses other than booze and salaries. He'd upgraded the broadcast relay server a couple months ago. She checked their account status with the security firm, but for some reason her log-on credentials didn't work.

She crossed her arms. Mike had probably lied about updating the security. There was really no way to know.

In her inner jacket pocket she found the crumpled up carbon copy of her police report receipt. It had an access code to follow the report online. She scanned it into the computer. The police department main civilian interface appeared.

Your case has been filed and is pending response from a financial attorney. Security footage still needs to be submitted before attorney can make a final document. No criminal charges will be filed at this time.

Blanch clicked on the financial attorney status link. A screen popped up that blinked, *'Awaiting confirmation on insurance claim. For the death of 4 human employees/assets, permanent injury to remaining 2, expected value: \$15-\$32 million.'*

She pushed away from the desk. She went to the window and pulled the blinds. She propped her weight on the window sill and gazed out down the alley. Throngs of late-night party kids stood in the glow of the Nightlife sign next door. Her thoughts were out of order. She had to collect them like scattered beads off the ground.

\$32 million was a lot of money.

She went back to his desk and felt around under the lip. There was a switch. She triggered it. The painting across the wall sighed open to reveal a console. One of the

features Northaus Security installed when Mike and Blanch first started the business. She doubted Mike had ever used it.

She input the password and pulled up the security camera feed. Jumped back to the night of the incident. The reel started with the girls dancing. Chloe and Tara had the two stages covered. Tara's boyfriend came in. They went into the back.

Business as usual. Mike was there earlier in the night. He closed out his paperwork and left around nine, which was also normal. Several hours fast-forwarded by. Hank came in wearing his bright red track jacket and took a seat at Chloe's stage. They exchanged words; he gave her a wad of money. Blanch recognized his play.

Shit got ugly pretty quick. No one died easily. The bathroom got repurposed. Hank strode through the hallway with his chest puffed. His step was confident. He moved back and forth from the restroom, emptying the stall doors. He was nesting like a mother bird.

Every time he came out, he came out with more blood. A pool started to seep into the hallway. It could have been from the torture. It could have been from more than that.

Then he brought the bodies one by one.

She paused the footage and checked the other screens. Gabe wasn't there. Rewinding, she watched Hank bring the first body out. Looked like Tori. Blanch let the tape play at regular speed. The image was small. She leaned in. The body didn't move. She couldn't see if there was any indication of breathing. Then he brought out another. That was definitely Tara, she had fire-engine-red hair. He tossed her body on top of Tori's, jarring Tori's body and throwing her neck at an angle.

The access history was empty. Didn't look like Mike had looked at it. Did he know? She input a print command and downloaded the clip from the console to her phone. She

erased the main console's memory. She closed the panel, flipped off the lights, and shut the door behind her. There was some other investigation she wanted to do.

The restroom was thick with dried blood. The cleaning crew hadn't gotten to it, yet. She entered the once make-shift torture room. Like Samantha, the room would be healed. Its stalls would be reconstructed and the porcelain toilets reseated. The cracked mirrors and tiles would be replaced. People would come in and fix their hair or relieve themselves; they'd be blissfully unaware of what the room had once been.

Blanch touched her earlobe. It was hot. She pinched her glow-mod on and off.

She went to the place where she'd been handcuffed. She got down on her hands and knees and looked in the space between the toilet and the wall. She was surprised to see the small pink lump nestled against the bolts at the bottom of the toilet. She picked the supple muscle up between her thumb and forefinger. It reminded her of chunked chicken breast or a Betta fish. It looked insignificant in the palm of her hand.

It was unsanitary.

She dropped it into the toilet.

"What did you do that for?" Gabe's voice startled her. He stood by the entryway, arms folded around himself, eyes rubbed red. She swore she could see new wrinkles around his young lips.

The firearm was heavy in the back band of her jeans.

He turned his face away, the tendons in his jaw flaring. "May I explain everything?"

Blanch took a deep breath and pulled her phone out. She typed, 'Yes', and held it up for him.

“How come you aren’t using an automated voice app?” he asked, cocking his head. His lips were slightly purple.

She held her phone up for him again. *‘I don’t need to make noise.’*

“You don’t want to be heard?” There was a cracking in his voice from too many cigarettes or a swollen throat. It looked painful for him to talk.

‘Making noise isn’t being heard. How’d you find me?’

He lingered awkwardly. He looked ill. He glanced at his digital watch.

“I would’ve checked here first. It’s a common tenant of victim psych, lots of people go back to the place they were tortured. But, even if I hadn’t known that, you’re still carrying my gun.”

She avoided touching the weapon, didn’t want to show him where it was. Made sense that it had GPS tracking.

“Just wanted you to know—despite everything, I really wanted to see you safe. If I could undo every scar I’ve inflicted, I would. If I could give you your tongue back, I would,” he said.

‘Wouldn’t take it.’

“Okay,” he said stiffly. He stared down at the ground for a long, uncomfortable moment. When he finally looked up, his face was raw. “Blue Grade is my living,” he said. “Been paying off old debts. I couldn’t afford the loan payments to keep my regulator if I quit. Without the company, I’m dust in the wind. I would’ve stopped if I could’ve.” He turned to leave.

She jogged to catch him. She pinched the edge of his hoodie.

“What?” he asked.

She tapped a message into her phone and held it up for him. *'Do you know who ordered the job?'*

"Are you going to go after them?" he asked. "Now that you're regulated?"

She stopped mid-text and looked up at him. She backspaced and entered a new response, *'Depends.'*

"There will always be another client," he said. He was so worn, so old, hidden in the skin of a young man. He glanced at his watch again. "It was a high-roller who owns a distribution factory in Boise."

His watch seemed to have him genuinely worried. It looked like he might shudder and descend into tears. That was an illusion. Because she was regulated and he was clearly unregulated, everything he did looked more emotional. She knew emotions well enough to know something was seriously defective with his regulator.

'I'm sorry you can't leave Blue Grade,' she texted and she meant it.

He just lingered there, feeling so many feelings, raw like exposed innards. She should've felt some empathy. She typed into her phone. *'I founded Sensory Broadcasts with Mike to pay off my regulator. Had a huge reserve when I quit BGS&P. I paid off the regulator, all \$1.5 mil of it.'*

"So you had a saving when you quit Blue Grade? And you made a killing as an alpha broadcaster, and then—the rest was made up by living frugally? I didn't think anyone had ever fully paid off a regulator debt before."

She nodded.

"I always say there're two types of Blue Grade employees: the ones who can't afford to live without the company, and the ones who don't care about money. But I guess there is

also you.” He looked down at his watch again. His breath hitched. “I can’t stay here, I’m being followed.”

She watched him walk past Mike’s office and out the front. He wore the same quiet Chuck Taylors sneakers. She put her hand on her phone in her pocket. Gabe was probably running from the company, from Hank’s report. She thought she probably felt no impetus to help him. She was pretty sure she’d be angry with him if she had feelings. So she watched him run away and tried to feel her own satisfaction.

* * *

In the absence of someone to blame, and with a regulator to calm her nerves, Blanch returned to the ordinary—the everyday. She made herself a list. A) Measure windows, B) visit hardware depot, C) make a list of necessary supplies, D) stop checking her Coltél, E) pick up a six pack of some Guinness, F) grab her clothes from her apartment, and G) fix the Bonnie’s windows.

Blanch pulled her pinky until it cracked, folded it, and cracked the knuckle. She pulled and pushed each of her other digits in order. The chill of surf-touched air rustled her jacket. She sat hunch on one of the wooden pegs. It supported the dock and passed all the way through the planks into the water below. The sound of lapping came easy.

Her Coltél vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out. The home screen displayed the time. No new notifications. Another phantom vibration. She’d been having them all afternoon. Her mind playing tricks on her.

Her stomach grumbled. It’d been a while since she ate.



A stack of windows, her utility belt, some planks and other supplies, and a suitcase of her clothes were piled on the dock next to her.

She rubbed the back of her hand.

Across from her rocked the Bonnie. White curtains flapped through the orifices of shattered glass windows. The boat jostled back and forth on the water.

Thirty-two million. The number blinked at her from her phone. It was Mike's total pending insurance payout, covering the lives of her dead co-workers. Blanch had been watching her phone for too long, ignoring the equipment, avoiding the Bonnie.

She wondered if dropping her phone in the ocean would help.

A woman stuck her head out of the next boat's cabin. Her smooth complexion looked like paste in the cloudy light. She stepped onto the dock. Her heels clicked as she came up to Blanch. She stopped nearby.

"Hey," she said.

Shoulders hunched, Blanch looked up at her.

"I know that you don't know me, and I don't know you, but I wanted to tell you that it's okay. Whatever you're going through."

Blanch cocked her head at the curly-haired woman.

"I work in a general-aid psychotherapy clinic, and I've seen hundreds of emotionals. I can see the symptoms from a mile away. What happened the other night—it's okay to have a tantrum." The woman lifted her hand and stopped awkwardly mid-motion. It was funny to be called an emotional with the soft buzz of the regulator in the back of her head.

"But you need to get help before you hurt someone or yourself."

Blanch's Coltel vibrated in her pocket. She put her hand on it and it was still. Her imagination?

"Please, just take some time, consider choosing stability," the woman said. She held out a long slender hand and a business card. Blanch took it. It read: The Offices and Practice of Dr. Chambers: Nurturing Mental Stability and Fulfillment.

"Dr. Chambers has several payment support and deduction programs, he's really committed to helping," she said. She stood quietly for a minute. Blanch ran her thumb across the embossed surface of the card, but didn't look at the lady. After a minute, the woman turned to leave.

She slipped the card into her jacket and checked her phone. Nothing.

The Bonnie rocked. If Blanch were going to board her, she'd need to repair the windows. She loved fixing things. She was confused. For some reason, the idea of even picking up the equipment seemed tiresome. Maybe something else needed her attention. She wondered how exactly she prioritized things when she'd been regulated before.

She looked at her phone again. It read the time, nothing more.

Fuck.

She needed to get this sorted.

* * *

Blanch wasn't an expert in emotions, but it seemed logical that she might be in need of some sort of cathartic confrontation with Gabe. He had taken her tongue, after all.

She went back to the hospital. Not to see Samantha. She'd been discharged. No, she went to the parking lot. She counted three isles over and headed towards the back. She found the silver Dodge, one window broken, a police ticket on the windshield. She stood back and watched it for a minute. Everything was silent, but for the sound of the highway in the distance.

Droplets of rain wet her hair and the back of her neck. They fell through the exposed window and thudded into the leather seat. The weather would ruin the seats. She couldn't help but wonder who would repair it. No one, she assumed. If Gabe hadn't picked up the car by now, he probably wasn't going to. Small debris pebbles ground under her soles as she walked to it. She leaned over and looked in the passenger side door.

Seemed unfortunate that Gabe's car that he'd clearly fixed up would be abandoned. There was hardly anything inside. Glass fragments pooled in the crux of the seat, its leather discolored from the rain. The ashtray was used, filled with crumpled butts and gray matter. She glanced around—didn't see anyone. She opened the door. She hadn't left the car locked, so whatever jerk broke the glass did it without checking.

She opened the glove compartment. The small light inside flickered. There was a manual booklet, some charging cables for several different types of phones, and a notepad with a piece of paper ripped off. She hadn't seen someone use an actual notepad since she was in foster school.

The edge of something poked out from under the passenger seat. It looked like a receipt. She grabbed it. Lenore's. She knew it. A diner on the other side of town. It wasn't anywhere in the vicinity of the torture room she'd escaped or the corner store where he'd approached her. She stuffed the receipt into her pocket.

She got her Ducati and went directly to the diner. There was something in the back of her mind, but she couldn't make it out. She should've taken Gabe out when she saw him last. It was likely she felt ill-at-ease because she'd ignored the necessity for vengeance. She noticed small symptoms. She needed to move. Sitting still felt like being permanent. She tapped every surface she rested her hand against. She'd been grinding her teeth. She couldn't bring herself to doing the things she loved—fixing her new darling boat.

Lenore's was wide and squat with glass windows that ballooned out. It was sunny inside and laughter poured from the open front doors. Or maybe it was the music. Blanch parked her bike across the street in the drug store lot and turned it off. She settled in.

She pulled the receipt out of her pocket. It was from a week ago about this time of day. Blanch really hoped Gabe was a creature of habit. She crossed her arms and waited.

Her Coltel vibrated in her pocket. She looked at it. This time, it was an actual text from Mike.

'I stopped by your boat. The windows are all broken? Are you alright?'

She held her phone, thumbs hovering over the keypad. She watched the blinking cursor.

There was nothing worth saying.

She set the phone down against the tank of her bike and looked up. Gabe was smoking a cigarette outside the diner. Stuffing her phone and keys into her pocket, she hopped over the curb and jogged across the street. She glanced for oncoming traffic. She stopped on the other side. Hank was there too.

Blanch crouched behind a decorative cement flower pot.

Hank grabbed Gabe's collar and said something in a raised voice. She couldn't make out the words. They walked together towards the back of the building. Gabe looked so small, his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. Keeping low to the ground, she trailed them. She pressed her back to the wall and inched towards the edge. She couldn't make out the syllables in their low conversation.

She leaned towards the edge, moving only far enough to catch a sliver of a glimpse. Hank held a piece of paper between his index and middle finger, waving it in front of Gabe.

"—out of line." Hank said.

They exchanged a few more words.

Hank jerked his hand in front of Gabe's face and crumbled the paper into a ball. Gabe didn't flinch. His hands were pressed into his pockets, Blanch noticed. He was probably hiding white knuckled fists like a frightened child.

"This is the end of the fucking line, Gabe." Hank said, loudly.

Hank stood still and taut for a moment. Gabe said something softly. Hank turned to leave. Blanch pressed her back to the wall. Hank walked by. She held her breath until he turned the corner to the front parking lot. Gabe didn't follow.

After a long moment of waiting, she slid back over to peek around the edge. Gabe stood, hands still in his pockets, looking at the crumpled paper on the ground. His shoulders were tightened and she realized he was crying. She pressed her back into the wall and waited.

He was slow to leave. She stood there, taking slow deep breaths, for a very long time. Eventually, he walked past back towards the front of the diner. She slipped around the

corner and grabbed the crumpled paper. She realized her fingertips were red as she unfolded it. It was cold. She read over it. It was hand written and addressed to Mike.

‘This might not make much sense to you, but your employees are in danger. I work for a company that has been hired to torture every broadcaster in your employ. Please protect your people and take them off the air and get them out of town.’

Gabe. She glanced over her shoulder in the direction he’d gone.

She had no desire to make him pay. She stared at Mike’s name on the paper.

* * *

Blanch’s heart pumped as she pushed through the door from the stairwell to the fifteenth floor. Her forehead was slick with a sheen of sweat, her breathing was labored, but still she felt nothing. The neural-regulator took the endorphins out of everything physical.

An advertisement smiled down at her. The digital figure opened his arms, palms up. “Do you wish you had more time for entertainment? Try our new—”

She straightened her leather jacket and rapped on Mike’s door.

Silence.

Once upon a time she would have yelled at him through the thick door. But not this time. She was resolved in silence.

The door swung in. Mike stood there with a puzzled expression. He opened his mouth, “Blanch, did you go by the—”

She snapped him in the nose with her elbow.

He stumbled back.

There was a buzz of white noise in the back of her mind and stillness like a taut silver wire. Yeah, she was definitely regulated. She peeled off her leather jacket and set it aside. The warm air touched her arms. She closed the door behind her.

“What are you doing?” His breath wafted with a twinge of bourbon. “What’s gotten into you?” he asked.

She pulled the note out of her pocket and held it up for him to see.

He glanced at Gabe’s handwriting and played it cool. “What is that?”

There were missing physiological reactions. Her insides didn’t ache. Her hands weren’t trembling. She didn’t feel like vomiting. She wasn’t overcome with the desire to slap him in the face, or crumble the paper, or storm out, or anything. The crackling of static filled the air.

She pushed the paper against his chest, forcing him to take it.

Mike’s hands did start to tremble, though, when nothing in Blanch could. He held the paper against his chest—didn’t look at it. His shoulders drawn back, something in the tilt of his chin or the line of his neck looked proud. It wasn’t a trick of the sunset. His blue eyes caught light that wasn’t in the room.

He was still.

“Blanch, I need to tell you something.”

She glanced at the paper clutched to his chest.

“I know this looks bad,” he said. He stepped over to his kitchen counter and set the paper down. He wore socks, but the hardwood floor creaked under his weight. “Everything is going to be okay.”

He stepped back towards her, taller, shoulders drawn back. He reached one smooth hand out and touched her arm. He sucked a breath through his nose, lowered his head, paused. His countenance reminded her of Gabe.

“Blanch, I love you.”

It wasn't until he said it, that she realized that was the last thing she wanted to hear. Gabe would have asked for her forgiveness.

She tapped the metal plate at the back of her head, and shook her head at Mike.

“I know what you think, that we're regulated, so love doesn't really exist for us. But, God, I swear that my desire to protect you is real. Don't you dare tell me that regulated companionship isn't meaningful.” He ran his hand down her arm to touch her hand. “Don't you want someone to witness your life?” he asked.

As if touching her intoxicated him, he swayed like an old building that couldn't keep itself rooted. He rocked back on his heels, and forward again. She looked up at his waxen deep-set eyes and her stomach clench. An urge filled her like unsettled digestive fluid. She couldn't put words to it. His face needed something; seeping blood, globules of his rational life catching between his lips and swan diving off the dip of his chin.

If she'd been anyone else, she would have considered calling a hit on Mike.

Instead she wrapped her arms around his neck. He faltered, catching her gaze. She let her eyes half-close, and then shut. He came in—he pressed his soft lips to hers. It felt like water on a scabbed knuckle—like nothing. No sensation. She could feel his heartbeat in his lips. She parted hers, she welcomed him in.

His tongue brushed her lip. She came to meet him, but it was harder than she'd realized. Simultaneously, she gripped his neck and pushed her stub—her mangled missing

tongue—to touch his tongue. He reviled. Hands against her shoulders, his body shook in protest. He pushed away. She gripped his neck harder. His upper body strength put her grasp to shame. She pulled with all the strength in her biceps but it didn't matter.

He slipped away with a hand at his mouth.

“How come you always have to push me?” Mike asked. He ran his fingers across the stubble on his upper lip.

‘You’re wrong about love,’ she texted.

“You think 600 million people are wrong about love?” he asked.

‘Those feelings are a phantom limb.’

“So, what do you want?” Mike asked.

‘Give me the company and payout.’

“Why? After all these years of being satisfied—happy—with our arrangement, you want to change things? Because you were tortured? I know the things you saw were horrific, I know it was so bad, but you can't act on these impulses cause they aren't going to stick. You're going to get better, feel better. Give the regulator time to heal you.”

‘What if I liked feeling?’

“Did you?”

She put her phone away and snatched the paper from the counter. She folded it carefully and slipped it back into her pocket. Mike watched her with knit brows.

“Please, don't go. I didn't mean to freak out. It's just, I forgot about your tongue.”

Blanch still had Gabe's gun. She let her hand linger behind her back, touching it. Mike's gaze locked fixed on her lips. The smooth silence of her regulator took the wind out

of her ability to decide if this was really what she wanted. She brought the firearm to her side. She stood immobile.

Mike watched her with a swiftly darkening expression.

And then he made a decision for her. She saw it a half a second before he shoved her. He clocked her right in the cheekbone and tried to grab her gun. The hit was pretty pathetic. She stumbled back two steps, pulled the firearm away. A better fighter might have knocked her on her ass. He looked puzzled at her stance, realized he hadn't hit her very hard, and became angry.

"You're such a cunt!"

She kicked him in the knee. A crunch resonated across the tile walls of the kitchen. He fell to the floor. She slipped the gun into her waistband, grabbed his shirt in both hands, and bared her teeth at him. Without language, she communicated like an animal. Dominance.

She lifted him by his shirt and pushed him into a kitchen chair. She pulled the USP and leveled it at his head.

Mike laughed, a shrill sound. "You know what? Fuck you, too. You give me your best shot."

She pressed the end of the suppressor against his forehead and she knew she was blind. She had the horrible picture in her mind of a boat resting one hundred feet from the sea on a beach, solid, sturdy, untouched by water and most importantly, unmoving. No sway, no movement. Just still. Everything inside her sat stagnant with the sandy grit of a beached boat.



Her hands didn't shake as she held it to Mike's head. She took her left hand away to slip her phone out of her pocket again. She unlocked the screen and entered a text.

'1. Gabe informed you before the attack. 2. You're getting 32 mil from.' She glanced up at him and pressed the tip of the suppressor harder against his forehead, warning him not to move, and then finished her message. *'Give me the insurance or I will shoot you now.'* She held it up for him to see.

"I'm not giving you the company. I already gave you your payout. You're done. Gone. You'll have to kill me, and then you definitely won't get any of my ownership."

What would it be like to hold the sidearm to his head with emotions driving, she wondered. Her throat was dry. She pulled up the screen with the pending insurance payout. She held it up next to the gun so he could see it well.

"I'm such a fucking idiot, loving you. Everything I've done for you—it's just my luck." His voice became low. "And just to end up here? You're just another backstabber."

He wasn't listening. He never really listened.

Blanch lowered the sidearm, pressed it against the knee she'd kicked, and fired. Mike screamed. The recoil immediately kicked back into her wrist, jarring it. Blood and chips of bone exploded from Mike's joint. He gripped his leg with both hands. His wide-eyed gaze moved from Blanch's face, to her arms, to the gun, across the kitchen floor to his nearly disconnected foot, and finally to land on the place where his knee used to be. He shouldn't have looked. His eyes rolled back into his head and he slumped forward.

She didn't catch him. She had a gun and a phone in her hands. He toppled from the chair into the quickly growing pool of his own blood.

It was pleasantly surprising how well the suppressor had worked.

The blood stretched and oozed out towards her feet. It seeped into the cracks of his cheaply laid hardwood floor. She set the USP on the kitchen bar counter and looked at her phone. The pending payout blinked at her. She took a couple steps back to avoid getting blood on the soles of her boots.

She considered leaving him like this. But he'd only take his fat cash prize and go recuperate somewhere in the sun. On the other hand, a real agent wouldn't have left loose ends.

With her foot, she rolled him onto his back on the floor. A smear of red colored his cheek and throat. Even fractured on the floor, he looked somehow heroic. She wondered if that was a trick of the regulator. She rested the suppressor against his forehead. It was his cheekbones. High, sharp, more distinct than the rest of his features. His unruly blond hair was now matted to his face. She used the suppressor to push the bloodied locks away from his face.

She looked at the freckle by his eye and expected it to wink at her. It was still. It was quiet.

The hum of the air conditioner was the only sound. She waited. She waited for a glimmer, a hushed breath, a slow sigh of knowing. His closed eyes fluttered. She wanted to say she hated him. She thought she'd been close to hating him before.

More than anything, she wanted to say, "You're a dick."

She went to the cupboard and grabbed a glass, filled it with water, and dumped it on his face. He groaned and rolled onto his back. He gripped his leg and sucked in heavy breaths.

"Blanch, Blanch, please call for help—"

She crouched down beside him. She tapped the screen of her Coltel and brought up the footage from the club. She held it out for him to see. It took Mike a second to process what he was seeing. He looked up at her. Half his face was wet with blood, the rest with water.

“Did you tamper with the master copy?” he asked in a wavering voice.

Blanch smiled at him.

She entered a new text. *‘I don’t want the money. I just want you not to have it.’*

Mike looked as frightened as she’d ever seen him. As frightened as a regulated person could feel. He laid his head back against the floor.

“I’m not going to give it to you.”

Blanch wasn’t bluffing. So, if he was trying to call her bluff, it wasn’t going to work. She grabbed the USP off the counter and rested the barrel of the suppressor against his forehead. He closed his eyes.

She didn’t know what she wanted to do. She put the gun in the back of her pants and stood up. Mike opened his eyes and looked at her.

“What’re you doing?” he asked.

She shook her head and ducked around the kitchen island. She went for the door.

“Wait—”

She reached for the knob, but it swung open in her face. She stumbled back. Hank stood in the door. The collar of his red track jacket was pulled up around his ears. He lifted his IMI Desert Eagle to her head.

“Hey, bitch,” he said. “Fancy meeting you here.” He gestured her aside. She acquiesced. His gun was ridiculously bigger than hers.

“The captain in the house?” Hank asked.

She straightened her back.

Hank half laughed and hit her over the head. She fell forward. Before she could react he grabbed the back of her shirt and caught her fall over his knee. He exposed her lower back. The cold prongs of his stunner connected there. Her legs went numb.

“Look, doe’s got a big bad gun. This Gabe’s?” Hank asked. He took the USP and let her topple to the ground. He rolled her onto her back and felt her pockets. He fished out her phone, winked at her, and stood.

She watched his lithe ankles as he crossed the apartment toward the kitchen. He turned on his heel with a flourish when he saw Mike and his blood.

“Listen, man—” Mike said.

Hank smiled at Blanch. “You’re never going to be one of us.”

He knelt and went to Mike, out of her line of sight. She hoisted her torso off the ground, flattened her hands on the hardwood floor, and pulled. Her traction was poor, but she managed to slither.

“Listen, friend, I’ve got nothing against you. But I will kill you if you don’t give me what I need.”

“Woah, woah,” Mike said. “Anything. What do you need?”

Blanch wished she had just shot him.

“I need your security footage from the night,” Hank said.

“I don’t have it. Blanch has it on her phone.”

“This one?”

Mike didn’t say anything.

Blanch's toes tingled. She hoisted herself behind the island. She heard a rustle of fabric and the click, click of Hank's feet on the kitchen tile. She spun her body, sliding her legs across the smooth floorboards, and caught him mid-step. He stumbled but didn't fall.

Hank turned to her. "I really didn't want to do this," he said.

Her muscles clenched at her beck.

He leveled his sidearm at her shoulder. "You kind of remind me of my niece."

She lifted her foot and kicked his hand aside. She rolled onto her knees and kicked his ankles out from beneath him. He fell. She pulled Gabe's USP from his belt, took aim at his gun arm, and shot. The aesthetic mods there flickered and powered off.

Unlike Mike, he didn't scream.

"This footage is no good to you," he said, voice low in pain.

Blanch knelt over Hank. She knew what to do with him, where to shoot him, not to kill him. He didn't realize it, but he'd just helped her figure it out. She really needed to be able to make decisions. More than anything, she needed to turn her regulator back off. She held her hand open, palm up, gestured for him to give her phone back.

He grabbed the USP's suppressor and forced it away from him, into the air. She loosened one hand and punched him in the jaw. She punched him again. It didn't feel good, but she knew it would have. He turned his head and spit blood onto the floor. She let go of the USP and grabbed his Desert Eagle. She pressed the barrel to his shoulder and squeezed the trigger. Flesh, blood, and bone chips exploded into her face. She scrambled for her phone and stood. Hank was out cold.

Mike peered at her from his spot on the kitchen floor. "I called the police," he said, faintly.

'The footage is mine.'

He looked at his phone, then up at her. He nodded. "I know."

Covered in blood, with her *Coltel* clutched in her hand, she turned and left.

She had something more important to attend to.

* * *

The Offices and Practice of Dr. Chambers: Nurturing Mental Stability and Fulfillment were warmer, friendlier than Blanch had thought. It looked like a legitimate practice. The walls were painted a sunny yellow and the letterhead had gold leaf stamped in it. It calmed Blanch like the sun on the ocean. She walked out of the building with a sealed medical container in her hand.

When she stepped out of the main door, the surf-touched air came to meet her. She leaned into it. The office was a block or two from the dock where her darling *Bonnie* waited. Blanced walked through the spring to her ocean-home.

She knew the nightmares would come.

For now, her heart rocked in the sea of her emotions, cradled by the calming tide.

She grabbed a memory stick with the footage from the night, sealed it in an envelope, and taped it to the medical container. Mike didn't need the money. It was key in Hank's report against Gabe, though. She put the care package in the rucksack on her bike and hit the road.

She took the skyward arch of the main highway. The ride was smooth and the wind nipped at her wrists and neck.

The lot for Lenore's was half empty. She took a spot by the front, took off her helmet, and went inside with the package. Sitting in the back, sucking on a cigarette, was Gabe. His heavy brows lifted when he saw her.

She smiled, and she let it wash through her. Joy. She went to his booth and sat down.

He didn't say anything. He didn't rub her loss in her face.

She placed the medical container on the table and slid it across to him. There was an emptiness in her head where the regulator used to be.

She set his USP behind the container where no one would see it. He took it, tucked it into the shoulder holster under his hoodie, and turned to the package. Inside the envelope he found the memory stick and a hand written note. He glanced at her.

The booth squeaked under her. She slid out. Gabe scanned the note as quickly as he could. She didn't wait. She walked down the diner isle with a smile. A waitress noticed and looked away quickly. Blanch pushed through the glass doors, grabbed her helmet, and got on her Ducati. Gabe stared at her through the windows, the open box clutched loosely in his hands. He mouthed the words, 'Thank you.'

She kicked her bike to life and headed back for the ocean.

