

Biomachina

By

M. Scott Burgess

- Sarah -

The whispers started again. "G, A, C, T, G, T, C, A, G, A, T, C, A, G-" The same four letters continued on endlessly, too fast to keep track of, too powerful to ignore. It was a machinegun loaded with information and every letter-shaped bullet slammed into her neurons with an agonizing thump.

She couldn't take it anymore. Her eyes shot open. She searched her room in a frenzy, her eyes darting back and forth like pinballs as she tried to locate who was whispering those damn letters. But there was no one. The room was dark, except for the slivers of moonlight that snuck in beneath the venetian blinds. And the room was quiet except for the human freight train that slept beside her.

She looked down at the covers that had been torn away, and she wiped away beads of cold sweat that had formed on her forehead. She caressed the liquid between her fingertips, feeling the sticky moisture fill the ridges of her prints. Slowly, her emotions began to dull and she was finally able to coerce reason to return to her.

It was another one of those wretched fever dreams. She'd been having them ever since- When was it? The earliest she could remember was around the time she found out. But hey, at least she wasn't getting sick in the morning. Though at this point, she wasn't sure which was worse.

She looked at the antique, plastic alarm clock on her nightstand. The digital display read 5:03 AM. It was the hour of bastards- too early to get up for the day, too late to fully fall back to sleep. Still, she'd be damned if she didn't try.

She took a deep breath and pulled her covers up, tugging to get the last bit that was wedged beneath Rick. She snuggled into her husband and closed her eyes. One of her hands instinctively fell on top of her belly and after feeling the love hidden within, she drifted back to sleep.

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When she finally woke up, it was 7:30. "Shit!" she cursed as she flung the covers off. She lay defiantly on the bed for a moment longer, demanding the flow of time to stop its endless march. But she was as much a slave to time as she'd always been. She slid off her mattress and stumbled into the bathroom. She could get away with being late to work, she was far too important to axe, but that didn't mean she liked it. She could hear her mother's voice, "Tardiness is the most effective way of telling others that your time is more important than theirs." Of all fun facts in her mother's arsenal, that one had to have seen the most wear. She grimaced and jerked the shower handle downward.

Just once, she hoped the water would come out hot. But it didn't. So she was left to stare at the woman in the mirror. Despite the perfect complexion and youthful beauty, that woman staring back at her looked worn down. Her eyes were dark and heavy- the result of working too many weekends and too many nights for months on end. She had always been a workaholic, contrary to what her mother suggested, but for the first time in her life, she was glad to know she could take a break soon. The project was wrapping up and heading to the board for review. All she had to do was prepare a presentation for the postmortem meeting- hardly work in comparison to what she had just gone through. With a little optimism energizing her, she abandoned the woman behind the glass and hopped into the shower.

When she finally made it into the breakfast nook, twenty minutes later, she was cleaned up and dressed in a charcoal, three-piece pantsuit that ran perfectly along her curves. She found a steaming cup of coffee waiting on the counter for her. Rick gave her a wink while casually chewing on a strawberry Pop-Tart.

She frowned. "Where'd you find the Pop-Tarts?"

"You can't hide this stuff from me!" Rick proclaimed through a mouth full of frosting and dough. He swallowed and then asked, "How'd you sleep?"

"What sleep?" She knew he was teasing her.

Rick laughed. "You were a little tornado. Kept me up too."

If only you knew why, she thought with a smile. For a fleeting moment she thought about telling Rick about the baby growing inside her. He talked about starting a family all the time and she craved witnessing his excitement over the news. But of course, that was the very reason why she couldn't tell him- at least in this moment. She wanted it to be special; something they could celebrate together. Telling him now, just as she was about to run out the door and vanish into her work for the next twelve hours, would be unfair to him. And it would make the announcement as trivial as the Pop-Tart he continued to shove down his gullet. *Saturday morning*, she decided. They could make a day out of it. Hell, it was a holiday weekend- they could make three days out of it. *That would be best*, she decided.

She sat down at her teal, shabby-chic kitchen table. It stood out like a sore thumb against the sleek, shiny-white porcelain and the dark-stained wood that made up the rest of their ultra-modern kitchen. Rick hated the table, but she didn't care how out of place it looked, it was the one piece of furniture that she was allowed to pick out. And that was good enough for her.

"So, Cheerios or Corn Flakes?" Rick asked as he pulled open the cupboard.

"Corn Flakes, please," She answered without thinking.

Rick paused for a moment. His muscles seemed to tense up beneath the loose USC shirt he always slept in. Rick hovered his hand over the Corn Flakes, almost waiting for her to change her mind. But she said nothing. Rick took in a deep breath and whispered something under it. He grabbed a hold of the box, and tore open the sealed bag within. Rick looked at her suspiciously as he poured the hard brown flakes into a bowl, filled it with milk and then set it in front of his wife. He plopped down into the chair across from her and studied her eyes intently.

She looked back at him while taking a sip of her coffee. She felt his eyes probing through hers and down into her soul. She felt naked in front of those dark brown eyes. Vulnerability and embarrassment quickly welled up inside her. "You're making me blush," she finally said.

Rick blinked and looked away. "Sorry," he stammered. "You just look beautiful right now." She smiled, his eyes returned to hers. Less intense than before, but still- they were searching, hunting for something inside her. "How's the project coming?" Rick asked in a tone that sounded more like concern than curiosity.

She took another sip of coffee and said, "Loose lips sink ships, Mr. Mavis." She tried to hide her smirk but had no luck.

“Then we won’t talk about the ships,” Rick countered with a sly smile.

She ate a spoonful of Corn Flakes before giving in. “We’re almost done. I’ll tell you that much.”

The intensity evaporated out of Rick’s eyes. “Great! That’s really great. I’m proud of you, Sarah. You’ve worked really hard on this.”

“Yeah, maybe you can have your wife back, now, huh?” Rick didn’t reply. He just nodded and smiled back at her. She took another bite and then threw her spoon into the bowl of cereal. “I hate Corn Flakes. Why did I ask for this?”

“You want me to switch it out?” Rick offered with an odd level of eagerness.

She looked at the clock. It was already past 8 AM. “Ugh, no. I’m gonna be late.” She jumped out of her seat and began to collect her things. “Call me at lunch?”

Rick nodded and climbed up from his chair. He watched her intently as she grabbed her purse and began to head for the door. “Wait,” he ordered. She stopped and looked at him as he walked up and kissed her, fondling her left breast as he did so. When he was done, he took a step back and looked her over.

“What was that for?” she asked with a curious smile.

“Like I said before; you’re beautiful. That’s all.” Rick opened the door and watched her leave the apartment. “I’ll see you later.”

- Neil -

He flicked the back of his thumbnail against each fingertip on his left-hand. He didn’t know why he did it- he didn’t even like doing it. It made him all too aware of the tiny, invisible monsters that lived in the swamping oils on his skin. It was disgusting. God had imbued the universe with uncanny beauty when he crafted it over those six days – but damn if the Lord didn’t save a lot of time skimming over the microbes.

Still, he continued flicking his fingerprints with his thumbnail. Disgusting or not, all he knew was that it was something easier to focus on than keeping his eyelids above his pupils. He lifted his heavy eyes up to scan the Sorensen-Darzi Corporation’s lobby.

The floors were a black marble that matched the rectangular, industrial art that spanned the ceiling. In the center of the lobby was a massive cement imitation of the Winged Victory of Samothrace. Its wings were outstretched as it stepped forward against an eternal wind. But while the original’s head and arms had been lost millennia ago, this one had a beautiful head sculpted out of black marble and a set of arms to match.

To the right of the Winged Victory was the concierge, she was chipper and excited to take on the day. He however, sat to the left of the security checkpoint, slumped in an uncomfortable swivel chair, waiting for the long day to end. He wasn’t one of the guards; he was paid far too much to waste his talents operating a scanner or patting down employees. But, unless something out of the ordinary happened, there weren’t too many things a senior security officer could do besides people-watch and flick his fingertips with his thumbnail.

The usual highlight of his week was escorting a freshly terminated employee out of the building. If he was lucky, security would catch someone trying to sneak into the building. If he was really lucky, he'd actually get to do what he was paid for- but that was a rarity. So, he had learned to enjoy the small things that came along with the job.

As if on cue, Sarah Mavis entered the building. There was something about her that excited him- if only he knew what it was. It was a scratch he couldn't quite itch. She was smart, beautiful, and had a smile that lit up the room. But there was also something more- something, almost dangerous about her. Deduction told him it was a simple crush on a married woman. But he had learned long ago that deduction was a hell of a liar.

He watched Sarah as she made her instinctive motions through security. The retinal scan across her cobalt blue eyes. The sympathy laugh for the guard over a weak joke about the weather and how much they needed a little rain. The brush of her raven black hair back over her shoulder. The electron-wave body scan- goddamn, he wished he could be in the security room where the results were shot to. Of course, he could be, he had the clearance- but he also had his honor, and that was a hell of a bitch to get on the bad side of.

When she finally got through the checkpoint, she headed for the elevator. It was at this point that he made his move. He jumped to his feet and slid inside just as the doors shut. He looked at the glowing number eight on the operations panel and punched the button for the ninth floor.

Sarah blushed as he casually shrugged. "Nine, huh?" Sarah asked.

"Nine," he answered.

"Always nine," Sarah said with a smile.

"Not always. Sometimes I need to go to six."

"Yeah, when I'm going to five."

"Hmm, I never noticed that," he shot back with a grin. His eyes involuntarily shot to the simple gold band on Sarah's left ring finger- that damn thing. The reminder that he couldn't split apart what God had joined together.

"You doing anything fun over the long weekend?"

"Nah. I'll probably go for a run. Maybe a little church. Nothing exciting."

"Well, why don't you do something exciting then?"

He blurted out, "What's the point? You won't be there," and instantly, he regretted it; that one may have been a little too far past the line.

The thing about it was he knew he could have anyone he wanted. He was a strapping, athletic man, who looked damn good, even in his cheap, clearance store suit. Sure, his nose was crooked and warped from too many fights, but that did little to dissuade the opposite sex. But the thing about it was he didn't want anyone else. He may as well have been asexual; he could have been one hell of a priest. But there was that thing about Sarah; that dangerous thing that intrigued him so much. And he was drawn to it like a moth to a bonfire.

"If my husband knew how much of a flirt you were-" Sarah began. Her cheeks were raised. Whether or not she meant to, she was grinning. He breathed a sigh of relief. He was still in the clear- for now.

With his confidence returned to him, he interrupted. "He'd probably understand." It was a dangerous game he played, both in a moral sense as well as a professional one, but for some reason, he couldn't help it. It was his one flaw. He had his rules, and damn if he didn't follow them, but he sure liked rubbing up against them every once in a while.

The elevator door pinged and opened on the eighth floor. Sarah turned and said, "I'll see you later, Neil." She exited the elevator and headed down the hall.

He watched her longingly until the doors slid shut.

- Sarah -

"Good morning, Martha," she said as she approached the receptionist. Martha smiled at her and pulled out a small tray with a smooth piece of tape on the side that read "S. Mavis." She handed her phone to Martha who promptly set it in the tray before locking it away in a slot in the wall. She set her hand on the glass panel that glowed green as it mapped the many valleys on her palm and fingers. A second later the heavy glass door next to Martha's desk buzzed open.

"Have a good day, Mrs. Mavis," Martha said with a lipsticky smile.

She stepped through the door, into a short, glossy white hallway and went through her last security checkpoint of the morning. This one involved an EMP sweep. Nothing that could electrically store information was allowed to pass through this checkpoint. Sorensen-Darzi had invested billions into this project and there was no way they'd allow a dollar of that investment to simply walk out their doors in someone's pocket. She felt the tiny hairs on her forearms rise as the EMP sweeper rumbled with a low-pitched buzz. When it was done, a green light came on with the click of the door's lock, and finally, she could enter her office and begin her day's work.

She walked down an aisle of cubicles toward her desk, saying hello and good morning to everyone she met with her eyes along the way. When she reached her cubicle, she fell into her lumbar-supporting chair and powered on her computer. She stretched her arms wide in a habitual motion to get ready for the day and then looked over to her neighbor. "Morning, Kyle," she said in a chipper tone.

Kyle looked up from his breakfast burrito. "Hey, Maverick!" he said in a higher than normal pitch. Kyle was the perfect stereotype of a bio-programmer; heavysset and shy, with a slanted forehead and beady eyes. He had dark hair all over his body that stuck out of the top of his collared shirt before dipping below it and traveling out his sleeves, all the way to his knuckles. His nickname around the office was Iceman. He didn't mind it because he thought it was a Top Gun reference, but that only made the joke all the more vicious. To spare his feelings, she told Kyle to call her Maverick, but she had her doubts whether it would actually help or not if he ever found out.

"Sarah, good morning," Keith announced in a trumpeting voice as he appeared out of nowhere. Keith was her boss and his surprise ambushes were a thing of legend around the office.

"Hey, Keith," she replied and waited for the other shoe to drop.

“Real quick, what’s your estimated time on those schematic charts? I’ve got that meeting with the board tomorrow.”

“Charts are just about done. The only thing I’m waiting for is a clearance code to print them out.”

“You email Ops?”

“Two days ago.”

“I’ll check in with them and make sure that code gets to you. Thanks for being on top of things.” Keith smiled and then headed down the row of cubicles toward his next target.

She breathed a sigh of relief, encounters with Keith this close to a presentation didn’t usually go so well. She opened her project viewer and began looking through the cumulative test results over the last six months. While Sorensen-Darzi was involved in a variety of endeavors, one of its largest divisions was devoted to genetic engineering. Her team had been working on Project Koel: an artificial strand of maize that was biologically designed to survive subfreezing temperatures.

The goal was to develop a food crop that could be harvested year-round, regardless of climate. There had been many attempts at this kind of food crop, by a multitude of corporations, but all had resulted in failure. Sorensen-Darzi itself had sunk enough money into the project to rival the GDP of a small nation.

Everyone in the industry knew how to integrate thermogenesis into their test crops. But that was just a simple duplication of a genome in the eastern skunk cabbage. The trick was supplying enough energy for the crop to not only keep from freezing, but to actually grow food. The main focus of every endeavor had been to increase leaf size in order for the plant to suck in more CO₂. While this solution would have been great for public relations on the climate change front, it just wasn’t enough to produce a commercially viable product.

Her team, however, did something radical; something that teetered on an ethical ridgeline. Rather than simply borrow genomes from other plant species, her team borrowed from other kingdoms. Project Koel integrated fungal markers allowing it to continue consuming CO₂ without sunlight. And it integrated genetic markers from cetaceans, allowing it to generate its own fat for insulation.

The results were astonishing. Project Koel could survive fully active at temperatures as low as negative forty-degrees Celsius. And if temperatures dipped below that, it wouldn’t die; it would simply go dormant until it warmed up again. She wasn’t sure how whale-lovers would react to eating its byproduct, but she knew it would change the agricultural industry forever. Already, nations like Russia, Canada, and even the Antarctic Coalition were lining up to get their hands on the first batches of Project Koel, and Sorensen-Darzi was positioned to make hundreds of billions.

A phone rang, jerking her from her concentration. She looked up just in time to see Kyle answer it. “Hello, this is Kyle Stark,” he said in an alert, overly eager voice. However, the next words that marched through his teeth were in a different tone entirely. In a dry, dead voice, he slowly said, “I understand. ATX593.” Kyle slammed the phone on the receiver and immediately pulled out a key to open his drawer. The color in his face faded to a ghostly pale white and his jaw clenched incredibly tight, causing the muscles above his jowls to swell.

Concern immediately washed over her. She was about to ask Kyle what was wrong when her phone rang. She looked at it suspiciously for a moment. She never got phone calls; all internal communication was done on the computer. The only two people who even had her office number were Rick and her mother, though it wasn't as if her mother ever used it. The phone rang again. She slowly reached her hand out to pick it up. "Hello?"

"Activate," a computerized voice began.

"Excuse me?"

The voice ignored her. "MLX745. Launch."

"Launch? Who is this?" She asked, but the line had gone dead. "Hello?" She hung up the phone and stared at it for a moment.

She looked back up at Kyle. He was busy pulling out large items from his drawer. They were all plastic souvenirs she had never seen before. She found it strange that he kept all these decorations hidden and locked away. Again, she was about to say something, but out of nowhere she burped something up. Suddenly, she felt incredibly nauseated. Abandoning all thought and composure, she clutched her stomach and ran toward the restroom.

This required her to pause along the way as the EMP scanner did its check. All the while, she paced back and forth, clenching her teeth and itching her fingertips as she tried her best not to hurl digested Corn Flakes all over the glossy white room. Those goddamn Corn Flakes. Why did she eat those damn things?

When the green light finally pinged and the door buzzed open, she burst out and flew toward the restroom that sat on the far side of the elevators. She rammed her way through the door and leapt into the first empty stall she found. Immediately, she collapsed over the toilet, not bothering to check its level of sanitation, and vomited the contents of her stomach into the bowl.

When she was done, she took a few deep breaths and then climbed up and stumbled to the sink. She washed her face and looked into the mirror. If the woman this morning looked tired, this one looked ready to collapse onto the floor and die. *So this is morning sickness*, she thought. As if to answer her, she felt the nausea rising rapidly in her throat. She turned and raced back into the stall.

- The Iceman -

Its mind was of a singular purpose as it methodically assembled the plastic monster on its desk. The animal who was once Kyle Stork was now gone. In his place was an entity that had remained hidden deep within his subconscious; waiting for this very moment.

"Hey, Kyle, you know where Sarah went?" an animal asked. But it ignored the question. The words held no meaning. The animal got closer to look over its shoulder. "What are you doing?" the animal asked.

At that very moment, it finished the assembly. It shoved a magazine into the monster, cocked it, and looked up at the animal. Without the slightest vestige of emotion, it fired a bullet into the animal's gut. The animal fell to the floor, and bellowed in pain. The animal was incapable of understanding that its slaughter was imminent.

It stood up, pointed the monster at the crown of the animal's head and fired a second bullet.

- Sarah -

She wiped her lips with a rough paper towel as she stumbled out from the restroom. Immediately, she was knocked against the wall as a pair of security officers in matching suits rushed past her. With curiosity, she followed them around the corner leading to her office. The doors that comprised that final checkpoint were wide open and surrounded by Sorensen-Darzi security teams. Many had their guns were drawn. Some were questioning Martha- her eyes were flooded with tears, showing an ocean of more emotion than had ever been visible before.

She spotted Neil speaking on his phone. She moved toward him slowly, hoping he might have some answers. But before she could reach him, he spotted her. Neil's face showed relief for a second, before morphing into an icy glare. He reached out and patted a large guard with a scarred face and drooping eyelid. When the guard looked up, Neil pointed at her and whispered something.

The guard immediately moved toward her. "Come with me, ma'am," he said in a deep voice that sounded like it had spent the last month being dragged behind a truck.

"Wait, what's going on?!" she protested, but the guard made no reply. He simply grabbed ahold of her arm and forcefully guided her away.

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"Why am I here?" she asked the guard with the droopy eyelid, the tone of her voice laced with more than a few drops of indignation. The droopy-eyed guard had remained silent from the moment he grabbed her and brought her into this room- if it could be called a room. It was more of a cement box. It was a small 8 by 8 square with a table and three chairs in the middle; she sat in one, the other two sat vacant on the other side of the brushed steel table. The guard casually leaned against one of the drab gray walls. "Answer me!" She demanded.

The guard gave her an uninterested glance and said nothing. She didn't like him. There was something off about him. He had searched her forcefully once they entered the room. He found nothing, but still, the way he did it made her feel less than human. She planned to speak with HR about him when this was over.

Suddenly, the door buzzed and opened. Neil entered with his superior, Jim Kriton. She had met Jim a few times before. He had always come across as a gregarious good 'ol boy who would go out of his way to smile and say hello to her. But today, there was no friendliness in his face. Instead, it was cold and emotionless. His hair was damp from sweat and stress.

She looked to Neil for refuge. "Neil, what's going on?" she pleaded. But Neil refused to make eye contact. He quietly placed a metal suitcase on the table and opened it. It was filled with a mishmash of tools: electronics, chemicals, and vials; everything secured by an outline of urethane foam. "Neil?" she tried again.

Neil sat down in the chair across from her and looked down at his hands as he waited for Jim Kriton to pull out a recorder and click the record button. Once it was running, Jim took a seat as well.

Neil cleared his throat and began, "This is Security Sergeant Neil Rook speaking. I am here with Security Director Jim Kriton, and Senior Project Manager Sarah Mavis."

"Why are you recording this?" She asked, still not fully grasping the gravity of the situation.

Neil ignored the question and asked his own, "Sarah Mavis, what were you doing away from your desk at 8:27 AM this morning?"

"What's going on here, Neil?"

"Answer the question, please."

"I was sick," she stated. "Please, just tell me what the hell is going on?"

Neil shot a look over to Jim Kriton. Jim rested his hand under his nose and drummed a finger against his cheek as he thought over the request. He succumbed. "I assume you know who Kyle Stork is?" Jim Kriton asked.

"Yeah, of course," She answered. "Why?"

"At exactly 8:27, Mr. Stork murdered every one of your coworkers with a build-on-site assault rifle. Afterward, he used an improvised EMP device to erase all data concerning Project Koel." Jim Kriton paused for a moment and stared into her eyes. "Then he committed suicide."

She sat quietly for a moment as she processed the information that was now laid out before her. It was unbelievable. It was horrific and ugly. She studied Jim Kriton's face and then looked at Neil. "You're joking," she blurted out. "He would never do that. He was—"

"Mrs. Mavis, it happened." Jim Kriton interrupted. "We have it on video surveillance. It's irrefutable."

She took a moment to assess her surroundings in light of the situation. Tears began to well up in her eyes. "So, what am I doing here?"

"You were the only survivor, Sarah," Neil said. "You walked out of that office just seconds before the shooting started."

She wiped away her half-formed tears as she realized what Neil was saying. "Wait, you think I was some part of this? I was sick! I had to vomit!" She looked up and noticed that the droopy-eyed guard was prepping a syringe. "What is that for?"

"We need a sample of your blood."

"That's not going to happen! I know my rights. You need a warrant to do that!"

"Mrs. Mavis, this may sound strange to hear, but Kyle Stork was not human," Jim Kriton announced. "He was a genetically engineered non-person actor designed for industrial sabotage."

She looked at the two men suspiciously. What the hell did that mean? Kyle was genetically engineered? Everyone knew engineering the human genome was incredible illegal. Corporations had been shut down and everyone involved thrown in jail for attempting to make simple alterations. This was impossible.

"What the hell are you talking about?" She asked in a whisper.

"It's rare and extremely expensive." Jim Kriton began. "Typically, they use the genetic base of a chimpanzee and alter it to look and act human. Unlike human modification, it's legal- for now at least. From what we can deduce, Mr. Stork is a type of non-per we call a Rube Goldberg. His mind was imprinted subconsciously with a specific task that it carried out once it received a trigger- In this case, a message delivered via an outside phone call."

"What does this have to do with me?" She asked.

"Mrs. Mavis, we know you received an outside phone call as well. We know it occurred immediately after Mr. Stork ended his call. It's circumstantial, of course. However, we do have the potential for more damning evidence. You see, one of the more interesting characteristics of non-pers is their blood. When it's mixed in water with a pH balance below five, it turns orange. It's a byproduct of one of the processes involved in flipping nucleases. Of course, I'm sure you know all this." Jim Kriton peered up at Neil and gave him a confirming nod.

Neil reached into a pocket in his suit jacket and pulled out a vial filled with a bright orange liquid. He held it up for her to see before placing it gently on the table. "This is Mr. Stork's blood," he said.

She stared at the vial. The orange tint was almost neon. She looked up at Neil. "You think I'm one, too," she said, vocalizing her realization.

Jim Kriton's eyebrows rose as he gave her a pained look. "Mrs. Mavis, we believe you may be an unwilling participant in this plot."

She looked back at the syringe in the guard's hand and panic began to sweep over her. "This is ridiculous," she pleaded. "I've worked here for eight years! I was in the damn bathroom!"

"This will only take a moment."

The droopy-eyed guard grabbed ahold of her arm and searched for a vein to plunge the needle into. She tried to pull away but he was far too strong. "Wait! You need a warrant!" She screamed.

Jim Kriton spoke calmly, "If you turn out to be human, you have every right to take legal measures against us. The Sorensen-Darzi Corporation will even go out of its way to make sure you are well compensated for this." He paused and gave her a grave look. "But if not, I'm sorry; non-person actors have no rights under the law."

She shot a look to Neil for help, but he seemed to be purposely avoiding eye contact with her. She thought of anything that could get her out of this moment. She thought of the baby in her womb. But before she could weaponize that thought, she felt the needle wedge its way between her skin cells and feed on the blood within her arm. It took only a moment for the syringe to fill, at which point the guard pulled it out and mixed it's dark-red catch into a vial of clear liquid. "This will just take a minute," the guard said as he screwed on a cap and shook the vial.

She stared at it in horror. Her entire fate rested on its results. Worse, the fate of her baby was at stake. She wanted to scream at them. She had a family, she had a past, she was human, dammit! But her voice remained caged within her throat. She was frozen and helpless as she watched the blood and water mix together in their cruel dance of judgment.

Nearly a minute passed and the blood remained red. Slowly, she began to regain confidence in herself.

“She’s human,” the guard announced with a tinge of frustration on his lips.

She burst into a series of deep breaths. She brushed her hand through her hair as she felt relief wash over her. But it wasn’t long before that relief turned to fiery rage. “Do you need me for anything else?” she hissed. Jim Kriton looked at Neil for a moment and then shook his head. “I’m leaving then!” She declared as she got up from her chair and headed for the door.

“Wait,” Neil said in a whisper. He held up her mobile phone. She scowled at him and then snatched it from his grasp.

“I will be taking legal action,” she announced and then stormed out of the room.

- Neil -

He sat with Jim Kriton in silence. The interrogation room now felt like a cage.

There was a part of him that was happy. Happy that Sarah was human. It was his job to root out non-pers, and the thought that he had not only gotten so close to one, but actually lusted after one, filled him with a toxic cocktail of shame and disgust. But she wasn’t a non-per. She wasn’t one of those abominations. She was human just like him. And that realization brought great relief.

However, the happiness he felt from this was greatly overshadowed by a dark and terrible cloud. Sarah was the only evidence they had. She was their only link to recovering any shred of data Project Koel. Without her, they were in the woods; lost without even the faintest trail of crumbs to follow.

Jim put his hands behind his head and leaned back. “Hell of a day,” he said with a yawn. His voice carried heavy exhaustion with it. But not from sleep deprivation- this was the other kind.

“Should we have let her leave?” he asked. He was legitimately worried about Sarah. They were throwing her back out into the ocean, either to swim home or be devoured. And he knew in his gut which of the two options was more likely.

“We can’t stop her at this point. We’re already gonna be in the shithouse with legal.”

“What do you suggest then?” He wasn’t really asking. He was looking for the confirmation he knew would come.

“Well, Sorensen-Darzi just lost a billion dollar investment and she’s the only one still alive that worked on it.” Jim Kriton picked up the vial of Sarah’s blood and swished it around. It splashed on itself with ease, but still it refused to show even a hint of the neon orange he sought. “As I’m sure you can imagine, we can’t relax in this situation, Neil.”

“I understand,” he said as he got up from his chair and exited the room.

- Sarah -

A light rain had decided to fall and saturate Old Pasadena as she pulled into an open space in front of her apartment building. She climbed out of her car and rushed toward the front door before the

raindrops could grow in size and frequency. She stopped for only a moment to fight back the urge to vomit again. When it was gone, she entered her building and took the elevator up to her apartment.

She threw her purse on the kitchen counter and leaned over the sink as she fought back a sudden spell of vertigo. When it was gone, she grabbed a glass out of the dish drainer and filled it with water. She wondered if this was still the morning sickness or the gore her mind kept conjuring up when she thought of her coworkers.

"You're home early," a voice announced from directly behind her.

She spun around to find Rick only a few feet away. She didn't expect he'd be home. Usually, he worked late hours- often later than her. Still, seeing him put her at ease. "I was feeling sick," she blurted out as if she had been caught playing hooky.

Rick approached her and put his hand against her forehead. "What is it? Your stomach?"

"Yeah. Among other things." Every fiber of her body wanted to tell him of the horrors of the morning, but she just couldn't figure out the words to explain that the meek man who sat next to her had just massacred her entire team. People she had worked closely with for the better part of a decade- some of her closest friends.

Rick pulled the glass of water from her hand and walked over to the cabinet. He casually pulled it open and searched until he found a teal bottle of medicine. Rick mixed the medicine into the water, turning it a light blue. "Here, drink this, it'll help," he said, handing the glass back to her.

"What is it?"

"Just medicine," Rick answered calmly. Still, she was hesitant to drink it. Something about all this seemed strange to her. "Don't worry. It's doesn't taste that bad! It just settles the stomach," Rick followed up. "My mom used to make it for me all the time." She gave him a curious look and then took a sip. She grimaced at the bitterness. "Try to drink as much as you can," Rick encouraged her.

She slowly swallowed down the drink. Rick smiled at her and pulled out his mobile phone. He dialed a number into it and walked into the living room as the phone rang. He kept an eye on her and continued to smile reassuringly until someone answered on the other end.

"It's time," Rick said in a casual manner. A second later, he followed it up with, "No, not a problem." Rick hung up the phone and dropped it into his pocket. He pulled out a key and walked over to a locked drawer. One of the drawers Rick kept the finances in. One of the drawers she realized at that very moment that she had never seen the inside of.

"Who was that?" she asked with curiosity.

"No one," Rick quickly answered from the other room. "How's your stomach feeling?"

"Better," she said after giving it a moment's thought. Rick walked back into the kitchen with a strange, heavy case. He dropped the case onto her beloved shabby-chic table and opened it.

"What's this?" she asked with more than a hint of concern. Very quickly her mind began to race. The situation in the room was rapidly changing in ways that didn't quite add up. And she was beginning to

feel queasy. Not like before with her stomach; this was different. She looked at the glass of blue liquid and slid it onto the polished white kitchen counter.

“You should probably sit down, Sarah,” Rick advised in an abnormally monotone and emotionless voice.

She fell back against the counter. Suddenly, she felt as though all the strength was draining from her muscles and oozing out onto the floor. “Yeah,” she whispered as she leaned for the chair in front of the table. With all her effort, she maneuvered to it and then flopped down. “I feel really dizzy all of a-”

“Good,” Rick said as he pulled out a roll of duct tape from the case, “the medicine’s working then.” Rick tore off a strip of tape and moved to her. He grabbed tightly onto one wrist and wound the tape around both it and the chair’s slender metal arm.

“What? Rick, what are you doing?” Fear suddenly gripped her. This was not normal. This was not the husband she knew and loved. Rick moved to her other wrist. She tried to pull it away, but he easily held it in place.

“I gave you a sedative,” Rick said in a calm, professional manner. “You’ll still remain conscious, but it’ll make this easier for me.”

“Make what easier?”

Rick caressed her hand as if to comfort her- as if there were some part of him that was hesitating. But that part of him quickly vanished. He got up and walked to the open case on her table. He reached in and lifted out a large, heavy-duty drill. It looked very much like a power drill, but its long bit was surrounded by a sleeve of sensor nodes. Rick plugged a thick wire into the back of the drill. This ran to a small display screen that was fixed onto an external hard drive.

“Let me ask you something,” Rick said as he began attaching a guider ring around the drill bit. “Your buddy, Kyle. He shoot up the office today?”

“How’d you know that?”

“Long story short, you asked for Corn Flakes.”

She tried to think back to her breakfast and those damn Corn Flakes. She assumed it was a craving from the baby. It didn’t seem to have anything to do with this. “Rick, baby, what are you talking about?” She pleaded.

Rick shoved a battery into the base of the drill and pulled the trigger. The one-inch bit sticking out of the sleeve spun around in a frenzied blur. Rick walked over to her and knelt down. Outside, the rain had become a downpour.

“Sarah, my name’s not Rick. I know this is confusing for you, but your employer was working on a project that is worth a lot of money to my employer. And inside that cute little head of yours is all the information my employer needs to replicate that project.”

She began to cry. She now knew what the drill was for. Rick was going to kill her.

Rick stood up and lightly caressed her cheek. "I want you to know," he said in a tone that would have been comforting if not for the circumstances, "I really did enjoy my time with you." He slid his hand to the back of her head and held it steady while he centered the drill on her forehead.

"Rick, please, you don't need to do this!" She cried out.

"I'm sorry. Really, I am."

"I'm pregnant! You can't do this!"

Rick paused just long enough to give a knowing smile and a sarcastic shake of his head. What that meant, however, she had no idea. And he would provide no answers. His attention was entirely focused on the drill bit that rested against her forehead. Rick's hand tightened around the drill's grip. He took a deep breath and prepared to squeeze the trigger.

There was a knock on the door.

Rick shot a look at the entryway in the living room. He waited a moment. There was another knock.

"They're too early," he said as he pulled the drill away from her head and placed it on the table. Rick pulled a handgun out of the heavy case and then walked cautiously toward the door.

When he reached it, he leaned forward to look through the peephole. No one was there. Rick ran his hand through his hair to calm his nerves. He double-checked the safety and slowly turned the handle.

Without warning, the center of the door exploded outward as pellets blasted through and lodged themselves into Rick's gut. Rick fell backward onto the ground and moaned in pain. The door swung open and Neil walked in holding a shotgun. He looked down at Rick and kicked away his handgun. As Rick coughed up blood and tried in vain to talk, Neil pulled out his mobile phone and knelt down. He steadied the phone over Rick's face and took a picture. Afterward, he calmly raised the shotgun and blew his face off; it vaporized into a thousand red chunks across the off-white carpet.

"Neil!?" she shouted from the kitchen. "You killed him!"

"I had to," Neil said as he walked toward her and inspected the power drill on the table. "He was about to extract company data from your brain." He looked at her bound wrists and the half-filled glass of the light blue liquid. Neil looked into her eyes with heartbreak as he quickly put together the situation.

"Damn it," he whispered under his breath.

"What?" She asked, overwhelmed by confusion.

"I'm sorry, Sarah."

"What do you mean, you're sorry? Help me get out of here!"

"Sorensen-Darzi can't afford to let the project you were working on fall into a competitor's hands."

"Then don't let it! Help me!"

"There's not enough time. His associates will be here soon."

"So, what are you saying?" she asked with worry.

“Sarah, my job is theft prevention. I wasn’t sent here to recover the project.”

“I don’t understand.”

Neil pumped the shotgun and aimed it at her forehead. “I’m sorry.”

“So, now you’re going to kill me!?” She cried out.

“I can’t allow anyone to get that data,” Neil said with tears hydrating his eyes. “This won’t hurt. It will be over in an instant.”

“But, I passed your damn test! I’m human!”

“No, you’re not, Sarah. The equipment on that table wouldn’t work on a human. Your brain would need to be specifically fabricated to successfully transfer the data.”

“But the test.”

“A false negative. I don’t know how you passed. But there’s no way you’re human.”

Tears poured down her cheeks. “Neil, please!” She wailed. “Don’t do this! You have to believe me!”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m human, dammit! I have memories! I have a life- I can prove it, Neil! Just please don’t do this! Please!” Neil wiped a tear that had wandered too far down his cheek. He steadied the shotgun on her forehead as she bawled uncontrollably. “Neil!” she cried. She thought of it again; the baby growing inside her. A deep sorrow formed for this tiny life that she would never be able to give her love to. “I’m pregnant, goddammit.” It came out uncontrollably. For all she knew, it would make it worse. If Neil believed she wasn’t human, what would that make her baby?

But still, there was a strand of logic to it. *Think, you dumb girl*, she heard her mother badger from deep within the mercurial memories of her youth. And when it came to her, it was like being hit by a bag full of bricks. She was paid to alter genetic coding- she spent the vast majority of her waking hours engineering genetics. Because of this, she knew how vitally important it was to eliminate free radicals when designing biomechanics. Free radicals could lead to unwanted mutations. They could lead to rogue product distribution. And what was more of a radical than reproduction?

“Non-pers are infertile,” she said with confidence. “How could I be pregnant if I wasn’t human?”

Outside the window, the sound of car tires screeching to a halt broke through the barrage of rain. Neil looked to the window for a moment. A second later, Rick’s phone began to vibrate beneath his corpse, giving off a low-pitched hum.

“Please, Neil!” she continued. “Please, believe me!”

Neil held the shotgun tight and took a deep breath. He stared intently at her, but the longer he waited, the more he knew he couldn’t do it. When he exhaled, he lowered the gun. “You can prove it?” he asked.

“I’ll take you to my mother’s house. She lives in San Marino.”

Neil stared at her for a moment longer, inspecting her eyes for any sign of deception. When he was satisfied enough, he gave a few small nods and whispered, "Okay." He threw the shotgun on her table and searched through the heavy case until he found a syringe. "This is adrenaline. It'll act as a counter to the sedative," he said as he ripped off the cap that covered the long, thick needle. "It's going to hurt."

She nodded, acknowledging that she was ready. Without waiting, Neil jabbed the needle into her chest and released the adrenaline directly into her heart. She writhed and screamed in pain, but Neil was quick to cover her mouth and muffle her until the screaming stopped. When she had a sense of composure, he went to the window to check outside.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"I think so."

Neil pulled a bread knife from the wooden block on the kitchen counter and returned to her. He slid the knife's serrated blade between her wrist and the slender arm of the chair and then sawed away the tape. When both limbs were free, he helped her to her feet. She was a little wobbly and she reached out to Neil to steady herself. But he gave her no comfort, "We need to move quickly."

Neil grabbed ahold of her upper arm and picked up his shotgun with the other. In a rushed walk, he guided her out of the apartment and down the hall toward the rear stairs. The doors were all closed despite all the noise and screaming that had just come from her apartment. It struck her at that moment that she had never met any neighbors for as long as she had lived there with Rick. When they reached the exit, Neil kicked open the door and looked down the stairwell. Footfalls pounded against the grated metal below them, each one louder than its predecessor.

Neil let go of her arm and he slowly pumped the shotgun as quietly and the weapon would allow. "Stay a few stairs behind me," he whispered to her.

Neil headed down the stairs as stealthily as he could. She held tightly onto the railing as she struggled to follow him down. After descending a few floors, Neil peeked back over the railing and spotted someone. His eyes blazed wide with excitement as he swung the shotgun over the edge and fired.

She heard the man collapse against the metal framing and cry out in pain, "Shooter!"

With breakneck speed, Neil flew down the stairs and rounded the corner. He fired the shotgun. Again, she heard a man grunt in pain and then collapse; this time tumbling down a flight of stairs. She made it around the corner to find one man dead with a chunk of his shoulder and neck pasted against the wall behind him. The other man, a few steps below Neil, cried out, "No, no, no!" Neil blew off his head in the same manner he did to Rick.

He inspected his work and then looked up at her. His voice was completely professional and calm. "Come on. Their friends probably heard that." Neil grabbed her arm and guided her past the bodies and down to the ground floor. When they reached the cement foundation, they could hear footsteps running down the metal stairs above them.

Neil kicked the door open and pulled her out into the pouring rain. It was cold and it stung as it pelted her head and shoulders. They started moving down the alley toward Neil's car, but the escape was cut off by a young gunman. He was too tall for his own good and was trying his best to take cover from the

rain under an awning on the other side of the alley. In his hand was a revolver that he raised without hesitation.

As if by reflex, Neil swung her forward, in front of him, and held her steady like a human shield. She could see the hesitation in the gunman's eyes. Before he could decide what to do, Neil swung his shotgun up and shot the gunman's legs out from under him. He collapsed with a scream.

Before he could look up, Neil was on him. He used the butt of the shotgun to knock him unconscious. Then he pulled a thick plastic tab out of the back of the shotgun's stock and then dropped it onto the pavement, trading it for the gunman's revolver. She looked at the shotgun curiously; steam rose off it as a substance hidden within began to corrode the weapon. *No fingerprints*, she thought.

She was quickly becoming all too aware that Neil didn't just work security for Sorensen-Darzi, he broke the law for them. He did horrible things for them. He was no longer the adorable flirt she thought he was- in fact, he never had been that. He was a professional killer- a man who murdered without empathy and left no trace behind. And this terrified her.

"This way," Neil shouted as he grabbed onto her and pulled her to the mouth of the alley. He peeked around the corner and pulled her out into the street toward a nondescript gray sedan. Neil flung open the passenger side door and helped her in. Then he ran around and climbed into the driver side, starting the car and pulling out onto the road before pulling the door closed.

The two raced down the street and around the corner as a black car pulled out behind them. Neil frowned at the reflection of it in his mirror and let out a frustrated sigh. He accelerated and turned a corner toward a series of towers. The black car was still behind them. Up ahead, Neil saw a parking garage. "Hold on," he ordered and then cranked the steering wheel down, making a hard right into the opening. Neil sped past rows upon rows of parked cars. After going up a few ramps, he pulled into an open spot sandwiched between two large SUVs. Neil cut the ignition, said, "Stay here," and then climbed out of the car.

He ran across the driveway to the opposing line of cars and ducked down between two sedans. She watched with wide eyes as the black car came up the ramp and slowly headed their way. She could see a submachine gun in the passenger's hand. The car slowly rolled up toward her and then slowed to a stop. The two men inside locked their eyes on her. Their faces were harsh and cruel and they glared at her like ravenous wolves.

Suddenly, a volley of bullets blasted through the driver-side window. The two men were dead before they could react. The driver slumped over and the car continued to roll forward. Neil stood up and walked back to his sedan and climbed in. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded her head, unsure if she really was 'okay.'

Neil started the engine and calmly pulled out of the parking spot.

- Neil -

It took less than half an hour for the two to reach San Marino. The rain had finally stopped and rays of sunlight were beginning to blast their way through the clouds. There were no signs of any other threats from whomever Rick's employer was; it stuck him as being far too easy.

From the corner of his eye, he watched Sarah slowly raise one hand and make a fist. "The adrenaline is wearing off," he said. "You're going to be sore when it does."

Sarah rested her hand and looked at him. "How did you know what Rick was going to do to me?"

"I bugged your phone. I was listening the entire time."

"And back in the alley, when that kid pulled his gun on us, you used me as a shield."

"He wasn't going to shoot you," he calmly stated. "They need you alive in order to extract the data from your brain."

"What if you were wrong?" Sarah asked. He said nothing in return. She decided to take it further. "What happens if I'm wrong? You're really going to kill me?"

"If it's safe, I'll take you back to Sorensen-Darzi where they'll attempt to recover what they can."

"If not?"

"If there's any threat. Any chance that you could fall into their hands-" he paused. "Yes."

"You wouldn't hesitate."

"I already did," he quickly answered.

"You think that little of these 'non-pers?' It doesn't bother you? To kill them like they're animals?"

"I've had to deal with non-pers before. I've had friends that were non-pers. One moment they're that person you know and love. The next, they're a vicious monster intent on killing you. Non-pers aren't human, Sarah. They're hardly even animals. They don't have the capability to reason, to love, to understand emotion like humans do. They may think they do, but they don't. They're machines made out of flesh and bone. They're monstrosities."

Sarah was silent while she processed what he said. "Do you think I'm a monstrosity?" she finally asked.

He looked at her with deep, sympathetic eyes. He looked at her stomach, knowing that she thought there was a baby inside it. "I hope not."

"Now arriving at your destination," his phone announced. He looked through the window to find a quaint Victorian house built in the early 20th century. It was light blue with a white trim. A large, elevated porch wrapped around the front and sides. The perfectly manicured lawn was accented by a rose garden on one side and surrounded by a two-foot-tall, white picket fence. His heart dropped; it looked perfect. Too perfect to be real.

"This is it," Sarah confirmed. She climbed out of the sedan and immediately went toward the house, staggering a little as the adrenaline continued to fade away.

"You alright?" he asked as he followed her lead and climbed out of the car.

"Yeah. Let's just get this over with," Sarah said grimly and looked back at him. She paused and stared beyond him; worry instantly formed on her face.

He spun around to see two black sedans barreling down on them. "Get inside," he yelled and then pulled the revolver out of the driver-side door.

He ran to the other side of his sedan and swung open the cylinder of the revolver. With a flick of his thumb, he popped out a single bullet and placed it on the ground next to a puddle formed by the rainfall. *That one's for her*, the thought and then shoved the cylinder back into position. He looked up at Sarah. She struggled with the locked door for a moment before kicking in one of the sidelight windows. She reached through and unlocked the door from the other side.

He turned back around just in time to see the two black cars skid to a stop on the other side of the street. There were four men in total- two in each car. They climbed out and attempted to use their cars as cover but it was futile. He was in position and ready for them. He fired at the most exposed passenger, hitting him in the head, and then pivoted and fired at the second passenger, hitting him in the neck. The second target fell to the ground and gripped his throat to try and stop the bleeding.

From behind the cover of the cars, the other two gunmen opened fire on him. He ducked down behind his sedan as bullets ricocheted off the hood. He rolled onto his side and looked beneath the car. He spotted the legs of one of the men, took aim, and fired. The man collapsed onto the ground. He fired again, hitting the man in the chest and killing him.

He pushed himself back up and leaned against the tire. A volley of bullets ricocheted off the hood of the car, just above his shoulder. His lips danced silently as he counted how many shots he fired out of the revolver. By his count, he had three left. He held the revolver steady and waited for a break in the gunfire.

When it came, He sprang into action. He jumped to his feet and sprinted toward the man, firing the revolver with as steady a hand as his muscles allowed. The surprise attack caught his target off guard. The grizzled, wiry-looking man in front of him returned fire in a panic.

Of all the bullets shot, only one met its target. His left arm flew back as a lead missile entered his forearm and fractured one of the bones inside. The impact caused him to trip over his own feet and fall onto the wet asphalt. He rolled to a stop in the center of the street. The wiry man smiled and took careful aim to finish the job. But when the man squeezed the trigger, he was met with the click of an empty chamber.

He took this opportunity to thrust himself back up onto his feet and throw his empty revolver at the wiry man. A second later, he was on the man, tackling him to the ground and pulling him into a chokehold. The man struggled, but he held firm, preventing any ounce of air from entering his lungs. Once the man went limp, he dropped the body and took a few deep, well-deserved breaths.

He climbed back up to his feet and checked his arm. A steady stream of blood was flowing down onto the asphalt. "Damn it," he said in frustration. He would need to stop the bleeding, the question was, would he have time to do so before more reinforcements arrived?

Gritting his teeth, he bent down and snatched up the revolver before walking back to his sedan. His car was riddled with bullet holes and it had a pair of flat tires. He walked to the other side of his car and found the lone bullet. It was still standing upright next to the puddle of rainwater. He leaned over and snatched the bullet up with his injured arm. Blood ran down it and dripped off his fingertips into the still water.

He swung open the revolver's cylinder and shoved the now bloody bullet into a chamber. He pushed it shut and looked up at the old Victorian house. It was quiet. He couldn't decide what that meant. Was Sarah right? Or was she in there crying in silence over what she discovered? Or maybe she wasn't even in there at all. Maybe she had taken the opportunity to try and run. He preferred that option over the other two; somehow it felt like the easiest.

Don't hesitate, he thought as he pushed off the sedan. He reminded himself that non-pers were abominations. They sounded human. They even loved like humans. But they were monsters designed to deceive and murder. They were nothing more than man's attempt to play god and create devils.

He closed his eyes and looked down to say a quick and silent prayer. He prayed for the strength to push away any emotions and do what was right. When the prayer was finished, he opened his eyes with immediate regret. A sense of world-shattering horror overwhelmed him.

Along one side of the puddle, a neon orange fluid danced around wistfully as it slowly mixed with the rainwater. It was his blood. It was a beautiful crimson on his arm, but as drops fell and splattered into the puddle, they slowly turned a disgusting tint of orange.

His mind raced as he tried to remember what the pH balance of rainwater was. But he knew it didn't matter. The orange fluid was screaming the obvious. He was a non-person actor. A biological machine built and imprinted with a predetermined purpose. He looked back at the four dead bodies on the other side of the street- that purpose was painfully obvious.

He was a monstrosity. An abomination. A being with no soul.

He struggled to suck in a few breaths. He rubbed his thumbnail across his fingertips and desperately tried to calm himself, but he was a million miles beyond that.

Instead, he gritted his teeth once more and moved toward the house. He climbed the stairs and entered through the open door.

Less than a minute later, he fired his last bloody bullet.