

Six Inches

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I. Tanaka and the Pulse

I want to die, Tanaka thought as her heart pounded against her ribcage. The stale air in the habitation cube smelled like dry ash in the darkness. The sheet was balled up under the small of her back and she was sweating into the foam, a ragged string of nausea pulling itself slowly through her gut. She shuddered and tried to sit up quickly, failed, dizzy, blood pounding in her head. *Fuck*, she thought, *I'm young and fat and dying already. And I don't even smoke.*

She pulled herself up slowly. The string of nausea pulled, pulled, and the back of her throat stung bitterly. She got to her feet and her head swelled up to the size of a melon for a second and she almost lost her balance. It was bad enough that she didn't turn the light on but instead lurched head-first across to where the personal vanity unit was set in the pliant, shitty plastic of the wall, and scrabbled with rubbery fingers until she found the catch she was looking for and jerked it out from its slot.

She smeared her fingers across the molded plastic surface of the unit, scattering casings and wrappers like plastic cockroaches until she found a small, hard lump stuck against the surface. The string lurched up her throat and her gut spasmed as she sucked in the ashy air, panic rising. She peeled off the wrapper with idiot fingers and slapped it on her underarm, where her skin was thin and crusted with tiny scabs.

Tanaka slumped there, waiting for the juice to kick her ass, and the feeling of her heart pumping in her chest and the blood sloshing around her swollen skull was far too much for her to handle. The air smelled like cigarettes, and she didn't smoke. At least she didn't smoke. She thought about the irony of that for a second. Over the white-noise drone of her unit, she could hear the dull hum of rain outside. *I don't actually want to die*, she thought as her chest shuddered, the pressure behind her eyeballs swelling and contracting, *I take it back, I take it back.*

The habitation cube was essentially fancy coffin with a Drip connection and a couple fold outs so you could pretend you were alive now and again. It danced the thin, hilarious line between habitable space and packing material.

She could probably disappear in here. Nobody would notice.

It was odd to think of her building as a graveyard, but it was kind of perfect. A vertical graveyard, with a 15 year old grave keeper from Somalia. The slow minutes ticked by and she felt like the blood was draining out of her toes. The pulse in her head slowed as her sweat turned cold, and dried. The unit had sensed she had woken up and was adjusting the atmosphere. *Well now I have to get up*, she thought blearily, *at least someone knows I actually exist.*

Then the juice hit her upside the head, and she became a real human being again.

II. Tanaka and the other Tanaka

Today was important. Her pulse thrumming, she tapped her fingers. She went through her little ritual humming some awful c-pop song, brewing coffee in her pull-out kitchen so her unit smelled like a hotel lobby. She had wanted to throw out her coffee maker for a long time, but she couldn't. It was too nice, an exceptionally cruel ploy from

her parents to make her feel a little filial shame every morning. She sat at the personal unit, then pulled it down a little more, and settled herself on the foam floor.

Steel yourself, she thought, this is going to be rough.

She swept aside the beetle clatter of dermal cases that covered the mirror and pulled it up. "Brighter," she croaked to no one in particular, and the light in her coffin went halogen-white. "Too bright, you fucking idiot," she cursed at the air, and the light dimmed, chastised. She was almost certain it could parse expletives.

She did a little dramatic head flip into the mirror and stared at the sweaty mess that stared back at her: puffy round geisha face, squinty little eyes, dyed brown hair that stuck to pasty skin. The person in the mirror had a dumb, squat little snub nose and an upper lip that stuck up into an almost sneer. They made a mock ugly pop-star pouty face, then squeezed their fat neck into a triple chin.

Looked about right.

The person was not her. Sometimes this person hung around for weeks at a time, especially when she was feeling like human garbage (which was often enough), but today she might have a visitor, so she started the ritual to bring her true self out. First, a forty five second boiling shower in the miniscule closet in her unit, then careful and practiced application of three laboriously selected creams, and an exfoliant. There was a skin lightener, a foundation, and a rest before prayer, then eyeliner, a subtle reddish shadow, delicate, spidery mascara, and vespers. Finally, there was a terrifying, man-killing lipstick that was kept locked away in a silver case in the back of her unit.

She forgot to drink her coffee first, so she applied it twice and left a bloody smear on her mug, replacing the deadly artifact with reverence. *Better*, she thought, as another woman slowly emerged in the mirror. This wasn't really her either, but it would have to do.

Next was the most important part, the dermals. She popped the swatches of artificial skin carefully out of their cases, tapping each one with a click to shake them loose. She hated them and wished she had the real fix, the Bliss, but she wouldn't be able to afford it until the next job was finished or she talked to Molly, and she wasn't feeling desperate enough to try fiddling with the kill switches. Yet.

The dermals were the vibrant colors of insect carapaces. She carefully counted them out and separated them into appropriate piles, then pasted them on her skin one by one with practiced care, trying to find areas not encrusted with the tiny little pinprick scabs of a perpetual user.

It made her underarms and wrists look like lizard skin. She'd used to joke with her brother that she was developing mutant superpowers before he had stopped talking to her a few years ago. It wasn't that great of a joke anyway, just a nervous cover-up. *Come to think of it, that describes most of my personality*, she thought.

She started humming the latest c-pop song to get lodged in her brain, then ran her stubby fingers over the dermals. The rush from her starter was very short lived and the rest would have to carry her over in a carefully conducted chemical orchestra. The red ones on her underarm were mood stabilizers, to counteract the thick blue stimulant she had pasted on the back of her neck. She had two iridescent teal ones for motivation on her right wrist but wasn't sure that was enough. She peeled one off, felt a small warble of apathy, then stuck it on the thin and un-ruined skin behind her left knee. Her fingertips brushed stubble and she cursed.

Shaving took an extra ten minutes of water she'd had to pay for. She felt nervous about having so many derms on, so put on two relaxant derms, then topped it with a calmer. That was too low, so she put a stimulant patch on, removed a cherry red derm and put on another mood stabilizer. Her skin felt stretched, which made her a little more nervous, so she repeated the pattern until she felt just right, then pulled herself into her chic overalls.

Her blood vibrated. That was good. She did a little pirouette and almost fell over – the floor was too soft. She gave that little snorting laugh that she hated and spat at the coffin to firm it up as she posed in front of her mirror.

You could almost pretend there was a reasonably attractive woman in her late twenties standing there posing like a pop star, making little dumb pouty faces. Only if you squinted really hard with your beady little eyes, though. She appeared to be colonized by brightly colored patches, and you could maybe pretend that they were part of a costume, a sort of fanciful harlequin, and not pumping life-threatening and mood altering drugs through her thickening and acidic blood.

She checked her implant. The tiny gray box clung hungrily like a tick behind her ear around shiny pink skin. It was clean.

III. Tanaka and the Gravekeeper

The door to her unit dragged open. To her disappointment, no bats flew out behind her. She wanted to imagine it would creak, or hiss like in an old, old movie, but it slid open like one of the old style paper doors that her grandmother had been so fond of.

The air outside was fetid and thick, the cavernous space of the collapsed atrium dim and wet with rot. She climbed the rusty ladder down and picked her way across the haphazard jumble of pock-marked habitation units, home of the living dead. Giant stacks of thick, greasy black cables snaked in through the toothy gates of what had once been a massive glass observation window but was now a wall to wall void. The hungry, feverish glow of Los Angeles crept through that window, and Tanaka crept around it in return.

Sluggish rain was rippling through the gaping space and pooling on the concrete floor, feeding a crop of evil looking plants. The only other light was from the cracks of the stacked coffins, like blind eyes in the darkness, and a bright white lamp, where in a wide and surprisingly clean space Abdul Rahman sat at what could only joking be called the lobby desk. He had pushed the desk back quite a ways to stop the rain from disturbing his work.

Abdul was dressed immaculately in a neat white collared shirt and sharply pressed slacks. In the devouring heat he was wearing a tight black tie, and Tanaka was reminded she had never seen the boy sweat. The whites of his eyes were incredibly bright, and he had skin so black that it had a purplish cast to it. Tanaka had the sudden and very strong impression that he was the guardian to the underworld. It wasn't the first time.

"Ms. Yui!" he said, breaking into a beaming smile and gesturing broadly. "How are you this fine day? I haven't seen you for a while. Will you look at this weather!" His

Chinese was perfect, his voice loud, rich, and far too immaculately enunciated for a teenager. His desk was a tightly organized synergistic grid of tablets, sheathes of smart paper, and a single charging station for his terminal. Tanaka wanted very badly to hate him.

“Hey kid,” she said, wanting to sound cool and casual, but her weedy little high pitched voice wasn’t up to the task, and she hated Chinese, so she gave up. She found it far harder to swap faces in the waking world. “What are you studying?”

“One moment,” he said with a bright smile full of perfectly straight teeth, and tapped something into one of the phones in front of him, pulled a tiny computer out of his ear and folded it closed. Tanaka got a glance at the phone screen. Music? She failed to match the picture with the clusters of fresh-faced, breathy teen idols that had become lodged in her brain.

Abdul caught her peering over and slid the phone around. “It’s very good, very technical,” he said, glancing at her slyly, his tone and accent dipping and rising precisely. “Please, sample my exquisite beats,” he said in heavily accented English. Tanaka had the earpiece in for all of three confusing seconds before she put it down.

“I’m studying mathematics,” he said, “And the Qu’ran. It’s not so hard. Very boring.”

“Nobody does both at the same time, Abdul.”

“You are far too kind,” Abdul smiled. One of the numerous phones on the desk flashed a bright script and chimed. “One moment please,” he said graciously. Tanaka watched his smooth brow furrow. His head was completely hairless, so you could see the dull gray stud of his implant behind his ear.

It was a cheap but very practical model. Tanaka’s was about five and a half times more powerful, but then again, hers was made for factory work. She felt strangely guilty about that. Almost nothing had been handed to Abdul in the way it had been to her: he was a serf. Her own family had become yeomen, and Tanaka was even worse off than the serf that her father had been, but at least they had their freedom, unlike the greater part of the heaving mass of humanity that was choking the planet to death. Abdul deserved a lot more.

The rain leaked through the hole that gaped in front of them, drifting in through the shattered window in waves.

“You should be a doctor,” said Tanaka, suddenly feeling strangely earnest. An odd affection came over her as she studied his smooth face. Abdul was surprisingly handsome. If he was a little older –

“Actually,” said Abdul as he dismissed the phone message with a flourish, and inadvertently relieving her of her incriminating chain of thought, “I would like to become a magister.”

“That’s difficult,” she said carefully, trying to hide her apprehension, “And you’ll need to become a yeoman, and a fancy one, you know? They don’t take any serfs or meens. There’s a lot of time and surgery involved.” She picked at the paper on his desk. She was terrible at math.

“Yes, I know,” said Abdul, reaching over to straighten the paper that Tanaka moved. He was probably aware that she was more than just a chem jockey. Probably. Maybe not all of it. Anyone who manned the gates of this particular kind of hell probably saw all kinds of things.

There was a pause just perfectly long enough to become awkward. Abdul looked at her expectantly. He had a disarming earnestness and honesty about him. He was very religious, but in the infuriatingly common sense way, and not the loud apocalyptic way that was so easy to dismiss.

“Abdul,” she said, picking at the dotted scabs on her arm and trying to think of money and not the task ahead, “Has anyone been in for me? Any messages?”

“No, Ms. Yui, just the residents,” he said.

That was unexpected, and more than a little disconcerting. Well what does that mean, she thought, nobody yet? No announcement or anything? It was extremely unlike the Madame to not give warning. After all, they were sending someone to meet her in the waking world. That alone was cause for notice. What if she went under too soon? What if her mascara started to run? What if she started violently vomiting for no reason as soon as they showed up?

This is why she hated meeting in the real world. Parameters were entirely outside her control. The world didn't bend here.

Abdul sat up a little straighter, if that was at all possible, opened his mouth, and closed it. “I thought you were going out,” he added, raising his hairless brows. It was worse than her father. Almost.

“Why? I do look like it don't I?” she said, making her pouty face and doing her best runway spin. She swayed a little too much and suppressed the urge to giggle. “It's because I'm expecting.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“-company,” she added, a little slower than she wanted, her cheeks flushing. She had to check her derm balance when she got back. “How do I look?”

“Miss Tanaka, it would be very healthy for you.”

“Come on Abdul, I'm actually having someone round and I'm trying really hard to look nice. And they're not business related, before you ask.”

He did not look convinced.

“Ok they are,” she huffed, “But you're ignoring my question. You have to learn to be better around girls. How do I look?”

He took a sharp breath in through his nostrils and set his jaw. “Ms. Yui,” he said in his very disarming way, “You are a good woman. You should peel those bloodsuckers off you, and go far, far away from here! This is not a good place for you, truly. One day, Inshallah, you will find peace.”

“Thanks Abdul,” she said.

“Please,” he said, enunciating very clearly.

“Thanks Abdul.”

“And you are a very beautiful and talented woman. Which is why I'm giving you some very valuable advice! You have to get out of the employ of these thugs.”

“Thanks Abdul,” she said. Her discomfort at being berated was uncomfortably strong for someone more than ten years his senior. It always was. “I'm going to be a while. Can you wake me if anyone calls? It might be today or even tomorrow.”

He looked at her, his expression serious. He raised an eyebrow, then put his earpiece back in.

“Thanks Abdul,” she said, her voice flat and final, and turned back to the deep ruin, away from Abdul's desk, stamping out a tiny seed of guilt as she did.

If the Madame's envoy hadn't shown up yet, then perhaps she'd get more info straight from the source. There was some time to kill before she needed to re-juice anyway. She faced the stagnant and damp darkness, the cathedral stacked with coffins. The graveyard, and her tomb.

Nothing left to do but go to work.

IV. Tanaka and the Infinity Street

It was called the Drip because a long time ago that's exactly what you would have to go on when you went under – usually a saline solution, laced with the kind of powerful sedatives need to induce the coma-like hypnotic state required for a connection.

In the early days of shared dreaming you needed a set up a monstrous apparatus the size of a room and a full medical team – military scientists and all. Nowadays, advances in materials meant you could go right through the skull or tap the spine. You could crack a consciousness like an egg and pour it right in with very little worries. All you needed was a pretty simple cocktail and a good enough skull shunt to sustain a connection. But you had to measure well.

Tanaka always measured well. It was one of the few things she was good at. Well, more than a few. She was good at make-up. She was good at eating, and choosing socks, and very, very good at maintaining her brain chemicals so she felt really, really good most of the time that she wasn't feeling like tearing her own eyes out.

She hummed and stripped her overall off and sat on the floor, telling her coffin to soften it to its foam-like sleep setting. From her PVU she pulled the chemical bullet, the carefully cooked mix she would need to go under. She dehydrated the evil little package and placed it next to her in its foil wrapper. Most people bought a pre-set bullet, but then again, most people didn't cover their arms in mood dermals.

From under her personal unit she slid a soft grey oblong the length of her arm, and turned it on. Some people preferred purely mental interfaces, but while she often relied on eye movement, she was not one of them. Her terminal was a little old but it was extremely reliable, and she was an idiot with technology.

Tanaka's implant buzzed, tickling her behind her ear, and a screen blinked into life in her peripheral vision. It wasn't really located anywhere in particular, it was just there, a figment of a hijacked brain. With a thumb in the air, she swept it around in front of her, the sensors of the hardware inside the terminal meshing with her coffin's to pick up the gesture. This was the remnant of the old network, the dumb and deaf realm. It still persisted and even thrived for the two thirds of humanity too poor to afford implant surgery.

She rubbed her arms and smoothed another angry red dermal onto her right wrist. She unwrapped the bullet from its foil casing, and held it between her right finger and thumb. With a swipe of her left hand, she pulled down the Gate.

It asked her for a destination.

"Styx West," she said.

"Excuse me," hummed the annoyingly bland voice of her coffin, "Did you want me to execute a network search?"

"Shut up, asshole," she said.

“Disabling vocal function,” said the coffin. She glanced back to the hanging Gate. STYX WEST SHUT UP ASSHOLE flashed the hanging letters. She switched to manual.

The bullet felt chalky and tasted slightly sweet in her mouth. She closed her eyes and try to relax, flat on her back. Her bra straps dug into her sides, so she tempted fate and wriggled out of it, peeking at the screen that hung in the air.

INT: 00:00:29:32
GAIN: 00:10:30:00
WAKE: 11:00:00:00

Less than thirty seconds. She settled back down in the foam and tried not to think about how much her nose itched. She dreamed of a proper insertion couch with an intra-venal set up and a massage function. But then there was the money. It was always about the money.

There was a gentle chime. She bit the bullet, swallowed, and hoped she wouldn't sweat too much and ruin her makeup.

Ten seconds later, she fell asleep and her brain was sucked out through her eyeballs.

It was an infinite fall, an impossible fall. Tanaka felt her whole body spaghettifying terrifically and all her guts get sucked up into her head while her toes were still stuck to the ceiling as she fell screaming down the pit wildly and hilariously but no sound came out. Behind her the whole world sunk into a great sucking pit and she swore she heard a gurgle as her liquefying body spiraled down the drain.

Then, just as suddenly, the pull reversed, and her forehead slammed back into her toes and the whole world slapped her hard in the face.

It was an impossible world, an impossible city. It had a single blazing avenue that swung violently into the infinite distance, and then, against all reason, up into the air where it curved in knife thin burning arc overhead against the pitch black void to some unseen vanishing point. If Tanaka had turned around she would have seen it hurtling monstrously out of that same void to join the street behind her, like a snake eating its own tail. That's just the way it was. If you walked on that street, you would walk forever.

The thing about Loop 1 was that the eye couldn't really ever quite parse what it was seeing. The precise problem was that it wasn't seeing anything at all. Tanaka's feelings about it always drew a thin line as to whether she got high out of enjoyment or as a coping mechanism.

The serious faced, thick-jawed military men who had made the first perilous forays into the realms of shared consciousness would have had no way to conceive of that street. It had its pale imitations in the metropolises of the old world, the bright and convoluted ferment of people and neon that were old Shanghai or Times Square, but man's age old obligations to hew to the dusty laws of space-time had kept him in check.

Here there were no such limitations. There was a sky only because there needed to be one, and nobody had given a thought to adding stars. There was a street, but it was paved in gold, because why not?

They had dug it steaming out of the gestalt sub-consciousness of three billion people. It was an orgiastic fever dream stacked upon a hedonist's nightmare, and it was all built in fire. Someone at one point had beheld the void, pure and unbroken, and thought *now that won't do at all. Let's build a ninety story shopping mall here, and sex it up a little.* And then a magnificent shared delusion had taken hold and that person had thought *no, let's build two.*

Let's stack them.

Loop 1 was many things, but primarily it was bright and loud, loud enough to wake God. Every available surface crawled with motion – brightly fired glyphs, lines of text, writhing videos, three dimensional interactables, burning ghosts, giant shimmering clouds of ad-mites, messenger daemons. Advertisements seeped from under Tanaka's feet and from the surfaces of buildings and a thousand bridges with architecture from five hundred eras. Every face was perfect, every smile was warm and flush with the unspoken pledge of orgasm.

An infinite canvas, thought Tanaka, *and we devote it mostly to dicks and skincare products.*

The buildings of Loop 1 were not necessarily buildings, just at the doors were not necessarily doors, just as the street wasn't really a street at all, just a useful visual paradigm. If you opened a door here you were as likely to end up in a coffee shop or department store as you were to enter a futuristic sky-city or an ancient realm of magic and women wearing leather underwear two sizes too small.

In the same way, the heaving crowds of Loop 1 were nominally people, but there the similarity ended. A cadre of Hindu gods rode overhead on a glowing skiff, almost clipping a café where a thin man in a pale suit was having a heated conversation with a dreadlocked idea-trader with stars in his hair. A lunchtime pack of business executives strode by in lock step, their dark suits perfectly and almost identically tailored, their handsome Adonis faces indistinguishable, their movements synchronized. A golden staircase opened up in the street and they were gone; nearby, ape-like squatters were hawking fistfuls of technicolor data fliers. They were flanked by line ups of glimmering porn stars with varying numbers of appendages; Tanaka counted them as she strolled by. A cartoon bear almost bumped into her and apologized before climbing on a bus driven by a thunder god that rode into the starless sky on trails of lightning.

Not everyone was so outlandish, and the vast majority of the crowd was rather plain by sane standards, if richly dressed and slightly too good looking. In the illusory city, appearance had value, and since appearance was the only thing that mattered, the value had climbed very high indeed.

Tanaka's best paying work was of questionable morality, and she had done a lot of that questionable work to pay a questionable guy with a praying mantis head and an eye for detail to fix her image up. She'd had bits of other people's dreams spliced up and shoved in her subconscious, which sounded awful on paper, but it looked *great.* She was slightly taller here than in real life, with a bob cut such a rich shade of brown it almost glowed. Her fashions were recent and she wore impeccable perfume and a jaunty sunhat. She had paid for a cute, (absolutely not puffy) heart shaped face, gigantic dark expressive eyes, and a crinkly button nose that suggested playful mystery. Playful mystery was a far better vibe than pasty Dracula, she had decided.

She skipped down the street, adjusting her sun hat, and feeling the swish of her short hair and the heat of the city on the back of her neck. Her perfect shoes made neat little clicking sounds on the non-existent cobblestones. It was extremely natural for her when dreaming to be a completely natural person.

She had some time before she had to clock in, so she checked in to a baroquely decorated boat floating in the middle of the boulevard, the gold-paved street rippling into liquid around its oaken hull. It was selling sit-down French-cut sirloin steak, according to the glyph outside, which sounded just fine to her. She savored her time and ate her steak delicately with a pure silver knife and fork in an airy booth with lacy curtains and felt the perfect lady. A young waiter figment with crisply pressed trousers and a knowing smile served her vintage wine as she perched by the latticed window and ignored him at her pleasure. The steak was fantastic, by all standards, which was not surprising as it wasn't real and the standards were non-existent, as there were no cows anymore. She stuck her index finger in the vending machine at the front and paid.

If you wanted to, you could walk on foot to any destination on Loop 1. It had even become increasingly fashionable nowadays to take a bus or taxi, which would swing you at speeds varying from realistic to outlandishly impossible wherever you wanted. Tanaka had even heard several patrons of the art world had taken to arriving in chariots, but she wasn't feeling like digging deeper in her exhausted pockets to indulge in further luxuries.

Styx West was getting increasingly busy. Loop 1 and the entire dreamscape of the Drip may have been built on the unholy architecture of the brain-machine interface, but its architects were not ballsy enough to build it that deep. Everyone shared the same dream, but it was the hardware that kept everyone lucid, and everything else meta-stable. The hardware cut order out of formless chaos, cut shapes into the mutating landscapes of the mind. It still had a few rules, namely that matter still had to have substance here, and therefore a crowd was still a crowd, full of people of a colorful variety of sizes and shapes that would have to get pushed through.

Tanaka was riding her high quite pleasantly by now and so whistled as she pulled an anchor in the shape of a small china cat out of the pocket dimension in her sundress, rubbed it three times, and snapped her fingers once, with a little flair, and things *shifted*. She didn't move at all, in fact, but her stomach dropped as the entirety of Loop 1 spun by her in a terrifying blur while she stood perfectly still, holding her sunhat on her head while the street rippled by.

Things slammed to a stop. She tilted out of reflex and, embarrassingly, almost dropped her hat. As she straightened she saw the crowd outside the gate was already massive, and growing by the minute.

The gate to the House of Cats was a hulking, ancient wooden relic. It had black tiled roofs reminiscent of a Buddhist shrine on which snarling ruby tigers stood perched. The predatory hulk of the House itself lurched out of the darkness beyond, its base engulfed by its garden. Thrusting defiantly into the pitch black sky, lit from below, it evoked a certain red-lit, dark exoticism. If anyone had to take a guess it could have been something as simple as a thousand year old temple or the castle of some bloodthirsty feudal warlord, but the truth was far worse. It was an institution of the Drip with an outrageous reputation and an even more outrageous clientele. Tanaka's reverence for it still didn't stop her from laughing at how tacky the whole thing looked.

She cocked her hat and sauntered lightly around and through the crowd up to the front of the massive splintered gate, where a diamond-skinned woman was having a heated argument with a jackal-headed demigod in a business suit the color of corpses. Heads turned as she walked right up, close enough to breathe on the wood, where the temperature lowered noticeably from the blazing chaos of the street behind her.

With a great deal of pleasure, she rapped lightly upon the gate. Conversation stopped very suddenly as those close to her craned to see what was going on. Laying finger on the gate before the opening hour was tantamount to a death sentence. There was a shudder in the gate and an invisible holding of breath from the crowd as a small wooden panel opened laboriously.

Behind the panel a knotted, ink stained countertop appeared, cluttered with richly carved tokens. Peering over the top with a placid expression was a frog about half the size of a man, dressed richly in the robes and court hat of a 15th century Chinese mandarin, his crest and phoenix feathers marking his high rank in the imperial court. He peered out at Tanaka with a cold and stately gaze, as though deciding whether she was worth wasting words on.

The effect was somewhat shattered by a mortifying screeching sound as the panel jammed halfway open. The frog flinched.

“Fuckin’ hell, we have to fix that,” grumbled someone out of sight.

The mandarin threw a withering look into the darkness behind him, and then turned languidly back to Tanaka. “And you are?” he said, dropping the words with extreme disinterest.

She didn’t recognize him, but she leaned on the counter and stuck her hips out at the crowd, then gave the frog a tiny little knowing smile. “Tanaka Yui, I have business with the Madame,” she said smoothly, aware of the crowd murmuring at her back. The fact that she hadn’t evaporated into ash yet was amazing them.

“The House won’t open until six,” said the mandarin to no one in particular, and the panel started grinding shut with an ear splitting screech. Tanaka yelped and grasped the edge.

“Wait, wait wait!” she said, far more desperately than she expected, dropping her cool all over the street, “T-The— just let me clock in early, I’ll—”

The frog blinked at her as the narrow gap in the opening began to close. She started babbling.

“It’s very – fuck! - important that I –“

The frog blinked again.

“-because she didn’t say when the start would- ahh!” She yelped as the panel slammed shut on her fingers and tried to close on them, unsuccessfully. The pain was quite real.

“Eaaaughh!” was about as much as she could manage as the frog started jimmying her fingers out from the crack in the panel.

“Fuckin’ hell, it’s jammed again,” groaned the voice from before, “What’s it stuck on this time.”

“Tanaka Yui,” said the bored voice of the mandarin. He gave up on the jimmying and started using what felt like a letter opener.

“Huh,” said the second voice, as though it had just noticed a stray hair on his toothbrush, “Isn’t she on the wait staff?”

“Eauggh!”

“Well I can’t know all their names,” said the mandarin, dryly. He didn’t give up on her fingers. “Thought you could sneak in here early and get an audience, did you? Shifts don’t start for another hour.”

“Aaeugh!”

“Business with the Madame,” he muttered, and the panel slid back just a hair. Tanaka ripped out her throbbing fingers with a gasp.

“It’s true!” she protested.

“Even if it was,” said the frog through the crack in the panel, “The Madame doesn’t conduct business. If you actually worked here, you would know that. And even if she did, she would pluck you from where you were standing like a daisy. Like a little flower, just so.” He made a very lazy plucking motion. Tanaka could tell he was savoring his words. “But she doesn’t, and the House doesn’t tolerate that manner of sloppy insinuation. Especially from menials.” He dropped the last word with a distasteful plop.

“Besides,” he added quickly, “We’re full on pussy cats today. Try again tomorrow.”

“We are?” said the voice in the back.

“You are not!” said Tanaka, trying to figure out if it was worth jamming her fingers back in the window.

“I thought we weren’t?” said the confused voice.

There was a meaningful pause. Tanaka tried very desperately not to hold her breath.

The panel groaned open a touch further, and a green hand slid through, dropping a small square token through with carefully calculated distaste and retreating. Tanaka hurriedly palmed the token.

“Well go on then,” said the mandarin.

Tanaka slid the token into the wall next to the main gate, and the outlines of a tiny side entrance cracked open in front of her in a shower of dust. She had to crouch to get through, picking up the token from its tray on the way through. She continued, bent almost double through a cramped passage to a tiny door where she handed the token through a slot to another pair of frogs who quizzed her about her use of intelligence enhancers, brain implants, false memories, and Bliss. She lied, as was expected of her, and they stamped her neatly on the forehead with the red ink seal of the house and slotted a crimson envelope in the front of her dress with two gold pressed tigers to mark her returning status. When she opened it later, she would find payment inside. If she opened it earlier, it would almost certainly explode, but not before insulting her intelligence and sexual preferences. It was the way of the Madame. The frogs pulled back the bolts on the door and let her through the gate into the garden.

When she stepped through the gate, she became a cat. She picked her way up to the House on two paws, her tail swishing nervously behind her.

V. Tanaka and the House of Cats

“No way!” said Nguyen, disbelieving. Tanaka watched her co-worker’s cat face fumble for the appropriate expression. A fresh crowd of impeccably dressed guests filed in through the entranceway, and Nguyen, Tanaka, thirty other kimono-clad cat

waitresses, and ten frogs in waistcoats all gave a perfectly synched, embarrassingly ingratiating bow and an ear splitting *'WELCOME!'*

Their conversation had been punctuated with this for the last twenty minutes. Nguyen didn't seem to notice at all. The guests filed past into the crimson passage that led to the coat check. Fiery heat and the thunder of a brass-band jazz orchestra poured forth from that passage, raising the fur on Tanaka's neck. It was a typical night.

"And she hasn't contacted you yet?" said Nguyen, pulling up from her bow. "No," said Tanaka, looking straight forward and smiling dumbly at the guests.

"You think there would be a messenger or somethin'?" said Nguyen, getting excited, "Like a buncha birds that explodes into fireworks and it spells out the time or somethin'"

"They can't do that in real life, Nguyen," said Tanaka, "She just sets the time and then you show up in her office. Or someone shows up at your door." She wasn't sure if Nguyen was exceptionally naive or more strung out than Tanaka. It was fun to believe the former.

"Ooooooh," said Nguyen, her eyes widening, "So- "

'WELCOME!' they shouted as the next wave of guests filed in. Tanaka saw fine coats with shiny buttons, feather headdresses, the circlets of priest-kings. It was not a crowd given to subtlety.

"So is it true then?" resumed Nguyen, in a whisper that was just below shouting, "I mean, the Madame does *business*?"

"Well of course she does business, Nguyen," said Tanaka, hiking up her kimono. It didn't fit her properly, and she wished fervently she was a person again. Fur itched. The Madame's insistence on the staff being adorable little animals out of a fairytale was only partly a gimmick, Tanaka suspected. The real reason was to remind you that the Madame could skin you alive at her pleasure.

"Check out this guy," she said, giving a little head jerk to a suntanned mountain of oiled pectorals and gelled hair that had just walked in, balancing a Barbie on each tree-trunk arm. Tanaka had to guess he was sporting a few grey hairs in the real world. You usually didn't get many of his type in the House of Cats, but maybe he was feeling adventurous. Nguyen ignored her feeble attempt to change the subject and gave her a wide-eyed, worried look that did not complement her incredibly high-pitched sing-song voice at all.

"I mean... the business kinda business, Yui... you know, not the café. The kinda business with... you know..."

Tanaka gave her a look.

"...ghouls and stuff?" she said, looking like someone was about to slap her, "Vampires, that kinda thing? Brain sucker--"

Another bow. Another wave of guests. *'WELCOME!'*

"Brain suckers!" Nguyen finished, in a tiny voice.

"Don't call it that," muttered Tanaka. It did have a certain ring to it, though, she thought.

"But does she?"

"Everyone knows that, Nguyen," said Tanaka.

"Do *you*," Nguyen said, her eyes widening. "do *business*?"

"Maybe," said Tanaka, trying not to humor her curiosity.

“Why doesn’t anyone talk about it?” whined Nguyen. Tanaka gave her another look. Nguyen countered by pouting, in the best way that a cat could pout, which was to say, not very effectively, but Nguyen could pout with anything. You could have turned her into a fish and she would have found a way to pout. She was a master of her craft.

“How did you get in with the Madame, anyway?” grumbled Nguyen with difficulty, speaking through her pout.

“Molly,” said Tanaka.

“Oh,” said Nguyen, dropping her act, “did she come back? Didya see her today?”

“No,” said Tanaka, which troubled her, because in fact, she hadn’t seen Molly for weeks. It troubled her for three reasons: one, because Molly was probably the only thing she had to a friend (Nguyen only half counted) at the House; two, because Molly was one of the evil little cogs around which most of the business here spun and the Madame surely would have noticed by now; and three, because Molly connected Tanaka to her main supplier of Bliss, which was the evil little cog around which most of Tanaka’s life spun.

She felt a little twinge of guilt that the last reason probably mattered the most. She had heard Bliss referred to once as the luxury car of drugs. The metaphor was a little lost on her, since she had only ridden a car in the Drip before, like most of the population, but it got the point across. It was the ultimate pleasure substance that didn’t really have any substance at all, a wild mix of stolen dreams, yanked by back-market head crackers, peddled away by data merchants, and cooked to perfection by chem-jockies in the back rooms of the Loop. Each one was unique. It was a high you couldn’t get bored of, and even better it had no side effects other than extreme addiction. You could pretend to be a perfectly normal person while spending large parts of your day unconscious and drooling.

There were no rules about selling Bliss legally, but the company packages were exorbitantly expensive, and given a maximum duration perfectly designed to yank you from la-la-land as you were settling into your metaphorical bubble bath. So you had to rely on back-market stuff. Your connections. And without the connections, Tanaka was forced to rely on dermals, which gave her terrible anxiety and made her cravings more intense. She had considered traditional hard drugs but that would probably kill her faster and in less interesting ways. She’d knew without a doubt she’d eventually be tempted to try cooking something up herself, fiddle with the kill-switches, and end up as braindead as-

‘WELCOME!’

She missed the bow. Stupid, stupid, stupid. The turtle at the second gate caught it and dismounted his desk. He was dressed in 12th century imperial Heian court attire and had peacock feathers in his cap, and Tanaka mentally slapped herself. Despite its namesake, cats were fairly low in the pecking order of the eponymous House. You were about even with frogs, if you gave them enough sass, you definitely had one past rats and carp, and you could maybe give lip to a pig if you were feeling saucy enough. But you certainly couldn’t screw with cranes, and you could never in a thousand years fuck with a turtle.

“Kitchen,” said the turtle, and smacked her hard across her pointy-eared head with his war fan.

She obliged. She probably had a lot of waiting to do anyway.

The House of Cats was a café in the same way that Loop 1 was a street and a tiger was probably a great pet. Someone had gone through a well-thumbed catalogue of Chinese imperial palaces, Theravada Buddhist temples, and Japanese Shinto shrines, picked out all the flashiest bits and smashed them madly together into a massive abomination that blazed fifteen stories high out of a black and twisted zen garden into the perpetual night. If you stood close enough to the verandas you could feel the heat coming off it. On the inside, the balconies rose *eighteen* stories through snarling golden tigers and violent red woodwork covered in poorly shielded paper lanterns that caused frequent outbreaks of fire.

It was always 2am. The café's coat check rose like an ungainly boat from a heaving sea of patrons, manned by a grim-faced captain with a golden seal and a snarling demon helm. The coat check was the size of most restaurants. It had its own bath house.

The key to the House was its exclusivity. It could have been open in perpetuity, but instead it kept extremely strict hours, evidenced by the human-shaped scorch marks outside its gates. It could be completely open to the street – capacity was rarely an issue as private rooms or even entire floors could be created at the Madame's pleasure. Instead, it kept a close eye on its patrons and an immaculately pruned guest list that resided in an ornately lacquered box in the Madame's desktop. It had a menu thicker than a dictionary but it didn't take special orders. Most importantly, it had a live staff the size of a small army, and just as regimented.

The live service staff was the thing that drew people, the biggest sign of ostentation. For the oldest law of the Drip was no animate part of a dream, or a figment, as it were called, was smart enough to really fully resemble a human being, especially in a world based on the shared dreaming of a billion minds. They were plucked, built, and composed with various degrees of care, but anything that was remotely close to being able to imitate a human was, by mutual agreement, overwhelmingly prohibited. It was a law so strictly held that even in the House, the darkest corners of the under-market, and the tunnels of dream-traders it was strongly respected.

There had been early attempts at creating something intelligent, certainly. There were even rumored to be successes - machine-generated dreaming consciousnesses, but if there were, they were certainly kept deeply buried by each corporate fiefdom. The substitute was usually imperfect enough to be laughable at best, disturbing at worst. So, most restaurants and other businesses cut corners and hewed strictly to the law. Figments weren't smart mainly because they couldn't be. Your waiter would serve you gracefully and react quickly, but you certainly couldn't ask him anything other than the special of the day. If you couldn't pay at a machine or from your table, the smiling cashier at the front who took your payment would only smile back if you tried to chat her up.

For most people, it didn't matter, for like everything on the Drip, the House of Cats was not really a café at all. It was the impossibly executed façade of a café, the grand pantomime of a café that served the idea of food. The very last time Tanaka had talked to her mother, when she started to tell her she had found work as a waitress she

hesitated. She certainly acted like a waitress, and the people she served were real enough, she supposed. But it was all a fairy tale, built barnacle-like on military hardware a century old.

In the real world, the waitresses were serfs, under work contract to pay off their company life-debt from birth until age 50. In the real world, for most people, the restaurants were dirty company mess halls crammed into the sides of buildings, illegal stalls perched in rotten holes and tin shacks, or military-like meal centers in the hundred story blocks of collapsing mega-cities crowded with two hundred million people.

Tanaka had eaten sushi only once in her life, when her father turned fifty and paid off not only his personal life debt, but his entire family's as well. Tanaka's parents had taken the whole extended family up the lifts and trams to the top of the skyline where the nobility not wealthy enough to escape to orbit lived, where the paths weren't knee deep in trash and the air didn't taste of cigarettes. Her grandmother had spoken Japanese with the ancient proprietor about the merits of vat-grown fish while Tanaka had her first and only encounter with the famed and rare salmon nigiri.

She had savored that taste for years and kept it like a treasure, until she learned that the House of Cats had hired a well-known specialist a long time ago to splice their sushi section together from the hundred year old dreams of ancient sushi masters and they served it every night with five choices of wasabi. It was perfect. She forgot about the real stuff almost immediately.

That was the House of Cats. It may have been a fairy tale, but what did it matter? It was an age of spectacle, and the House was *the* spectacle. It hired two hundred staff because it could. Ostentation was its sole reason for existing, and that was precisely why it had become a way house for the scions of the new world: the peddlers of obscenity, the movers of money, and the purveyors of five hundred shades of fantastically inventive new crime. The crumbling corporate gods of the old-world couldn't reach this deep. Their eyes were not lined with flecks of gold.

So it was that every time Tanaka dashed from kitchen to table, carrying steaming trays of food, she was never quite sure who she was serving. This kept her from getting bored, because she couldn't quite know if the curry udon she was balancing was for some company nobody out for a night on the town or some shadowy yakuza limb-smuggler.

It really wasn't hard to tell sometimes. The cocky, low level ones usually wore souped-up bodies decked in leather and spikes and demon faces, and tugged at her tail while laughing with their killboy pals. The high level ones, the really dangerous ones, stuck out like a sore thumb because looked like successful, neatly dressed men and women in their 50s and looked through her as if she wasn't there. Half the time, she knew, this was because they had a really juicy rig that split their consciousness straight up the middle and allowed them to conduct business in two places at once.

Tanaka knew this because she'd been with teams that had to work around that rig several times. It was a pain in the ass that could make sealing a bore near impossible, and while Tanaka never had to deal with it personally, Molly had told her all about it.

Thinking of Molly didn't really help calm Tanaka down, because outside the dreaming world the little patches on her skin had thoroughly soaked her bloodstream

and the mania was setting in. The roar of the brass band was starting to hurt her head and make thoughts rush unbidden in repetitive patterns through her swirling brain, so she focused on the waitress routine. She would get flagged down by a frog, who would direct her up or down heaving flights of stairs with the thrust of his fan. Occasionally, she would climb ladders, slide down banisters, or dodge around other cats carrying stacks of towels to put out fires, or guardian pigs hauling out drunken patrons, and generally try to stay out of the frenzy that the café was at peak hours.

Then she would hang on for dear life to the railing at the side of a booth while a gang of armored apes or white-robed dryads or fire gods argued with her about the presence of completely non-existent things on the menu. She would be the perfect little waitress, apologize and bow profusely, then duck and slide back through the chaos to the heaving kitchen.

The kitchen wasn't a real kitchen, of course, because there were no chefs, and the food was imaginary. There were a series of shutters, behind which there certainly seemed to be a kitchen, and all the noise, clatter and smells you would normally expect from one. It was set along a wide corridor gated by set of massive double doors where huge crowds of clamoring serving-girls in the bodies of cats climbed over each other to shuck their order receipts under the shutters.

The receipts were picked up by Yan. Yan was not a person, of course, but a figment, a dream carefully cut and shared between minds, injected a million times a second into sleeping brains across the world by a brick buried deep in the real world. Yan was a thick-faced temperamental Sichuan chef with a habit for screaming at you if you misspelled your order. True to the deficiencies of figments, he would scream at you whether your spelling was perfect or not, but the waitresses swore it had more of a begrudging tone of approval to it.

Tanaka would scramble over fifteen or twenty other yowling waitresses and Frisbee her orders under the shutters. Ten seconds later she would deftly yank trays of dumplings, noodles, and shochu out from under the shutters and fight her way back. In the mad battle back to her table she would inevitably drop something, and breathe out a silent thanks that nine times out of ten the trays never flipped or spilled any of their contents. The more savvy waitresses used this constantly to amuse new patrons and extort tips from them to great effect. The tenth time was so that the veneer of a real café could be maintained, and it pissed the rats off to no end when it happened.

Usually it was incredibly easy to bring out cute little Japanese waitress Tanaka and have her put on a show and slide through the madness. This was another skill at which Tanaka excelled. The first time Tanaka had met Molly in a data smuggler's den in Styx, the bright haired woman had looked her straight in the eyes in a way that somehow bored right past the imaginary face Tanaka was wearing and straight up the drain pipe and tightened her stomach in the real world. *You're good at make-up*, Molly had said, in her self-assured way, and Tanaka had been incredibly confused. Only later had she understood. It only took her a while because she didn't play the same sort of mental game as Molly. They weren't even playing with the same ball.

Good at make-up, Tanaka thought. *Huh*. It bounced around in her head as she made her exhaustive way, back and forth through the chaos. That really was how she had moved past waitressing, wasn't it? But what if she'd screwed up, somehow? The last job had no problems she could think of – Tanaka had earned a lot of praise for her

performance. She was good at performing. *Good at make-up*, she thought again, over and over. What else was she good at? She couldn't remember. The call would never come. She'd stop getting the money to sustain her habit comfortably and it would suck her dry, like the shriveled wretches that lived under the bridge in the stinking canyon below her building. Then she really would be desperate enough to fiddle with the kill switches and she'd die kissing infinity. But she'd be good at make-up.

The band switched tempo, and Tanaka felt a tug on the loose skin on the back of her neck. It was a peculiarly cat-like sensation. Mid stride, she was yanked hard off her feet by some invisible force and pulled backward through the air, mouth agape. The trays of soup dumplings she had been holding clattered to the floor next to the cloven feet of an Egyptian fertility goddess and a battle scarred robot. They landed perfectly upright. The food didn't move an inch. The startled crowd parted as she hurtled backwards.

Huh, thought Tanaka, *finally*.

It really was like getting yanked like a daisy, now that she thought of it.

VI. Tanaka and the Master of Cats

The Madame's office was on an almost empty floor at the very top of the House. It was unnaturally quiet, and only a dull vibration through the polished tiles told you were in the same building. Fortunately for Tanaka, the rats here waxed the floor daily, and she skidded along with very little trouble. She didn't smack into too many people on the way up and wasn't too badly bruised when the pull stopped and she somersaulted backwards into a wall. All in all, it wasn't the worst way to receive a summons.

As she dusted off her kimono, she tried to calm herself. She had to find out why, when she gated in three days ago, a lanky tomcat with a red seal between its shoulder blades had sidled up to her and told her in the deep and terrifying voice of the Madame that she was needed for a new job, and they'd be sending someone – in the real world. Tanaka had been excited at the prospect of new work at first. Head cracking was a lucrative business, far more than simple waitressing. But she always tried to maintain a respectful distance with the real world. They had a sort of truce. When it knocked on her door, she immediately knew something was wrong.

Here, she had to pull out another Tanaka. She had to transform from accommodating and beaming waitress to quiet, obedient serving girl. She smoothed the fur down around her head, then straightened her apron and kimono and trotted up to the heavy brass doors that marked the lair of the Madame. The metal was warm and they were slightly ajar, the smell of burning coals pouring out from between them. Tanaka would have thought it was ominous, but this was how it always was. Either the doors were open or they were not. The command to enter was implicit.

The air inside was dark and potent. Though it was Tanaka's ninth or tenth time inside this office, she never got used to how small she felt here. The office was oiled, black, and spacious. It had a huge vaulted ceiling in the classical Chinese style. There was an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, but they looked out on nothingness. Every wall was covered in dark, glossy cabinets, and the cabinets, along with every available surface, were covered in – well, Tanaka was never sure. It seemed to change every time she came in here. There were faded paper scrolls, and poetry, and wall hangings,

old, thick tomes bound in twine, maps and bottles of smoky liquor. There were ink paintings of mountains, monks, and calligraphy. And there were cats. Lots of cats. Cat dolls, china cats, carved cats, pictures of cats.

The only light came from a deep, fragrant hearth burning in the middle of the massive room, over which was hung a blackened iron kettle, and a dim oil lamp over where the Madame was ensconced at the far end of the room, encircled by her overflowing writing desk. It was very hard for Tanaka to picture seeing her anywhere else.

She was a monstrously fat Chinese woman, so fat that her massive, operatic face appeared to be floating in a sea of her own corpulence. It was currently tilted down over her numerous chins to a tablet screen that she peered at over miniscule reading spectacles. She wore thick make-up, opulent robes, and her copious, dark hair was pulled in glossy waves over the top of her head and held in place by golden ornaments.

“Well,” she said to the screen as Tanaka walked in. “Well.”

Tanaka’s parents were Christians, and if she had tried to imagine Satan’s voice, Tanaka was fairly sure it would have paled in comparison to the Madame’s. She had the deep, rich, dulcet baritone of a man who knew you were breathing air at his pleasure. Nobody at the House ever tried to second guess the proper gender of the Madame, even after they heard that voice. She was simply the Madame, with the same connotations as Your Majesty.

Tanaka waited, smiling and standing perfectly still, watching the eyes of the porcelain cats around the room, and trying not to sweat too much. She remembered then that cats didn’t really sweat. Or was that dogs? The Madame sighed and put the screen down, her expression pained. She looked for a moment as if she was about to speak again, but instead pulled out an old fashioned fountain pen and began to delicately scratch something into a notepad.

A few minutes passed. Tanaka could not be sure. A serving girl did not speak unless spoken to, even if her knees ached. She was fixated on the scratching of that pen. It sounded like it was exfoliating her brain. The kettle started boiling, gently at first, then a full-blown screech. Tanaka looked at it and didn’t move, and neither did the Madame. It was only when the lid began to shake on the kettle that the scratching of the pen stopped. The Madame turned her terrifying gaze upwards and looked tiger-like at Tanaka through the clutter on her desk. She had the cruel eyes of a predator, narrow over her thin spectacles.

“Aren’t you going to start the tea?” She raised an eyebrow that could cut steel.

Tanaka gave a startled but neat little bow, then stepped over and grabbed the kettle without thinking, burning herself audibly. She was definitely off today. The Madame looked down and her pen resumed its excruciating business.

“Madame, I can’t see any teacups,” said Tanaka, wrenching her grimace into a smile and trying to squeeze the tears of pain out of her eyes out of sight of the Madame’s lamp-like gaze. Another one of her skills, and arguable her most marketable, was complete control of her face. She could set it into a perfectly content little smile while her nerves could inwardly scream at her to her heart’s content. It had got her very far, that face. Maybe too far she thought, as she squeezed her stinging paw into a ball.

“No teacups?” intoned the Madame, low and ominous. It sounded exactly like the low rumble in the back of the throat of a large animal before it mauls its prey. Outwardly,

Tanaka smiled brightly as she hefted the kettle. Inwardly, she was about to have a heart attack.

“Ah here, they’re on my desk, darling,” said the Madame.

Tanaka poured tea. Nervousness tugged on the back of her brain and she spilled a little on the dark wood of the desk. The Madame’s eyebrows shot up again. “What’s wrong darling?” she muttered, not taking her eyes off her work.

“Ah, nothing Madame!” said Tanaka with a shy smile and a perfect curtsy while her brain screamed at her, “I’m unfortunately a little tired today, that’s all!”

“Come here,” crooned the Madame in a grave-cold voice, beckoning, and Tanaka obliged, leaning in. An oversized hand topped in dark nails the length and consistency of skinning knives reached out and rubbed its surprisingly smooth palm across Tanaka’s forehead, breaking the invisible seal there. Tanaka felt a disorienting rush and the floor pushed away from her as she returned to her human shape, still dressed in the kimono and apron of her uniform. She felt unbelievable relief at getting rid of the fur. You could never get used to it.

The Madame frowned and reached out again, and Tanaka flinched, imagining those claws sinking into her eyes. The Madame paused and gave her a razor sharp look, then plucked at Tanaka’s face. There was a sharp pain on Tanaka’s upper lip and she winced in spite of herself.

“Whisker,” said the Madame, and settled back into herself. It was not hard. There was a lot of her. The golden ornaments in her hair clicked together as she appraised Tanaka like a butcher taking stock of a particularly sickly animal.

“Thank you Madame,” squeaked Tanaka.

“Stop that, you’re twenty five, darling,” said the Madame. She had thick, droopy eyelids and she blinked exceptionally slowly. It was like someone shuttering a lamp from hell. “Look at you,” she continued, her hands arched dangerously. She had a queenly manner about her that Tanaka, and anyone else for that matter, found particularly intimidating. It was extremely easy to imagine her perched upon a golden throne, draped in silk and attended upon by scantily clad slaves. Then again, it was just as easy to imagine her regally looming over a bubbling cauldron with a necklace of skulls. “Drop the act,” she rumbled, “I know you’re a good ass-kisser. Show a little gall now and again.”

“Why of course Madame,” said Tanaka, not dropping the act in the slightest. That meant doom here. Tanaka desperately wanted this little game to be over, wanted to know why she had been summoned here, wanting to know what the job was, what the message meant, why someone was meeting her in her box outside the dream. Inside, she was clawing at the walls. Outwardly, she blushed and looked downwards shyly. After all, she was good at make-up.

The Madame leaned back and her massive face wrinkled, ogre—like, in concentration. “You’ve too much quicksilver,” she said after a short while, pursing her lips. She seemed decided. “An inner, lunar element, used to treat disorders of Yang. Mobile. Good for treating ulcers, sore throats, and carbuncles, or upward heat. Smear on the feet it might enable one to walk on water, or perform mysterious feats of transformation.” She rubbed her hands together languidly.

"It is also extremely poisonous," she continued. "Don't be quicksilver for too long, darling."

"I won't, Madame," said Tanaka with a shy smile, feeling, if it was possible, more entirely lost than before. Her kimono was coming undone and she was definitely starting to sweat now. The Madame didn't seem very pleased with her response and narrowed her eyes.

"Why are you at work?" she said.

Ah. Here it came.

Tanaka tried to get words out but her throat refused to work.

"I did say you had business today didn't I?" Even though the Madame was sitting and Tanaka was standing, the massive woman loomed far up into the dim air over the desk. Her gaze was fixated directly on Tanaka's honey-brown scalp. Tanaka could feel it burning a hole there.

"You did, Madame," said Tanaka, wrestling to keep her smile intact.

"Well then what are you doing here? Are you shirking the job? Where's your partner?"

"P-partner?" squeaked Tanaka, in spite of herself.

The Madame pursed her lips and Tanaka paused. Her lipstick was the color of dried blood and Tanaka noticed it was applied with terrifying precision. Slowly, her lips un-pursed, and she seemed to relax a little. Her claw-like nails loosened up and she seemed to deflate a little back into her station. Tanaka's whole body remained clenched.

"She didn't show up yet did she?" murmured the Madame.

"No, Madame," said Tanaka. Her ass hurt from the tension she had been holding in her entire body and her knees were starting to spasm uncontrollably.

"Well then, let's drink our tea," said the Madame, as if nothing had happened. This was a clear sign, Tanaka understood, that the Madame was at least willing to talk about what was going on, and that she wasn't about to be hurled out the window by gale-force winds or transmuted into toads quite yet.

She sat carefully and perched nervously on a chair, smoothing her apron obsessively as she drank oolong tea out of fine china with the dark lady of the café. The cup was polished and a deep, rich, oily black, like everything else in the office. As they drank, a frog poked his head tentatively through the thick doors of the office and was immediately waved away. Tanaka noticed the thick scrolls and sheaves of paper on the Madame's desk were written by hand, and not automatically, and she boggled at the time the Madame could be saving. The desk smelled richly of ink and incense. It should have been a relaxing smell, but instead it just smelled of power.

"I love your hair, darling," said the Madame over her miniscule tea cup, breaking the silence in her own laconic way, "who did it for you?"

"It was... an artisan in Tartarus, Madame. He's a well-known image splicer, I think," started Tanaka, but trailed off as she couldn't remember his name. Was the Madame inviting her to speak? Was this her opportunity? She swallowed, hoping it wasn't audible, and tried to deflect it with a demure smile. However, an unspoken question escaped from her expression too early and got away before she could catch it.

"Well go on then, ask me about the job, if you must," said the Madame with the self-satisfied tone of something toying with its food.

“You said I had a partner?” said Tanaka, relieved, and trying not to let questions pour out of her stupid mouth too fast. “Is that who’s coming to meet me in real space? Why the- I mean, why meet there? What’s different about this job?”

“It pays *extraordinarily* well, darling,” said the Madame, “didn’t I tell you? The client is quite the eccentric. You’ve done so well on these other little errands I’ve sent you on; I thought you deserved to get in on this one.” She cocked a knife-sharp eyebrow. “You do need money,” she rumbled.

“But,” said Tanaka, trying to swallow her own words, “Madame, pardon me, but I didn’t get any details this time. Was there a mistake? I don’t know where the gate is or when this... person will arrive.” She hoped painfully that her words were conveying the appropriate deferential tone in whatever language the Madame was hearing them. She squeezed her knees together and shoved her hands in her lap and tried to look down shyly and away from those blood-red nails.

The Madame gave her a pained eye roll. “If your partner wasn’t late, you would already know this,” she said, “but here’s what matters, darling, if you really must know.” She distastefully pushed a sheet of paper covered in glyphs to where Tanaka could see it. There was a number on that sheet of paper, written in very clear, crisp type across the bottom. Tanaka didn’t really think she was seeing it properly and squinted, trying to look again.

“That’s not in Yen, darling, so you don’t need to subtract any zeroes,” sniffed the Madame.

Tanaka tried to swallow her heart.

“The client has not provided the gate information yet, so there is no information to give,” said the Madame, shuffling the offending sheathe of papers back into the mountain on her desk. “There’s a seven man team on this one. Mr. Himself will be your team leader. Ms. No-sell and Mr. Love Thy Neighbor are tackle. Mr. Hate and Ms. Fly are running the line.” She tapped her fingernails on the hard wood of her desk with each name.

“Your partner is Ms. Rainy Day, and you,” she said, her gaze boring into Tanaka, “are, of course, Ms. Sunshine.”

Tanaka nodded confidently. Inwardly, her mind was reeling. A seven man team?

“Have you met Ms. Rainy Day?” asked the Madame.

Tanaka shook her head. “It’s a hard gate job?”

The Madame raised an eyebrow.

“-Madame?” added Tanaka quickly.

“Well obviously,” said the Madame, “and of course, you must want to ask me about your partner. I can see it in your silly little face.”

Tanaka tried not to look too anticipatory. A strange expression came over the master of the café, almost as if she sagged a little. She looked at Tanaka with a cocked expression and pursed her lips, a dangerous gesture at the best of times. Tanaka tried desperately not to lean in. The oil lamp on the Madame’s desk had burned down a little, and behind Tanaka, the coals had shriveled away to a dull glow.

“I’ll be honest with you darling, it’s a corporate job, a Face,” said the Madame in the warm darkness. “The client is extremely specific with their request, and security is likely to be high.”

Tanaka's heart, which was up near her throat, suddenly dropped out of her stomach. Head-cracking was a practice widely outlawed by what passed as international law nowadays and just as widely practiced. For in the heady throes of the information age, as nation-states shriveled away and corporate fiefdoms sprung up, the ocean-spanning business conglomerates began to discover a major problem. You could own all the assets, the networks, and the private armies, hell, you could even own people, in a way. But for all that, you still couldn't own ideas. A man's mind was sacrosanct. You couldn't reach into his brain and pluck out his dreams.

Of course, with the invention of the six-inch skull shunt, that limitation became laughable very quickly. It became quite possible, though difficult, to pull intellectual property straight from the intellect. Most of the time, who's intellect you were pulling from didn't really matter. Companies were picky about their ideas and patents, not about who was holding on to them. The usual target for a head crack were lapsed employees or engineers, middle managers or salary men.

But occasionally, you got a Face.

Face jobs were coveted in the circles of head-crackers, but carried the stench of mortality about them. Cracking the mind of a pay master or guild lord was near-guaranteed to be fantastically dangerous. The masters of the old world, the feudal corporate kings, still had power, even in the dream realm of the Drip. The behemoth machinery of commerce that they commanded still lashed together kingdoms of hundreds of millions, and every man and woman bore their mark. Many a line-man had been sloppy on his exit and woken from his Drip session to find a cadre of corporate kill-boys drinking his coffee and pissing on his mattress with knives at the ready.

A strange and terrible thought hit Tanaka.

"Madame," she said, her mouth dry, "was your granddau- Ms. Papillon involved with this?"

Molly.

"Yes," said the Madame, giving her a look. The deepening gloom encircled her, but her eyes were still bright. She removed her tiny spectacles, pinching them between her nails, then folded and inserted them somewhere deep in the drapery surrounding her. She looked straight at Tanaka, a look that told her very precisely that if she proceeded further there would be teeth and claws involved. "My granddaughter Ms. Zhang has been working very closely with our client on a related project."

"But is she-"

"Your concern is noted," said the Madame carefully, with just the barest rumble of a throaty growl, "but it's extremely private business, darling. It'll be a while longer before we all hear from her, I expect. For the time being, this particular case has been difficult. I have ordered side to side sleeping to prevent *complications*." She picked the last word extremely carefully, enunciating each syllable with cold precision.

Tanaka was about to say something further and ask what complications were exactly, but she noticed the breadth of that glossy black desk and the writs that filled it, and wondered how many of them were death warrants. The hollow eyes of the china cats that crowded the room peered out at her from their gleaming black corners and Tanaka knew suddenly that she had really only pushed a little way into the fast darkness that was the Madame's empire. If she wanted to push further, this might be her only opportunity. She had bills to pay, and interesting chemicals to buy, at least until she

could get her hands on more virtual nirvana. But more than that, there was something else pushing Tanaka forward. There were glimmers in that darkness. She was like some idiot girl in a fairytale skipping blithely into the deep woods in search of flowers. But the flowers were very pretty indeed.

Tanaka clamped her mouth shut.

“She’s fine, dear,” said the Madame, and that was that.

Tanaka felt a buzzing on her right wrist. She turned at it and looked over it curiously. Imaginary words hovered there, informing her that there was a visitor at her residence, and she was in a safe wake period. She looked up. The Madame picked up the lamp on her desk and poured something viscous into it, snuffing out the light, then snapped her fingers and the hearth at Tanaka’s back glowed to life again. She plucked a thin envelope from a threatening looking pile of scrolls and slid across the smooth surface of the desk. Tanaka picked it up and opened it carefully. It was an analog photograph.

“This is what the client requested, the target of your headcrack,” sniffed the Madame, “It’s buried somewhere in the mind of a young West Korean Iron executive.”

Tanaka realized her legs were stiff, and wondered how old the wake alert was. Sometimes the shunt gave minute long delays, depending on her cortical activity. She turned the picture over to see if there was anything else written on the back, but there wasn’t.

“Be nice to Ms. Rainy Day,” said the Madame peering down at her tea cup, “She’s even more socially stunted than you, if that’s at all possible. But she’s extremely talented. One of the the finest mancners I’ve employed.” She swilled the tea dregs in her cup with her swollen hand and squinted at them. “Well, I hope I’ll get at least one of you back out of this little operation.”

The humor was lost on Tanaka. She looked down at the picture.

“An *apple*?” said Tanaka.

“Of course it’s not an apple,” said the Madame, “it’s never just an apple.”

VII. Tanaka and the Somnambulist

When Tanaka came back up the drain pipe, Ms. Rainy Day was in her habitation unit, folding her towels and smoking.

She scrambled to her feet and almost passed out. Coming back into the real world was always an experience. Your brain didn’t completely cut out the sensations of living while in the Drip, just softened them and polished them to a pleasant glow. Here, it was impossible to ignore that you were a wet lump of contracting tissue. Every time she came back up, it was very hard for Tanaka to believe she could tolerate it.

Her head was thick from the after-effects of the bullet, and muggy from the comedown of her morning high. A painful knot in her stomach reminded her she hadn’t actually, in reality, eaten anything for a day and a half. She was hot, confused, her make-up would need re-applying, she wasn’t wearing a bra, and someone was sitting there smoking and folding her towels.

She lurched forward in a blind rage and almost wobbled into the wall, reaching for the stranger to grab her and shove her out of the door. The stranger wore a heavy coat, but when Tanaka grabbed her arm and started pulling, she was shockingly light.

“Get the fuck out!” Tanaka croaked.

“What are you-” started the stranger, in a remarkably calm voice, and Tanaka shoved her bodily out the door and slammed it shut. She swayed over to the sanitary closet and vomited over the floor. She had woken just on the border of it being unsafe. If she’d taken a stronger bullet, the stranger would have had the full run of her place for far longer than Tanaka was comfortable.

She rinsed the vomit down the drain with the shower head while her head stabilized, slowly. Nothing had made it on her overalls, fortunately. She looked at herself in the mirror, breathing in and out heavily, trying to steady herself, trying to pull on the mask again. *Nope, still ugly*, she thought as she drew ragged breaths. But her mascara hadn’t run at least, and her lipstick was perfectly intact.

There was a sudden and muffled exchange of words somewhere in the murk outside her cube, and then a slow knock at her door. Tanaka ignored it and tried to stop her arms from shaking. How the hell had the woman gotten in?

The knock came again.

“Hello, Ms. Yui Tanaka,” said the crisp voice of Abdul over the door intercom, “There’s a woman trying to break into your habitation cube. Though I would rather have not, I have drawn a gun on her and she is being perfectly well behaved. Should I call the building management?”

“Please don’t shoot her Abdul,” Tanaka said, jamming the intercom button as fast as she could.

“I am fairly sure, Ms. Tanaka,” said Abdul, “that she has suppressor implants to hide her brain signature from the building surveillance net. Isn’t that interesting?”

“Your place is very dirty,” said the same disinterested voice from before. It was slow, strongly accented English. Tanaka guessed the old London district of Magnasanti. “I was just cleaning up a bit.”

Tanaka peeked behind her at the room. Her towels had been folded and lined up corner to corner on her personal unit, which had been completely cleaned of wrappers, casings, drink cans, and other unidentifiable smears. The dermals themselves had been stacked side to side with ruler-like precision and organized by color, her precious hacked-together makeup collection had been carefully and precisely assembled based on skin tone and color complements. Her mirror had been straightened. The notes she had stuck on it to remind herself not to overdose had been pasted into a rigid grid. On a whim, she crossed the floor (cleaner than it had been, or was she imagining it?), and slid open the case where her clothing was kept.

It was organized by color, mood, and at least five different outfit combinations.

She opened the door.

“Who *the fuck* are you?” she said.

Abdul was there, wearing the same neat and shocking sweat-free shirt. He held, with a slight boy-like tremble in his right hand, an unassuming, and therefore extremely menacing, lightweight pistol.

The woman that stood in front of him was possibly the whitest white girl that Tanaka had ever seen. The word gawky only began to describe her. She stood almost a head taller than Tanaka, and was dressed in a coarse, dark, outrageously unfashionable coat at least two sizes too large that draped down past her knees. It gave her a certain scare-crow like awkwardness. She had a long, painfully thin face, a long, extraordinarily

pointed nose, and lash-less eyelids that seemed perpetually half closed. Her badly cut hair was the pale white-blonde of dead flowers and it hung lank and loose past hollow cheeks to her chest. She had practically no eyebrows, which gave her a strangely serene, almost unreadable expression.

Her eyes, though, thought Tanaka. They were a painful blue, and they flicked around behind her half-closed lids like sparks, animate and animalistic. They didn't match the rest of her at all. Tanaka immediately knew the other woman was a Bliss addict. You could just tell.

"Ms. Rainy Day?" said Tanaka.

"Ms. Sunshine?" said Ms. Rainy Day. She sounded tired or strained, and Tanaka realized that was just her voice. She was rolling a lit cigarette back and forth between her long fingers. Her nails were filthy.

"This is the company I was expecting, Abdul," said Tanaka. Abdul looked reticent for a moment, then relaxed, lowering the pistol with visible relief.

"Next time, Ms. Tanaka," said Abdul in his very carefully chosen Chinese, "please ask your guest to check in at the front desk." He gave her a look that said *you owe me and I will remind you gently of this and others of your moral deficiencies each time you wish to visit me*, and then retreated, keeping his eyes on them as he climbed down the stack of coffins to the pungent darkness of the atrium floor below.

"Don't smoke inside," said Tanaka to the tall woman, "It already smells like it, so you think it wouldn't matter but I can totally tell."

"Sure," said the woman. She continued to roll her cigarette back and forth. Definitely old London, thought Tanaka. "Well," she said after a moment, looking at the cigarette, "If you'd like to finish that I should... finish getting dressed anyway. Please wait a minute."

"It's too small," said the woman, seriously. Tanaka fumbled with her expression.

"What?"

"Your bra. It's too small. They're all too small. You need three to three and a half more centimeters on the strap for ten of them and maybe five to five and a half for four, but I presumed those were old anyway."

Tanaka gaped.

"You're also on the road to being a really bad addict, you know," said the woman with the same blank expression.

Tanaka slammed the door shut.

She made coffee, swallowed down a nutrient drink that tasted like pasted bread, and had a few bites of a thick black supplement bar that she kept in the cold box under her personal unit, trying to remember the steak she had eaten earlier that day. Or rather, hadn't eaten, which was precisely the problem. She opened up her terminal and checked her personal messages, swiping through the mountains of messages imploring her to upgrade her shunt, or buy mood stabilizers, or one-use intelligence clamps that channeled the dreams of geniuses to allow her to pass any employment test (not likely, she thought). There were a few tentative knocks on the door but Tanaka ignored them and turned the intercom off.

After her third cup of coffee, she felt a little better. She peeled and re-applied some of her derms, and added a few bright yellow calming ones to the skin behind her left ear. Her low burning high of the morning was a thing of the past and she didn't think she'd have time to try and orchestrate a stronger one with a guest around so she prepped her kicker for the next day, peeling open the package and setting it in an easy to reach place with part of the backing folded over. She re-applied her lipstick, fixed her hair a bit, then turned on the intercom and held it open.

"I finished my cigarettes," said the tired voice of Ms. Rainy Day immediately. Tanaka was boggled at how fast she responded. Had she just been sitting there by the intercom?

"Were you just sitting there by the intercom?" said Tanaka.

There was no immediate response, just the quiet hum of the cube. Tanaka leaned in against the wall. The woman on the other side cleared her throat. It was a harsh sound.

"The cigarettes," repeated Ms. Rainy Day, "They're all gone."

"Great," said Tanaka blithely.

"I was going to say," started Ms. Rainy Day, each word tumbling lazily out after the next. She closed off her sentence, as if she had stopped speaking. There was another fruitful little pause.

"I was going to say," she said again, with only marginally more confidence, "your overalls... well, they're a little too big for you. You dress like you're fat. Well, you could probably stand to exercise more. And your blouse is the wrong color for those socks."

Tanaka closed the intercom and made more coffee.

She opened it about ten minutes later.

"What are you on?" said the voice of Ms. Rainy Day almost immediately again.

"What do you mean?" choked Tanaka, trying to decide if this was actually worthwhile or if the Madame had been playing a kind of strange practical joke on her. The top echelons of the Madame's private head-cracking teams tended to be eccentrics. You needed to be a little wrong in the head, it was the nature of the work, and if you weren't when you started, you certainly would be after a few jobs. Viewing the inside of other people's subconscious minds tended to have that effect.

"Your dermals. I'm guessing a five, five, three split with a backup kicker," said Ms. Rainy Day, as though reciting a grocery list, "You're trying to substitute for the emotional and physical withdrawal after extended Bliss use."

Tanaka was very tempted to close the intercom again, but decided to fire back. "What are *you* on, huh?" she said accusingly, "what's hiding under that coat there?"

"I'm a lot worse than you," came the reply. There was an edge in the other woman's voice. "I started heavy on the derms once I ran out of money for the real stuff. I started to look like a bloody skincase. I tried mixing and drinking dilutions and it almost killed me, and I wasn't about to go for any mucous membranes. Did you hear about that?"

"Yes," said Tanaka.

"So when I *could* get the real stuff, I started to mix my own. Take off the kill switches. Extend it indefinitely, that kind of thing."

Tanaka's eyes widened, and she was glad the other woman couldn't see her expression. She was surprised the other woman was still talking, and not a drooling empty shell. *If she had figured out a way to-* Tanaka began to think, but the thought was dangerous.

"Still doesn't give you the right," she stuttered, "How much of *your* skin is fucking patches right now, huh?"

"Now?"

"I said now, didn't I? What's *your* derm mix? What are *you* on?" sneered Tanaka.

"Nothing," said the woman, and the edge in her voice turned ragged.

Suddenly Tanaka understood completely. "Nothing?" she said, amazed.

"Nothing," said the woman, "Nothing at all. Totally clean for years." She didn't sound proud, or triumphant, or relieved, or anything at all except tired. There was a pause and a soft exhaling of breathe from the other end of the intercom.

"I lied," said the woman, "I have one more cigarette."

Tanaka pulled back from the intercom and leaned against the soft plastic wall of her cube and rubbed her fingers together. The ashy smell of the air inside wasn't so bad, she guessed. There was a short pause on the line as the other woman smoked. It was still uncomfortably hot outside. Tanaka was sure the acidic rain would come back and the humidity and heat would get worse. It always did in the Pacific this time of year. She pressed the button again.

"So?"

"So that's what's up with me," said Ms. Rainy Day, "That's my thing, I guess. If you need to have a 'thing'."

Tanaka listened to her take another deep pull of her cigarette.

"Listen, you're far better off than me. You really don't want to see under this coat, believe me. I tried dating recently but people want to call the hospital as soon as I take the shirt off. And you're far better dressed, really, I mean that." She stopped and made a small pained sound.

"I'm so bad at this," she said, "My cigarette's almost gone, by the way."

Tanaka waited, and rubbed her sore eyes.

"You have an excellent taste in shoes," offered Ms. Rainy Day.

Tanaka waited.

"You're a maybe a little overweight," said Ms. Rainy Day, "but not that overweight. Not as overweight as you dress. No sir. Not remotely."

Tanaka crept her finger a little closer to the intercom close button.

"I'm out of cigarettes," said Rainy Day dejectedly, "properly, this time, I promise."

There was a long and peaceful pause. Tanaka listened to the silent hum of her cube, the subtle vibration in the wall against her back. It was warm, soft, and quiet in here. For once, she felt oddly safe and at home. She could probably ignore everything and go back to sleep. The thought was tempting.

"I'm sorry," said Ms. Rainy Day, "I'm sorry I'm an asshole. But I'm a special asshole. Listen, do you want to get paid?"

Tanaka opened the door.

Ms. Rainy Day was right, Tanaka really didn't want to see under the coat. There were certainly healthier skeletons out there. The pale woman wore only a ragged sleeveless shirt and shabby, thin trousers that somehow managed to hang loose on her frame. The skin around her wrists and inside her elbows was dark, creased and cracked like a crocodile's. She had two brightly colored plastic ports emerging stalk-like from her left forearm. The skin around them was irritated and bright red.

They sat on the floor and drank Tanaka's perfectly brewed coffee in silence, then began to set up their gate. Ms. Rainy Day's fingers were constantly rolling back and forth, minus their cigarette. When she pulled back her lank blonde hair, Tanaka saw that she had not one, but three little hard grey boxes that clung like ticks to the shaved patch of skin behind her ear. Abdul had been right, there was definitely a lot of hardware packed in there.

Tanaka felt a twinge of reverence. She never afforded a set up that juicy. She wouldn't have been able to get a hold of her own factory grade shunt without substantial help from her parents. A shunt that powerful could sustain the kind and quality of connections needed to slave anywhere from thirty to seventy primitive manufacturing figments. Working in tandem, two or three workers could run a small army of machines by themselves, driving them into mass production with the whips of thought. Most of the back processes would be run automatically when the figments borrowed bits of the decision making centers of Tanaka's neural cortex, and all she'd feel was a mild buzz.

Tanaka's father had done it for thirty years, and was still doing it, as far as she was aware. He had worked hard for the sake of his wife and company-mandated single child, rocketing Tanaka and her family from serfdom into the slightly less subsistence existence of yeomen. Tanaka had never asked where her father had gotten his implant from, originally, when he was a serf. She knew he had been in a war when he was younger, but when she asked about it, it set him off enough that Tanaka would have to turn her face away from his all night.

Tanaka too, had that job, riding on the privilege of her newly implanted skull shunt, straight out of school. It was not an easy job, nor was it the most interesting, but it was a job, something that barely a fifth of the population of Los Angeles had on paper. With it, Tanaka avoided the stinking, cancerous street markets, the meat halls and puppet factories. The hungry, rancid barter law that had swallowed up most of the city. She could trade in real currency. She could get a paycheck.

So for a while, Tanaka sat on a pillow and slaved thirty five rudimentary machine consciousnesses to the task of creating superconductors while they raced in and out of her deep brain tissue, querying parts of her neural pathways that could never be replicated by human hand. She did it again and again, day after day. It became routine, and as Tanaka now knew intimately, routines could either consume you, or turn you into fucking idiot. She did the latter. She guessed it was the same reason that people kept falling out of perfect paradises in all the religious texts. Getting naked and hanging out with talking animals could only be novel for so long.

A co-worker had taken her into the Drip one day to the most infamous café on Loop 1 on a half-assed date. There, she met a woman with turquoise hair and nightmare eyes that told her she was good at make-up and asked her if she wanted to

kiss infinity. When it came down to it that sounded *new* and *interesting* most of all and so Tanaka accepted. Now here she was, covered in bloodsuckers, lying on the floor next to a complete stranger with an organization fetish and hallucinating lines of text asking her for gate keys to an imaginary street in an imaginary city where they would hijack the neural processes of some poor asshole and rip bits of his dreams up to sell on the black market.

Figures, she thought.

Her parents had thoroughly severed from her. All she had left of them was the coffee maker. But at least it made damn good coffee.

She was, in some way, glad that this gangly, skeletal white girl was beside her, not just in the dream world, but in real life. She was glad that she spoke English, even with a weird accent (though Tanaka had heard that it was the original, if that could be believed), and not Chinese. And she was extra glad that she had seemed to have a proper, real ass-kicker of a rig shoved in her skull.

Tanaka wasn't a real head-cracker, a real architect or dream-god. She couldn't read the patterns of the unconscious mind like they could, or understand the complicated processes that enabled a billion minds to pull the fiery nightmare of an infinite street out of nowhere together. As far as the Drip went, machines were intermediaries. They didn't create the dreams, but they sustained the pathways where connections raced back and forth, the trees and branches from which the lurid fruit of shared consciousness sprouted.

But when you could bend those branches, or grow those trees, you could do *extraordinary* things. Tanaka was just a hanger-on, a kind of sidekick to the real cowboys, the world striders. Her role was vital, but when things got heavy, she would be the one cowering behind a rock with her ass in the air.

They cooked their bullets, Ms. Rainy Day measuring hers like a professional. It was a shallow sleep that would sustain a connection just stable enough that they could easily abort before the bore. Once they were in, getting killed would be a real issue, but it was nice to know they had the option to back out. It was something you only did if you had the biggest balls in the world, or the skill required. Dipping in the shallow end of the pool was not something to be taken lightly. If you weren't under strong enough, when the connection went through your brain would start getting conflicting information at the same time. Streets of fire rising out of your habitation cube, doors opening in air. Your muscles would spasm and tear as they tried to move two bodies at once.

The gate information was wired to them after very little waiting. A figment of a brightly colored cat exploded across Tanaka's vision and dropped a small infographic that floated in her vision like a dark spot after staring at a light. Ms. Rainy Day plucked it from Tanaka's view and began to input the information.

"So why the secrecy about this?" Tanaka said, squinting at the woman next to her as they both lay back.

Ms. Rainy Day was still rolling her fingers. Unlike Tanaka, she used thought and eye movement to enter information, so her bright, weirdly pale irises flitted back and forth disturbingly, staring at a screen that only she could see. "Client's got a fancy for it I supposed."

Tanaka felt extremely out of place. She had only ever talked to members of the Madame's little cabal in the dreaming world. Now that they were going through the

motions of a well-trodden but usually solitary process, it felt uncomfortable, like someone walking in casually and trying on her clothes while she was getting dressed.

“Why didn’t you give me a wake up call?” she said, trying to provoke a reaction.

“I gave you a wake-up call,” said Ms. Rainy Day, her eyes darting back and forth.

“From the inside,” said Tanaka, disgruntled, “seriously, what gives you the right to just... walk in here and touch everything?”

“It was dirty,” said Rainy Day. Her tone didn’t change in the slightest, much to Tanaka’s disappointment. She was very fast, and her thin, dry lips mouthed silent words as she opened and closed hidden libraries in her mind.

“Have you heard of knocking?” Tanaka pushed. She was getting irritated and feeling woefully inadequate at how fast Ms. Rainy Day was at setting up a gate. The tall woman stopped what she was doing and looked intently at Tanaka. For the first time, Tanaka saw the hint of some indeterminate expression on her face. It could have been annoyance, or it could have been a smile, or it could have been sadness. She couldn’t really tell.

“Come on,” she said, “We’re not much for knocking, you and I, are we?”
Tanaka had to give her that.

They gated in to Jigoku North. Jigoku was Japanese for Hell, Tanaka remembered, making this section of Loop 1 particularly unsubtle. She didn’t know why cardinal directions were assigned to district names, seeing as the only directions were up-street and down-street. Animal-brain habits died hard, maybe, the same reason why there was a ground and sky here. Tanaka had heard the fabled Loop 2 had been a double loop, with each street flipped and facing the other, so you could look straight above you and be looking down onto another acid-fire commercial nightmare. The buildings joined in the middle, so you could have taken an escalator all the way up and exited on a different ground floor to the one you entered.

The lack of a sky and the flipping of gravity had driven people crazy, she’d heard, but she suspected it was probably the doubling of the sensory nightmare that was the city on a good day.

It’s nice to have something blank to stare at, she thought, as she looked up at the void above her. The heat and the noise of the city enveloped her but seemed strangely far away when she was looking up. You needed the empty space there.

Tanaka brought her eyes down and was surprised to see an androgynous, smooth faced Nordic looking man in a well-fitted grey wool jacket standing on the fiery pavement next to her. At first she thought there was a mistake, but she caught the man’s sleepy, half lidded eyes, and their bright, mobile irises. There was something slightly feminine about him, she thought, maybe his face, or the way he was standing.

“Rainy Day?” she said, hopefully.

“Sunshine,” said the man, rolling his fingers lazily. He had a silver cigarette case in them and was twisting it back and forth.

“Nice,” she said awkwardly. He was also peculiarly attractive and very well dressed, with sharp features and strong cheekbones. His eyes were almost exactly the same as in the woman wearing his image, back in the real world.

“I prefer men,” said Rainy Day. “Uh, to wear,” he added, scratching his nose.

Tanaka nodded, hesitantly. She'd tried it herself, but it wasn't for her. It felt too much like walking around in a rubber suit.

"You're pretty nice yourself. You look like a pop idol," said Rainy Day, staring at her uncomfortably, "Yes, definitely. I can't think of which. Hold on." He tapped the cigarette case against his thigh.

"Nah," said Tanaka, "I don't listen to pop." It was a half lie. She didn't listen to pop, she *devoured* it.

"Yue Yue," said Rainy Day, pocketing the cigarette case. "Her thirteenth album appearance"

"Nahhh," said Tanaka. He was exactly right.

"Your hair should be a little darker. And her jawline is slightly rounder."

"So do you listen to much of her music?" said Tanaka, squirming.

"No. I don't really listen to music. But I saw the video once in a pop classics catalogue."

"What were you looking at a pop classics catalogue for, if you don't like music," said Tanaka. It was getting too hot in the center of the street.

"I like catalogues," said Rainy Day, unblinking. He might have winked.

"So is it Mr. Rainy Day now?" jabbed Tanaka, thoroughly vexed. They moved out of the center of the street, under a footbridge dripping with advertisements for priapics and haircare. The glyphs and images were old, and sagged, pooling into the molten pavement below and spattering over passerby, who wiped the glowing residue into the gutter. Ghosts of beautiful people rose glimmering out from the pavement and implored them to invest in a gene-care program. A column of messenger demons, colorful and blaring anthems, rushed past on various limbs, almost knocking into Tanaka.

"It's still Ms. Rainy Day," said the man, "The nicknames are technical as well. I thought you knew that." He nodded to an overhang where under a broad, glowing red canopy, people were sitting at a scatter of mismatched, half-formed chairs and tables and drinking coffee from an old growth coffee tree. The trees were a feature of Loop 1, seeded by some unknown prankster, and allowed to stay by unspoken consensus. You could pluck a full grown macchiato steaming from its broad branches. Tanaka had been disappointed to learn the trees didn't grow the kind of chilled, sugary drink she was particularly fond of (which technically still contained coffee). Evidently, their creator was a purist and didn't stand for that sort of shit.

"Should we suit up?" asked Tanaka, taking a seat across from a company of suntanned shirtless men who grinned at her while flexing their oiled pectorals. She pulled her hat from the pocket in her dress, fitted it elegantly on her head, and tried to ignore them.

"I was told we'll suit up in the car," said Rainy Day.

"There's a car?" said Tanaka, surprised. She'd never been in a car. "Wait, no pocket world?"

"The pocket world is in the car"

"What? How are we doing the bore?"

"The car is the bore," said Rainy Day, rooting around in the crimson branches above their heads. "is an Americano ok? I can't find anything else?"

Tanaka nodded reluctantly, and wrinkled her perfect little button nose. Real nervousness was starting to work its way through her system. She wasn't riding the

same wave of drugs as a few hours before, and really wished she had pushed herself a little further. She would need to get really high tonight, and find a way around Rainy Day being there. She drank her imaginary coffee with trepidation while a flight of whales with miniature restaurants on their back rolled lazily through the space between skyscrapers of gold and glass.

There was indeed a car. Tanaka was unlikely to see another car like it for a long time. In the real world, private automobiles were a massive impracticality, a thing of the past only used by lords and ladies in the deserts between megacities that passed for a wilderness nowadays.

The car did not drive down the street, it *prowed*. It was black, and sleek, and it had the feel of something meant to split flesh and spill blood about it. It was a delivery device that told you very clearly and aggressively exactly what it delivered, in the same way as a cruise missile, or a very well made gun.

People scattered from it as it roared up. A ten foot tall Norse war god dashed like a schoolboy to get out of its way as it clawed its way up the golden pavement and slid to a stop in front of Tanaka and Rainy Day's table, steaming. The engine purred throatily and there was a hiss as its carapace parted at the front. A scowl so fierce appeared in the crack that Tanaka recoiled and saw Rainy Day do the same. The scowl was affixed loosely to the face of the driver, a sloppily bald middle-aged man with a broken, purple nose, thick-rimmed glasses, and a dense, black beard. He was completely unremarkable other than the scowl, which more than made up for the rest. It could flay a man at fifty yards.

"HELLO!" he roared over the window, so loud that Tanaka was surprised the glass didn't crack, "I am MR. HATE! Get the FUCK in the car and SUIT UP!"

Tanaka glanced at Ms. Rainy Day, who looked at her with a shrug. They climbed in the door that hissed open in the car, Tanaka holding her dress down by reflex. Maybe she had made it a little bit too short. She was trying really hard not to conflate Rainy Day with the peculiarly attractive man she was wearing here and failing very miserably. He did look remarkably like her.

The car took off, and the street outside started to slide by in a gilded blur. The inside of the car was dark and warm, and smelled strongly of old leather. As Tanaka shut the door lights blinked on and illuminated the cabin. It was her first time even as much as touching a car, and she tried to take it in. It was far more spacious than should have been possible at first glance. Four seats sat facing each other, and two of them had neatly shrink-wrapped piles of clothing.

She looked at Rainy Day for direction. "To be frank, it's my first time in the car," said Rainy Day. He started towards one of the packets and then a drooling horror opened the car door to his right.

Tanaka shrieked. What shoved its head through the door was composed mostly of compound eyes, bristly hair, chitin, and dripping mandibles.

"Suit up quickly ya'll, it's twenty minutes to bore, and I wouldn't like ya'll to get your cute little asses slammed in the door," said the nightmare in a bubbly USP accent and withdrew.

Tanaka's knees knocked against each other uncontrollably as her heart ricocheted around her chest.

“I guess it’s your first time, too,” said Rainy Day.

IX. Tanaka and the Dream Stealers

As it turns out, the car door on the other side of the cabin did not open onto the street that was streaking by through tinted windows, but rather into more car. More specifically, it opened into what could only be described as a lounge designed by someone who had an unhealthy fascination with oak paneling and dark, aged leather. It was dim and smoky, and could have been located at the top of a rooftop bar at three in the morning on a Friday. There were car seats here, but they could more appropriately be called couches, and the compartment was, naturally, far larger than the car itself, around twenty feet across, and smelled of darkness and late nights. It had a low, stained and notched table set in the middle of the room, and (Tanaka noticed very quickly) an extremely well stocked bar.

The only sign you were still in a car was the faint vibration and muffled roar of the engine, and the improbably sized car door set in the far wall. A blinder was over the window and only faint glimmers of the golden light of the city pierced through and were immediately smothered by the hovering darkness.

Tanaka sat gingerly on the couch and picked at her outfit. The suit fit her extremely well (they always did), but the rest was making her uncomfortable. The jobs always included a mask, which changed the shape of their face somehow. It was partly practical, and partly for the benefit of their gimmick. Putting the face on had changed her appearance very little, but she now had a thick streak of fluorescent yellow war-paint covering her forehead and eyes, and a spiky blonde pixie cut. Her eyes had changed to the color of warm butter. The collar of her suit itched and the air over the back of her neck felt unfamiliar, and now when she tried smiling she had deep dimples. She hated the dimples. But it was her gimmick. She’d requested a different one, and the Madame had dubbed her Ms. Exceptionally Porcine Nose. Tanaka had asked very quickly for her old name back. At least she wasn’t Ms. Fly, who sat at the other corner of the cabin, mandibles twitching.

Rainy Day’s face had also barely changed, other than a similar dark streak that roiled like thunderclouds over his face and eyes. Tanaka had worked with Ms. Deep Frost, Mr. Heatwave, and Mr. Thunderbolt. All of them had been professionals, but compared to them Rainy Day looked especially comfortable wearing his head cracking face. It made his already pale skin look even paler and his electric eyes almost glow, like Tanaka sat next to some kind of otherworldly phantom. He carried an umbrella, looking more like a weapon than anything else in the lounge, thin and black. That was his gimmick apparently, as the dimples were hers.

The gimmick was necessary. Cracking a person’s raw mental processes tended to be harrowing work. In a line of business where people slid into different roles and bodies with terrifying speed and the dreamscape itself was likely to shift on a whim, you had to very quickly tell who your allies were. Hence the dimples, and the umbrella. You had to know at a glance who you were about to send up the drainpipe. The early days of brain hacking had turned out more mental cases than they had successful jobs, and people had quickly realized the need for some kind of identification.

This was why, though she seemed to be a perfectly nice person, Ms. Fly had the twitching, suppurating head of her pseudonym, why Mr. Love Thy Neighbor's dark arms and face were totally wrapped in stained bandages, and why Ms. No-sell was a voluptuous Bollywood bombshell in a low cut, daring business suit, unbelievable heels, a sheer miniskirt that clung like a film to her thick brown thighs, and sharp, wicked looking pieces of metal jutting and tearing through her face like macabre piercings. She had just one eye, three lip rings, and was sipping a tall whisky straight.

Actually, Tanaka couldn't figure that last one out.

Mr. Himself was at the bar when they came in, mixing drinks. The other three were stretched tensely on the sedans, saying nothing in particular. Though you were very likely when working with the Madame to meet a few repeat offenders now and again, special care was paid to making sure that no team went on the same job together more than once. That build comradery. Comradery built desire to break form into a crime that was more an art than anything else, where breaking form was tantamount to life and death.

Mr. Himself set a can down in front of Tanaka, a thin glass of something pale in front of Rainy Day, and sat down. You knew immediately that he was somebody to be listened to. It was the way he carried himself. It was also enhanced by the fact that he had no head, face, hands, or anything else to look at where a normal man would have flesh, just a hole, like someone had torn the air, and through that hole there was darkness. If you peered long enough you'd start to see things though: points, glimmers of light, swirling arcs of stars copulating, entire galaxies wheeling around wreathed in star-fire, burning suns, a million worlds careening madly, the *universe* -

Tanaka looked away, and her eyes rested on the can in front of her, her head throbbing. It was a lemon sour, of course. It was incredibly impolite to ask in these situations and circles how exactly people found out about your favorite drinks, so you didn't. You sat down and drank them and tried not to think of your brain getting picked apart. She opened the can and took a sip, feeling exactly like a ten year old sitting in on her big sister's school pals.

It started.

"I'm Mr. Himself," said the man with the universe for a face suddenly, in a voice full of smoke and darkness.

"I'm Ms. Fly," said the clicking, twitching mess next to him.

"I'm Mr. Love Thy Neighbor," said Mr. Love Thy Neighbor

"I'm Ms. No-sell," said No-sell, and took a drink, the metal in her face clinking sharply against the glass.

"I'm Ms. Rainy Day," said Rainy Day. A few eyebrows were raised momentarily, but no questions were asked. It was just the way it was.

"I'm Ms. Sunshine," said Tanaka, a little too quickly. She wanted to squirm and tried to contort her face so her stupid dimples weren't showing, but she knew it was impossible. She really regretted not upping her dose.

"I'm Mr. HATE! And it's FIFTEEN MINUTES 'till the goddamn BORE, so let's get through this BULLSHIT QUICKLY!" said Mr. Hate, climbing through the car door into the compartment. Nobody bothered to ask who was driving the car. It was mostly a formality anyway.

“Is that really his gimmick?” said No-sell to nobody in particular. Her voice dripped sex, and her thick, dark lashes fluttered as she rolled her eyes. Her right eye was a pulped, pink socket. Three wicked nails pierced her carefully plucked right eyebrow and left puckered, red sores. Mr. Hate’s livid scowl turned even more livid, and Tanaka honestly thought it would tear itself off his face and start thrashing around the room, spurting blood.

“Yes,” purred Mr. Himself, “it is his gimmick. The key is to do your job well, and he won’t have to talk that much.”

“Effective,” muttered No-sell, and sipped from her glass.

Mr. Himself gave her a look. It was hard to tell exactly, what that look was, because it was hard to look at him for more than a few seconds, but the woman went quiet immediately. Tanaka could feel the street rushing by somewhere beneath their feet, and a terrible sense of purpose begin to coalesce. She felt like she was on the inside of a bullet, fired from a very well-aimed gun, which in a way, she was.

The room suddenly went very still.

“Here are thirty pieces of gold,” started Mr. Himself, his words methodical, “and six pieces of silver.”

“Who pays the gold,” said Ms. Fly, in a measured voice.

“It is unknown,” said Mr. Himself.

“Who pays the silver,” said Ms. Fly again, her mandibles twitching.

“The Madame Zhang Fang, sovereign of the exalted House of Cats.”

“Is all our company gathered?” said Ms. Fly.

“So we are,” said Mr. Himself.

“So we are,” they said in unison there, in the darkness of that close and murderous room. They all drank, but not for pleasure. There was another series of clinks as the metal in Ms. No-sell’s face scraped on her glass, and then a series of neat thumps as they set their drinks down. Mr. Love Thy Neighbor was drinking from an entire bottle of something smelling strongly like sweetened paint stripper.

“Then it is settled,” said Mr. Himself. “The supplicant is Jaemin Lee, a lord of West Iron, of noble blood. Though the gates of his mind may bend to us, we must bear him no ill will for he surely bears us none. We must ask him to forgive us, for the price has been paid.”

“So it is,” they said, echoing again around the room. Tanaka’s voice almost cracked, even though she’d done this a score of times before. She desperately hoped her legs weren’t shaking. She tried to pull on the mask of indifference and professionalism and failed.

“Who has the key, so we may cross his threshold but not mar it?” said Ms. Fly.

“I do,” said Mr. Himself.

“Who bears the rope, so we may bind him?” said Ms. Fly, tiny glimmers of light reflecting in her compound eyes. The air in the room felt warm and potent.

“I do,” said No-Sell.

“Who bears the sword so we may bend him?” said Ms. Fly.

“I do,” said Love Thy Neighbor.

“Who bears the scalpels, so we may cut him?” said Mr. Himself.

“I do,” said Ms. Fly.

“I do,” growled the voice of Mr. Hate.

“Who bears the lantern? Who bears the bag?”

“I do,” said Rainy Day.

“I do,” said Tanaka.

“Then it’s sealed,” said Mr. Himself, “Give me your hand, but not in welcome.” They all put their hands out then, palm up, thrust towards each other, thumb stuck out, as though offering it to some unseen god, crouched in the darkness there over the low table in the middle of the room. A strange and terrible purpose linked them there. There was no way to explain the feeling to anyone else, Tanaka thought, only that terrible sense of a pact being made, a palm thrust out to a thick and broad darkness, an infinite darkness. A darkness that listened.

Tanaka felt a dull ache and then a sharp pain as a bead of blood grew from her thumb and blossomed into a thick droplet. It was tugged off her thumb by some unseen force, and she watched six other almost identical droplets do the same, being pulled slowly through the black air as they fused together into a glimmering jewel.

There was a flash, and a hiss, and something clattered to the wood. Mr. Himself very carefully produced a small set of iron tongs from within his deep grey business suit. Producing a kerchief from his suit pocket, he wrapped it around the handle, then very carefully plucked the item off the table-top, where it sputtered and protested sibilantly. A dark scar was left on the tabletop when he lifted it.

They watched as Ms. Fly hurried to the bar and filled a small ice bucket with water. Her nightmare eyes glimmered with tiny pinpricks of cherry red light as Mr. Himself thrust the tongs and their captive into the ice bucket and withdrew it with a rush of steam.

“It’s hotter than normal,” said Mr. Love Thy Neighbor quietly, his dark eyes wide beneath his bandaged face. His lips were dry. Nobody made any further comment, but watched as Himself grasped the tongs and examined what he held. It was a dull, roughly wrought coin, red and sticky. Crude figures were etched in it, but of what, Tanaka could not see, and did not wish to.

“By the powers of Incubus, in the sixth month of the year Han-Kennedy 38 we devils six and one have met here at the crossroads,” he said, his dark voice resonant. “We come bearing rope, sword, knife, and key. Two have come with bag and lantern, to bear our gory prize. May God drag down the lids of those that watch the sleepers, and may their rest be unperturbed.”

“So it goes,” he added, pocketing the coin with reverent care.

“So it goes,” they echoed.

“SEVEN MINUTES to fucking BORE,” added Mr. Hate.

“Ever done a Face job, Sunshine?” Mr. Love Thy Neighbor asked Tanaka. He was tapping his wrapped fingers against the dark wool of his pants leg in a quick staccato rhythm. They had slid the bar back into the wall, pushed the low table into the floor, and locked the seats against the wall, pulling the straps over themselves. Tanaka was warming up her face, stretching it out, doing small vocal exercises and trying not to annoy anybody. The blinders on the car door had been slid up and Mr. Himself stood next to it, one hand behind his back, the second holding the release handle. The golden light of the city slid madly by outside and Mr. Himself watched it intently as though reading a pattern, stock still, a terrifying watchman. It was making everyone in the room

nervous, and Tanaka more than usual. Even though it should have been completely impossible, she suddenly and strongly felt that she needed to pee. It always had to happen.

“Sunshine?” said Love Thy Neighbor. He looked concerned. The lilt to every syllable made Tanaka think he was west African. She wondered if the ugly looking burns on his arms beneath his bandages actually hurt, and then dully reminded herself that everything here was a complete and utter lie.

“Sorry,” said Tanaka, “it’s my first.”

“Everyone’s gotta have a first time, sweetie,” said Ms. Fly. Her fingers were sliding around in the air on windows and panels only she could see, prepping the second bore, Tanaka imagined. The first bore was always to where the target was. That was Mr. Hate’s job this time, judging from the car.

Tanaka couldn’t guess where they were headed other than it was a private dream somewhere off Loop 1, probably spun up and sustained on some rented hardware. The second bore was inside the target, and infinitely harder. To start, you needed to prepare a stable area into which you could suck the mind of the dreamer being targeted and keep things stable. Going straight into someone’s sub-consciousness was best done with a little protection.

The alternative was boring into pure subconscious. This was referred to in house as a naked kiss and was a terrible misnomer. It was an absolute final measure that nobody wanted to resort to unless they were insane or had a death-wish.

Comforting thoughts.

“Don’t mind her,” said Rainy Day, in his tired, disinterested way. Even he seemed on edge. His body was tensed, his earlier languid manner out of sorts. Tanaka couldn’t tell if he was nervous or not. Tanaka tried to remind herself that the woman behind those eyes lay next to her, somewhere far up the drain pipe. Just in case things went wrong. Just in case.

“I’m-” Tanaka started.

“She has some sort of anxiety disorder,” continued Rainy Day, “she self-medicates for it.”

“Huh,” said Love Thy Neighbor, scratching his bandages. Tanaka felt her face flush, and tried to choke out something but Rainy Day just kept on going.

“But she would do much better with a different dermal mix. She’s overdoing the stabilizers. She’d be better off with a hit of Bliss,” he said, matter of factly. “but maybe her supplier is short on what she needs. Your cuff is riding up by the way.”

Love Thy Neighbor blinked.

“Now calm down ya’ll,” shushed Ms. Fly soothingly from the front, where she was tapping on an invisible panel. It didn’t help at all. It was impossible to calm down within visual range of Ms. Fly, Tanaka thought. At the very least you would have to try a lot harder than normal.

“My what?” said Love Thy Neighbor.

“Your left shirt cuff,” said Rainy Day, unblinking. The tip of his umbrella was circling the floor.

“What do you do?” said Love Thy Neighbor, looking incredulous, “who are you again?” He fixed his shirt cuff, reluctantly.

“Mancery,” said Rainy Day, looking up, “You?”

“Binding,” said Love Thy Neighbor

“I hate mancancers,” said No-sell. She had a small hand mirror and was adjusting her dark lipstick. It was uniquely fascinating trying to watch her push the lipstick around through the maze of metal poking out of her face. Tanaka tried to return to her exercises but failed. Her thoughts were racing and her entire mouth had turned into paper.

“THREE MINUTES!” roared Mr. Hate over the intercom.

“He’s gonna need the key,” said Ms. Fly to Mr. Himself. The impossible man didn’t move an inch, but remained in the same pose, hand on the door, one behind his back. The rush of light from the street outside threw flickering golden outlines across his classically tailored suit.

“Wait,” he said.

It was very quiet for a bit. The quiet roar of the car engine seemed to be growing.

“Nobody’s gonna ask me about my cool powers?” said Tanaka.

“Oh, everyone knows you’re a very talented changeling sweetie,” said Ms. Fly, resuming her work. Her voice seemed a little strained. Tanaka heard a click as Ms. No-sell closed her hand mirror. She had perfectly manicured nails to match her movie star’s body. Tanaka was incredibly jealous of her hair. Her own spiky blonde get up made her look like some spunky host of a weekend show for kids.

“I didn’t know that,” said No-sell.

“Oh well of course, sweetie,” said Ms. Fly, not pausing her work. Her mandibles were shivering and Tanaka suddenly felt the strong urge to throw up. “You haven’t met Ms. Papillon. She talks about our little Ms. Sunshine here all the time.”

“Have you heard from her? She’s been really quiet lately,” said Tanaka, her heart jumping. If she squinted, she realized, she could look at Ms. Fly in a relatively normal manner. She mentally cursed at herself for being unable to pull the mask on here, of all places. She was going to have to do it whether she wanted to or not in a few short minutes.

“No, sweetie,” said Ms. Fly, “none of us have.”

“I hate changelings,” said No-sell.

“TWO MINUTES!” roared the voice of Mr. Hate, “and where is my GOD DAMN KEY?”

“Ready it,” said Mr. Himself. He said it very quietly, but everyone heard. Their backs straightened, their muscles tensed. He turned and with practiced ease and incredible care, reached inside his head. Tanaka had to look away, and was pleased to see Rainy Day do the same. Ms. No-sell made a small sound of surprise. Tanaka peeked up to see Himself handing what looked like a tiny smoking star to Ms. Fly, who immediately stopped what she was doing and took it with two hands.

“I’m sending the key up, sweetie” said Ms. Fly to the wall. A slot the size of a cigarette tray opened and she slid it in gently. “Try not to shout at it.”

“Ms. Fly,” purred Mr. Himself, “Start assessment.”

“Ab-so-lu-te-ly,” said Fly, happily, sounding off each syllable, “Though I woulda had em’ done way faster if Madame Zhang hadn’t taken so long to-”

“Ms. Fly,” said Mr. Himself to the window, “Assessment, if you would.” Tanaka swore that the roar of the engine was picking up, and as it did, the lights outside the car window sped up faster and faster. The walls of the room began to vibrate gently. Tanaka focused on her exercises. *I’m happy, I’m subservient, she said, molding her face. I’m*

friendly, I'm your buddy. I'm upset with you, you came home late. I don't need friends, I'm fine by myself. Rainy Day was watching her, she realized, and she tried not to flush.

There was a wet sucking sound. Ms. Fly unbuttoned the front of her blouse. Mr. Love Thy Neighbor coughed, Tanaka flinched, and a second, insectile set of arms unfurled from Ms. Fly's chest and began tapping away feverishly at imaginary terminals.

The cabin began to shake.

"You smoke?" said Rainy Day. No-sell had somehow found time to light a cigarette.

"No, of course not," said No-sell with a roll of her eyes.

"I meant back in the real," said Rainy Day, his pale features firm, disinterested.

"Location?" said Himself.

"Ten story pre-fabricated boardroom dream, Korean make. Serial Ten Oh Oh Five Four. Large hotel, classical," said Fly, all the appendages and parts of her horrifying face contracting and twitching. Tanaka suddenly realized each of the facets of those over-large eyes were filled with different views of the space they were about to crack into, and she shuddered to imagine the kind of rig that could accomplish that.

"Exit to Tartarus East, three hundred and fifty five point oh-oh five," she rattled off, "Two hundred figments. Nothing above a class four. Thirty security figments, lightly armed. No human security."

"Thirty? Idiots haven't heard of hard gating," muttered No-sell past her cigarette.

"Sovereign?"

"Park Jonathan. Not present," said Ms. Fly, her limbs twitching with terrible precision.

"Why the secrecy?" said No-sell, waving her cigarette around. The cabin shuddered and Tanaka almost tumbled out of her seat. "I mean, why the pairing, why the wait for the details? You think I like waking up next to this weirdo?" she said, thumbing at Mr. Love Thy Neighbor. "That fat piece of shit can shove it up her—"

"Quiet," said Mr. Himself. The cabin lurched, but he didn't seem affected.

"This is just some bullshit regular crack! Who pays this much for a—"

Mr. Himself turned to her. There were galaxies in his gaze. The words withered in the metal-faced woman's mouth and she tried to take a drag of her cigarette, but the cabin was shaking too much and she gave up.

"Target?"

"Un-located," said Fly. There was an edge of urgency to her voice. The speed of the car picked up noticeably, and Tanaka felt herself pressed into her seat. The lights ripped past into a golden blur outside, so bright it was hard to look at. Mr. Love Thy Neighbor looked at her as if to say God Damn, what are we getting in to.

"FORTY FIVE SECONDS!" roared Mr. Hate.

"He'll be on the eighth floor," said Rainy Day suddenly, "that's where the boardroom is."

"Confirmed," said Fly, after a moment. Her mouthparts palpitated excitedly. The roar of the engine was shaking the walls now, "How did you—"

"I read it in a catalogue," said Rainy Day.

"She likes catalogues," said Tanaka, her teeth chattering, trying to distract herself from the way the car was trying to shake her off her seat. God damn she really had to pee. She found she had a strong desire to disappear.

“Well played,” said Rainy Day sardonically, but Tanaka could barely hear him over the animal roar of the engine, which had grown to consume the world.

“God damn,” said Mr. Love Thy Neighbor.

“We’re here,” said Mr. Himself, and then there was a horrifying tearing sound, like the curtains of the world were ripping. Tanaka could hear masonry crashing, metal bending, and the entire cabin went completely black, lurched violently, and came to an impossible stop.

Massive clouds of dust and a faint artificial light shot through the cracks in the door and for a moment, Tanaka couldn’t believe she was alive. Her animal brain was telling her she should have been completely pulverized, thrown against the wall with the force of impossible momentum and turned into a fine paste. She sat in shock and flexed her fingers. Her entire body felt like a hand that had been shoved into freezing water.

“FIRST BORE!” screamed the voice of Mr. Hate, and whooped madly.

“Gate in,” coughed Ms. Fly.

“Get a lock,” said the urgent voice of Mr. Himself. Tanaka was astonished. He hadn’t moved an inch. She could hear mad scraping of what sounded like insects grinding together and chitinous claws rubbing on metal and realized it was Ms. Fly. She shuddered and unstrapped herself, swaying almost off her seat, her skin crawling.

“Unexpected,” muttered Rainy Day from somewhere to her right.

“Ms. Fly, the second bore?” said the empty man by the door.

“Well the second bore is fine,” coughed Ms. Fly, “But give me a second to realign my head and my ass, sweetie.”

“Fortress status?”

“Fucked!” roared Mr. Hate, “You cheeky bastard! You are a prime quality wall smasher, my son!”

“Close it.”

“Shut!” cackled Mr. Hate.

“The lock?”

“Give me five seconds,” sputtered someone.

“The lock, Mr. Love Thy Neighbor,” repeated Mr. Himself. The light outside was artificial, fluorescent, filled with clouds of fine dust. The clicks of the team unfastening themselves reverberated around the pitch black chamber, then there was a breathless silence.

There was hurried movement. Somewhere, outside, a muffled voice shouted. Mr. Love Thy Neighbor was murmuring feverishly, in a language Tanaka didn’t even attempt to understand. Tanaka had never heard of a binder that worked this fast before.

“Got it,” he gasped. There was a sputter of flame, or perhaps electricity, and a dull light appeared in the cabin, illuminating the dust seeping under the door, and the tensed faces of those assembled. It glinted off the metal poking through Ms. No-sell’s contorted face, and the wet, seeping facets of Ms. Fly’s eyes. The light was being shed by a thick red cord that appeared seemingly out of nowhere and now wrapped taut around the two forefingers of Mr. Love Thy Neighbor, who was trembling and sweating. As Tanaka watched, not daring to breathe, he wrenched with considerable effort and pulled a long length of the cord out of the thin air, wrapping it around his forearm. It jerked and tugged like a living thing, and Tanaka suddenly and all too well understood the source of his awful burns.

Mr. Love Thy Neighbor's grin was ear splitting white in the darkness.

"It'll take him a while to notice," he said, hoarse and triumphant, "but he won't be able to wake from this one."

"Guns," said Mr. Himself, and kicked open the door.

X. Victoria Palm and the Bullet Hotel

"What's the weirdest job you've had to do?" asked Vicky. She was speaking to Ms. Sunshine but it was highly unlikely that Ms. Sunshine could actually hear anything. Firstly, because Ms. Sunshine was trying extremely hard to mash her body as hard as she could into the marble pillar they were both hiding behind, and secondly, because Ms. Sunshine was obviously trying extremely hard not to hyperventilate. She looked at Vicky wild-eyed. The marble pillar was rippling with bursts of dust as bullets blasted away at it and turned it slowly into a modern art sculpture by someone with a sledgehammer and unresolved anger issues.

"What kind of a question is that!" stuttered Sunshine above the din. Her suit was rumpled and she had both buttons done up at the waist, a classic fashion mistake. Her pop-star face didn't really work with dimples, Vicky decided. There was a whine and the marble twenty three centimeters from Vicky's head exploded into a shower of dust. Ms. Sunshine flinched and clutched her gun, and scrunched her face up.

The roar of some heavy weapon that Ms. No-sell was hefting around was vibrating through the lobby and through the soles of Vicky's hand-tooled leather shoes. Men's shoes were so much nicer, she thought. Vicky counted the spider webs in the shattered marble. Forty three spokes. An ill omen.

She was uneasy, and she never ignored that feeling. Her mind had a way of picking up on things subliminally, like a shaggy dog that trekked through some dark and twisted forest and came out covered in burs. She never knew where the hell the dog was going and she didn't really care. She hated it, to tell the truth.

The job was going well, and their bore was extremely clean. Vicky peeked around the edge of the pillar across the cavernous lobby of the dream hotel. She knew there was a gunfight going on but she couldn't help wince at the tackiness. An insipid mural covered the rococo ceiling with frolicking cherubs, now half obscured with smoke and dust. Gold filigree (certainly just gold leaf, she knew), was wrapped sloppily around the edges of massive marble pillars, which were pockmarked with the impacts (140) and scars (hard to tell) of bullets. Behind the pillars crouched her compatriots (6), on the other side of the room, dark shapes in suits (12...11), and between them the lightning flash of gunfire. The fake hotel staff (7, in poorly matched uniforms) were cowering behind the glossy front desk (awful choice of wood) scattered with debris. Small fires were burning everywhere. The shag carpet was unforgivable.

The breach couldn't have been more than two minutes ago but the ground was already littered with the dark suited bodies of security figments. Their guns lay next to them like toys, their faces wholly forgettable, like the men that lined up in action flicks to get knocked out by the steely faced hero. Vicky couldn't stand how poorly made they were.

Their kill girl, Ms. No-Sell, was extremely good. As Vicky watched, she hurled an insufferably kitschy coffee table about five meters where it frisbeed into a security

fragment and took him in the face with a wet crack. Vicky heard Ms. Sunshine make a small distressed sound as the figment crumpled up against the wall and sort of smeared down to the floor.

Yes, it was all going extremely well. But Vicky was uneasy, and she could never ignore that. So she asked herself questions to distract herself.

What was the weirdest job she had done? She gave up on asking Sunshine. Confusion was sort of what she had come to expect from people, anyway, so she wasn't really surprised. She thought about it, as a grenade exploded into a blossom of fire, and scattered tiny embers all over the right arm of her suit, peppering it with scorch marks. She didn't mind, the suit was the wrong cut for her anyway. It wasn't even real, of course.

The weirdest job she'd ever had to do was for some thick-jawed Yakuza boss a few years ago in West Pacifica. He met her on the drip in a café that Vicky had chosen specifically because she liked the fractal pattern of the lacy curtains. The man couldn't have known this because he didn't see things the way Vicky did. "I was expecting a woman," he said when he met her, his bushy eyebrows rising. "I am a woman," Vicky had said, which was true. She would have liked to think of herself as a very dedicated transvestite, but the truth was that there was no reason not to be a man if one had the opportunity. They were paid more. Their suits were better. Their clothing actually had pockets, and nobody would make assumptions about their character based on their chosen brand of lipstick. That was just how it was.

The man had wanted her to find his wife. She had run off with another man and –

The moment Vicky heard that, she had gotten up to leave, as it was very clearly a snuff job. An erasure. Vicky didn't do those. It was one of her rules. She had many, many rules, and they were long and complicated and she was very tired of thumbing through them in the back pages of her mind, but that one was pretty near the top, and so she tried to leave. But the man had stopped her. It wasn't what she thought, he said. He wanted something excised from her, he explained, something very specific.

All her memories of his fifteen year old daughter. Cut, gone, and excised. The man's wife had taken his child from him, he explained, and so he wanted her to feel the same.

Vicky had sat down. She wished now that she hadn't. Because she didn't think through the implications. She didn't think what she now knew, that when that woman woke up, with a freshly minted stranger in her house, what her reaction would be. All she had thought about was the money. She was using bliss at the time, so very little else mattered. What were a few memories to someone? She'd done extractions before.

So she'd sat down and she'd done the job.

The job wasn't weird at all, now that she thought of it. It was extremely sad. Especially the way it turned out. Her chest hurt. She was uneasy.

Ms. Fly's nightmare head hurled out of the dust, followed by a dark suited arm hefting an evil looking revolver, and then the rest of her.

"Let's hurry along now, ya'll, the way's clearin' up and I'm fixing to get this over with," she said, and then paused. "Where's your gun, sugar?" she said. She was talking to Sunshine. Victoria looked down and saw that Sunshine had somehow lost her pistol.

“Sweetie you’ve got to have a gun. It’s just make believe,” said Ms. Fly. Her tone had somehow completely swung by condescending and into the soft realm of gently comforting. Vicky wondered how she could pull it off with a face like that.

“I’ve got it,” said Sunshine, squirming. She concentrated, then put her hands together, breathing deeply. Classic mistake. You didn’t really need to do anything at all if you wanted to make something, just act as if it was always there. Acting like you had do something special to bring it into being just made the dream harder to convince. That was the trick. Vicky’s muscles twitched as she fervently pulled her mouth shut and pushed her hands to her sides to stop herself from correcting the little woman. She had to wake up next to her in eighty minutes and she didn’t want to get locked out again. She was out of cigarettes.

Sunshine pulled her hands apart and a pistol appeared between them. It wasn’t very impressive.

“You’re holding it by the barrel,” said Vicky.

Sunshine adjusted her grip.

“Well let’s be glad you’re not our mancer,” sighed Ms. Fly.

There was a sound, then, which Vicky at first thought was coming from Ms. Fly, but was in fact, coming from the air itself, and for a moment, she thought the world was coming apart. It was exactly as if thirty lightning bolts had struck in the space of about six seconds about two feet from her nose. She was flipped backwards head over heels straight into the air and landed square on her back, bruising her tailbone.

“Mr. Hate!” said the muffled voice of Mr. Himself, with a terrible aura of menace in it, “would you kindly not fire the car. It will affect metastability.”

“Then hurry the GOD DAMN HELL UP!” said the amplified voice of Mr. Hate. Vicky’s ears felt like they were full of water, and she looked over at the car. It was crouched where it had smashed through the wall, submerged in a thin covering of dust and masonry like a self-satisfied crocodile. Tiny blue streamers of fire were licking up and down its sleek length. Someone grabbed her arm, and she was looking into the bright mask of Ms. Sunshine.

“Are you ok?” said Sunshine. It was remarkably sincere, so much so that it took Vicky aback. Sunshine’s face was very close to hers and she was suddenly aware of how afraid the other woman was. Her eyes were very big. Vicky counted her eyelashes to distract herself from how close they were. 46. Liquid mascara. She couldn’t tell the brand, because there probably wasn’t one. It was a fake face anyway. Vicky thought she was much better looking in real life. There was asymmetry there. Vicky liked asymmetry. Vicky was uneasy.

“Are you ok?” she said, trying to stall. She didn’t know what the other woman wanted.

“Yeah,” said Sunshine. Her brow furrowed, making tiny v’s, and she pushed away. Sunshine really was a remarkably good bullshitter.

You could die in the Drip, just as you could die in any other dream, and it wouldn’t mean a thing, Vicky thought. The cavernous lobby was filled with smoke and the echoing of tiny chips of paint and masonry as they fell rain-like to the scarred marble. Bodies were piled against the pastel walls. Here and there, Vicky stepped over a human-shaped greasy smear that was the car’s work.

The body's natural in-built response to dying in a lucid, shared-consciousness state, as it turns out, was to try extremely hard to wake up. This was called the Richards response, and depending on your fail safes and how deep you were under, could be like waking up with a mild hangover, or could create permanent, irreversible brain damage and bodily seizures. Many people had a backup function where they would be shot into a state of unconsciousness until a safe wake period as soon as they showed any indication of waking at an unsafe time. But not everyone could afford that, which made attempted (and often successful) under-Drip murder a surprisingly real and not at all uncommon occurrence.

The problem really was that if they died here, there would be consequences. Waking up, whether from the Richards response or otherwise, had its complications. The architecture of shared dreaming had, by design, been created to closely match the experience of real dreamers. It was the only way to keep the experience fluid and maintain the sleight of hand that allowed it to exist in the first place. Therefore, waking up was not always a one-step process. Most rigs would give you a gentle nudge in the right direction (*gentle* was a very important), but it was entirely possible to get snagged on another dream on the way up, and awake from a dream into another dream. They hadn't quite worked out the kinks on this yet, which provided non-stop amusement, a popular topic of discussion in parlors and salons up and down the Loop, and a source of intense frustration for the morphic architects that built dreams.

But it was also possible to exploit this. You could lock a dream around another dream, like a clamshell protecting a pearl. Then you could lock another clamshell around that clamshell, and so-on. It made it easier for the little gray boxes shoved into your brain to fuck with the delicate electric signals making up your consciousness, and slip you between dreams, like sliding between the layers of an onion.

It was also possible to clamp a dream over another dream and seal the exits, so to speak. This is what was undoubtedly being done now. The bore through the Fortress keeping native sovereignty secure here was sealed from their side, and very soon there would be a lock from other. If they died here, not only would they not be getting back in, but anyone getting out that wasn't through the narrow little tunnel that their keybearer and lineman had created would likely get caught by what was affectionately called a purgatory. Purgatories were not fun places by design, and they would be kept there until rescue or until their captors could get a trace on them.

A trace would bring one of two kinds of retribution. The first kind, which Vicky preferred, was polite. Maybe you'd get served with an AD (Active Dispatch), a kind of warning shot. Company or private police would eventually show up at your door, but they'd knock first. Sometimes they'd be lazy or lenient and take their time. Sometimes it was better to show up and find them first. It inevitably end up with you getting beat up a little bit, then spending some time in the local lord's private chain of jails before they got bored with you and kicked you out. It could last weeks, but at least they fed you. You'd get back to your hab cube with most of your stuff intact, and probably all your teeth.

The second was of the kind that wore shin-guards and steel toed boots and licked their flaying knives as they stood outside the door to your habitation cube. They didn't knock. Vicky had only had to deal with this kind of retribution once and didn't ever wish to repeat the experience. She still had a slight limp.

It would definitely be the second kind if they died here. They picked their way to the far end of the once-gorgeous cavernous lobby. Sunshine stuck her tongue out at the cowering hotel staff as they passed. Vicky counted the floor tiles.

"This is going well," said Love Thy Neighbor, as he stumbled over the bodies, eyes wide, "This is going really well."

It was. But Vicky was uneasy.

Was she uneasy at the danger they were in? Was that why she was thinking of death? She didn't know. She'd died a lot before. The other problem with dying, Vicky thought, is that the fact that it wasn't real didn't make the experience any more pleasant. You usually forgot your regular dreams. Here, fully conscious and lucid, dying could be a remarkably real experience. Pain was real here, and could be even more intense than it could ever be in the waking world. A remarkably strong willed person could certainly try to ignore it. *I am not being shot*, the person could think, *these bullets are not real and I am perfectly fine. This is just a dream.* But the same lucidity that allowed them to be there, to be conscious and share their consciousness with others, and feel and breathe, demanded that the pain was there all the same.

Which made it even more remarkable when they came to Ms. No-sell.

She was standing in the middle of a scene of complete devastation, the end of the lobby where it rose to a soaring balcony with an overwrought baroque mess of railings and wood paneling. A spiral staircase with three hundred and thirty six steps out of a fairytale climbed the swooping far wall, which was scattered with fifteen bodies. An impossibly elegant crystal chandelier with four hundred and thirty five individual pieces that would have cost a small fortune in the real world shook back and forth like a mad pendulum.

Small fires were everywhere, licking at tables, potted plants, papers, and battling against the hiss of ceiling sprinklers, which filled the air with steam and water. The floor was slick with blood and detritus, which was oozing down the top steps of the staircase. It was a peculiar kind of hell.

Ms. No-sell had her gun by her side, held by a spiked leather strap. It was long, and sharp, and dangerous, and clashed with her shoes. Vicky couldn't really see where a person could reasonably hold it. Bit of it were steaming and rotating lazily. No-sell was attempting to light a cigarette.

A man close by was shooting her in the chest.

"Die!" screamed the man, and Vicky felt Ms. Sunshine flinch next to her as the report of his gun split the air. Several shots splintered a pillar behind No-sell, a third clipped her shoulder, and the second hit her chest with a wet thud and a gristly spray of blood. She stumbled backwards a step, and hacked something out into the water pooling around her feet that hit the tiling with a wet plink.

It was a bullet.

"Why won't you fucking die?" sobbed the man, trying to reload his pistol with wobbling hands. He looked like a real hardass, Vicky thought. He was old world Korean or Japanese, his suit was custom tailored, he had perfectly cut, if slightly disheveled, hair, a trim beard only an asshole could wear, and sleek, dark glasses built into ports that sunk into the smooth flesh around his eyes. He looked the perfect action hero. He also looked like he was about to shit himself.

"Good work," said Mr. Himself.

“Got a live one here,” said No-sell, turning. For once, Vicky was taken aback. There was no way a woman could have been standing there. It more closely resembled a tattered scarecrow. Huge chunks of flesh had been blown out of No-sell, bone wrenching through, her stockings, suit, and bare flesh were poked through with weeping bullet holes. She was missing hair and part of her skull was showing.

“What?” said No-sell. She sounded like her mouth was full. A tiny ooze of bloody spittle dribbled from her mouth where a bullet had torn a sizable hole in her cheek. Vicky could see her shattered molars.

“I’ll get better,” she said.

The man across the room shot her in the back, and Sunshine flinched again. No-sell stumbled forward. There was a thick pulse of a gun and the man screamed as Mr. Himself fired three extremely precise shots, blowing the man’s pistol, and several of his fingers, clean out of his hand. As he approached, the man rose, grunting, and there was the clean and deadly ring of metal sliding against metal as he drew and swung at Mr. Himself what looked like an old fashioned Japanese sword, sleek and black and deadly.

Himself barely flinched as the sword sliced into his head with full force, an expert stroke. It lodged there, seemingly stuck, and then as its bewildered wielder tugged at it frantically, it slowly, inexorably, began to stretch and distort, and sucked itself into the space where Mr. Himself’s head would be and disappeared. It was fantastically interesting. There was really no other way to describe it.

“That’s not fair,” whimpered the hardass.

Mr. Himself promptly shot him in the balls.

His screaming was enough to make Vicky’s head hurt. She looked over at Sunshine, who had her eyes pressed shut. Sunshine didn’t notice her, so Vicky made the very real mistake of looking at Ms. Fly, who was poking around on the floor. She quickly swiveled her gaze to Love Thy Neighbor, who gave her an apologetic grimace, so she counted bullet casings.

“Twenty, maybe thirty security figments, and then this guy and five others,” said No-sell, mushily, “but no mancery. There’s gotta be more upstairs.”

“Is that right?” said Himself to the man on the floor. The man had pulled himself up somewhat, arm against a pillar, his action hero face pulled into a trembling and defiant smirk, trying to salvage his ego.

“Fuck you!” he spat. Mr. Himself shot him in the balls again.

Everyone grimaced.

“You fucking criminals,” moaned the man after he’d stopped screaming.

“Mafia,” said Ms. Fly from the floor, excitedly, “New Ginza syndicate. They have house made bodies with a seal behind the ear. See?” She had pushed the stylish haircut of one of the dead fighters aside, presumably in order to show them, but nobody bothered to look.

“New Ginza fights like ass,” said No-sell, coughing up another bullet.

“How is she doing that?” whined the man.

“A true lady never tells,” said No-sell in a classic Bollywood actress voice and shook her hips at him. She went back trying to light her cigarette, which was thoroughly blood soaked. She was missing two fingers.

“Five New Ginza kill boys and you didn’t notice them?” said Mr. Love Thy Neighbor. He was holding his arm to his body as though it would escape him and trembling slightly.

“You’ve never done a Face job have you, sweetie,” said Ms. Fly, sounding somewhat amused. She wiped her hands off on her suit. “They were shielded, of course.”

“How many more of you are there?” said Mr. Himself to the man on the ground. The man was bent double and trying to control his breathing so he didn’t sound like he was just about to cry. He looked up and jutted his heroic chin out at Himself, sneered, and spat weakly.

Himself shot him in the meat of his thigh, then again, then began to nonchalantly reload his pistol. “This stiff has shielded Ginza protecting him?” said Vicky, trying to distract herself from the loud keening sound of a very handsome man in terrible pain.

“We need a new approach,” said Himself, “What’s the time on the first bore seal?”

“Thirty five minutes,” said Ms. Fly hesitantly.

“I’m gonna throw up,” moaned the man.

“Die,” said Himself.

“The suits have sealed this shit by now, you really dig I wanna lock myself out?” huffed the man between breaths. “I’m so fucked. We all are. You here for the big suit upstairs? Boy’s crazy! Always talking about his girl, man! I’m glad this is over.” He groaned and wrenched himself further up against the pillar. “I’m so fucked,” he repeated.

“Die,” said Himself.

“You know what they’ll do to me when I wake up?” said the man, panicked. Himself shot him in the chest. Thick spatters of blood shot from the man’s mouth and he slid backwards in a bloody smear against the pillar behind him, coughing and writhing. Then, defiantly, heroically, he slowly began to pull himself up.

“Come on, man,” said Sunshine weakly.

“If you don’t die,” said Himself, “I’ll have our binder keep you asleep here, and then I will place a small untraceable tracker deep in your subconscious in the shape of a dwarf star. It will not take me long, nor hinder our efforts here. You will try to look for it later and fail. You may even forget about it.”

He crouched down next to the man, his face swirling. All the spirit in the Ginza kill boy was deflating as he stared into Himself’s empty head and the awful darkness within. “You will try to pretend like you have somehow escaped unharmed, that perhaps you imagined it,” continued Mr. Himself, with his voice full of smoke, “But at some point in the future, I will come to you. I will open all your doors and secret places and the four winds will lash the corridors of your mind. I will take something precious from you, and I will keep it in here, forever.” He tapped the yawning void that was his head, and the galaxies whirled madly.

“Die,” he said.

The man died.

“Real tough guy, huh,” said Ms. No-sell, her ruined chest making wet sucking sounds with each breath.

“Would you really do that?” said Vicky. Mr. Himself didn’t say anything, so Vicky was uneasy.

“Bind status, Mr. Love Thy Neighbor,” said Mr. Himself. Vicky noticed then that though the rest of them were thoroughly soaked, their suits clinging to their skin, Himself was perfectly dry as if his suit had come out freshly pressed. He was impeccably dressed. He had beautiful thin leather driving gloves on. There wasn’t a spot of dust or dirt on them.

She looked closely and saw the droplets of water around Himself were actually bending into tiny lines around his body as though sliding through some warped lens. Vicky had not done much commuting into the very deep corridors of the Madame’s shadowy empire, but every time she met its denizens she was reminded anew why she needed to get out of this business as soon as possible.

“Stable, but he’s noticed,” said Love Thy Neighbor. He had turned his eyes to the bind. Where it met his arm, the rope seemed to cool and had become a bandage, wrapped tightly like the rest of them. There was a slight wince to his voice, and Vicky knew he was fighting a strenuous mental battle.

“We’re making good time,” said Himself, “and we don’t need to waste time pacifying any more surprises. We need a new path up.”

“Rainy Day’s a mancer, can’t she just alter the building?” said Sunshine.

“May I remind you,” said Ms. Fly, gently, “this is a pre-fab dream? It’s metastable. Metastable, sweetie, meaning, stuck. Crystallized. Far from the source, meaning we ain’t going up any stairs that aren’t already there without seriously risk of popping the bubble.”

“Probably filled with shielded Ginza,” added Mr. Love Thy Neighbor quickly.

“I’ll get us a way up,” said Vicky, “I’ll be gentle.”

Ms. Fly looked incredulous and crossed her arms.

“That’s what you brought me for, isn’t it?” said Vicky.

“Proceed” said the incredibly resonant voice of Himself. It cut through the soft hiss of the sprinklers and the sluggish drip of water and blood like a dark, precisely aimed knife. All eyes turned to Vicky.

Metastable didn’t mean anything. Vicky knew this. Dreams were dreams after all. All it took was a little lying to the universe. She tapped her umbrella on the ground, sending up a small spray of water, and then held it straight up in the air like a storybook magician’s wand. That was just for show. The rest was holding two contradictory things in your mind and believing very clearly that one was clearly true over the other. She looked at the wall, and the golden cherubs near the ceiling, and her gaze rested on the nice flat wall near the stairs. That would do.

She felt very clearly the sensation of living, and was painfully aware of the air in her lungs, and the small minute actions of the muscles in her legs, and the wet cloth of her suit against the hairs of her arms in her man’s form. She was here, but she wasn’t here, really. She was present and not present. The soap bubble of the dream around her began to stretch and Vicky felt a profound sense of disconnection, a deep and threatening loss of lucidity. Most people, at this point, started waking up. But not mancers, and certainly not Vicky.

“There’s a small service elevator here, simple, unadorned, rarely used except by staff, two and a half meters by five meters wide, it could perfectly fit seven people,” she said, to nobody in particular. It was true. But it wasn’t true.

“Metal, well maintained, inspected regularly and a very smooth ride. The maids sometimes like to ride it for fun after hours. It’s just to the left of the spiral staircase that sits in the main hall.”

They all looked. There was, in fact, such a door there. There almost certainly hadn’t been before, but nobody could really be sure. It seemed very natural that it was there, and perhaps it always had been. That was how mancery worked.

Next, a figment. It was hard to make figments. But it was also the best way to fool a dream, and the best way to get around ‘popping the bubble’ as it had been put. No human being had the raw mental power to keep a dream stable and understandable to all its participants. So they were meticulously hand-crafted. Anyone could buy a dream, of course, but they had to have the hardware to spin it on, which you weren’t getting away with without some serious investment, since they were spun up on some extremely heavy biomechanical hardware made partly of the fragments of dead men’s brains, and curated by the enhanced techno-savants known as Maguses. This made sure the dream was rich and believable - stable and fully realized, which was more than anything a regular old human brain could do. The only people authorized to fuck with this were those given sovereignty.

If you were a mancer, you could screw with things a little bit even without sovereignty. But once sovereignty was breached, a mancer could do whatever they wanted. Make staircases appear out of nowhere. Turn a wall into butterflies. Fly. Then, however, you risked popping the bubble.

Popping the bubble was extremely simple shorthand for an extremely brutal outcome. The fruit of the dream grew too big for the tree, so to speak. So it fell off. Where it fell off to, nobody knew, because absolutely nobody had survived the process.

So Vicky had to be very careful.

“At the moment Mr. Jaemin Lee of Korean West Iron is having a very important meeting and of course, it would be very rude not to offer tea. The tea service is regular and very fresh. It is delivered by maid through the use of the elevator.”

There was a clinking sound, and from a long hallway to their left, a young woman came through the bullet pocked double doors, dressed in a neatly pressed hotel maid uniform and pushing a bright metal tea trolley. Vicky had made her too attractive. She seemed completely oblivious to the carnage around them and pushed her trolley around the debris and crumpled bodies on the tile, humming a happy sounding tune.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said brightly with little head bows as she pushed the trolley around the group. She held her hand up to shield herself a little from the sprinklers as she gently pushed the button to call the service elevator.

“The elevator goes right to the eighth floor meeting room, instead of the regular eighth floor lobby,” said Vicky to the maid, maintaining eye contact. She felt the ridges of her cigarette case in her pocket. It wasn’t actually there, of course. “This was a special design in the building to accommodate the demands of Mr. Lee, who liked to entertain many guests and demanded the modification to the original dream for the company’s benefit.”

“That’s right sirs and madams!” said the maid happily to the assembled group, “you can read all about it in our lobby pamphlet.” She spotted Ms. No-sell, a bloody cigarette dangling from her mouth.

“Why, Madam, do you need medical attention? Should I notify the front desk?” she said, a look of wide eyed concern on her face.

“I’m fine,” said No-sell, a look of disbelief on her face.

“She’s fine,” said Vicky, without blinking.

“Oh, it’s so good to know you’re fine,” said the maid happily, touching her hand to her heart. The elevator opened with a soft chime.

“The elevator had just enough room for seven people to fit inside,” said Vicky, “and normally, its use wasn’t allowed by guests. However, there was some trouble at the hotel that day and the regular elevators weren’t working. Sarah knew she might get in trouble with the management, but the guests seemed in a very sorry state, and she was very happy to allow them to ride along to see Mr. Lee. After all, the guests were the top priority at the hotel, and she was very happy to please them.”

“That’s right,” said the maid, giving them a little bow, “please hurry inside! I’m sure Mr. Lee will be very happy to see you.”

“Well done,” said Mr. Himself. They piled in the elevator. It fit exactly seven people, with a little room left for the tea cart and the deadly bulk of Ms. No-sell’s gun. Ms. Sunshine shuffled as far away from Ms. Fly as possible and quickly and awkwardly pushed against the wall so she was next to Love Thy Neighbor instead. The space was small and resonant, and the silence that enveloped them when the doors slid neatly closed was deafening.

“It’ll be just a moment,” beamed the maid as the elevator began to crawl upwards with almost comical slowness, “would you like to hear about the history of the building?”

“That’s quite alright, Ms.-” said Vicky, trailing off, and peered at the maid’s name tag for effect.

“Sarah,” said the maid, smiling as though she’d suddenly realized something special, and then lit up as a thought hit her. “Would you care for some tea?” she said.

“I would love some,” said Vicky, “my throat is quite parched. I prefer black if you have any. But there are very few black teas I am partial to. I hope you have my preference.”

“Of course we do, sir,” said the maid, and delicately poured a steaming cup of tea, which Vicky picked up with a flourish. She sipped it loudly. It was perfectly warm.

There was a series of dull mechanic clinks. “Sorry,” muttered Ms. No-sell. Ms. Sunshine made a small discontent sound and Vicky glanced down as she felt something roll against her foot. It was a slightly sticky bullet. She looked up to No-sell, who was digging around with a finger in her thigh.

“Sweetie that is plain disgusting,” said Ms. Fly.

“And a pain in the ass to walk with,” said No-sell. Vicky realized No-sell was suddenly looking like far more of a person and less of an assortment of human mincemeat than she remembered.

“How are you doing that?” said Vicky.

“Doing what?” said No-sell out of the side of her mouth, and popped out another bullet.

“Doesn’t it hurt?” she said.

No-sell smiled, the metal in her face twisting and contorting her flesh. *Of course*, Vicky thought, *the metal*. Constant pain exposure.

There was silence as she dug around in her thigh some more. The maid looked a little nervous and tapped her tea tray. Vicky had an inescapable feeling of dread as her mind began to wander back out of the forest, all patchy with burrs. She willed it to go away but it wouldn't. She didn't want to look at it.

"Would anyone like any tea?" said Vicky.

"Sweetie, you can stop showboating now," said Ms. Fly.
Fair enough.

XI.

Tanaka and the Ominous Hole

The elevator doors opened with a soft ding. They filed out cautiously into a narrow and oddly humid hallway. It was empty and slightly fragrant. Tanaka tried not to squeeze the grip of her gun too hard as she eyed the door at the other end.

"Thank you very much!" said the maid as they left, and gave them a neat and very well practiced bow. She had a warm smile beaming on her face. "Thank you Sarah," said Ms. Rainy Day. The elevator doors slid gently closed, and just before they shut, the expression on Sarah's face turned very rapidly from a smile to sudden shock, and then a fraction of a second of abject horror. It was the very precise and clear expression of someone suddenly realizing they had never actually existed. Tanaka had seen it on figments before, and it never ceased to amaze her how real it seemed. Then the clean metal clicked shut, and then there was only wall there. There had never actually been an elevator.

Tanaka shuddered, involuntarily. Rainy Day exhaled with a slightly shaky breath, as though she'd been holding something painful inside his chest. She'd spent the whole ride with her brow increasingly furrowing, and the dark paint on her face roiling. Tanaka wondered what she was thinking about.

"Well done," said Mr. Himself.

"This isn't a boardroom," said Ms. No-sell.

"It's a boardroom. But it's also a bathhouse," said Ms. Fly from behind Tanaka, the facets of her eyes twitching, "as I understand it."

"That's a little indulgent," said Tanaka.

"It's in vogue," said Rainy Day.

No-sell pulled her gun up and Tanaka saw everyone except Mr. Himself flinch. Before anyone could say anything, No-sell strode purposefully to the elegantly framed door at the end of the narrow hall and put her hand on the handle.

"Eighth floor alright. A VIP suite," said Ms. Fly. Tanaka could see she was focused on some hidden space again. "There's a buncha people inside, only five armed dreamers that I can see. But watch yourself ya'll."

"Well?" said No-sell, looking pointedly at Himself. She had tucked her sodden cigarette into the front of her blouse, where it was staining it terribly. She cocked some sharp piece of metal back on her gun and it began to warm up with a throaty roar, like a motorcycle starting. Mr. Himself reached a gloved hand in the air, and cocked it forward with a precise motion.

"Proceed," he said, and then chaos broke loose.

No-sell pushed the door open. There was a shout, and she was almost immediately shot in the chest, each impact staggering her and sending sharp cracks echoing down the narrow corridor. A high, piercing sound cut through the humid air and Tanaka had just enough time to realize No-sell was laughing before the Indian woman pulled the trigger on the death machine strapped to her arm and strode into the room spitting fire with a cloud of molten bullet casings pouring out behind her. They surged forward as one, Tanaka feeling herself pushed forwards by those behind her. The roar of gunfire was so deafening that Tanaka could only hunch forward, her eyes half closed as flashes filled the dim air and vague images filled her eyes, but it was over almost as soon as it had begun.

Hot water sloshed around her thighs and Tanaka realized she had run into a shallow bath. Raw images of the last fifteen seconds ran through her head like a bizarre slide show and she wobbled slowly to a crouch as blood rushed to her head. A burning somewhere in her lower extremities told her she had been grazed somewhere, but she didn't care to look.

The inside of her face felt raw, and she looked up through stinging eyes to see Ms. Rainy Day crouched above her. The bath chamber was expansive and terribly over-decorated, a gaudy mix between classical Ming dynasty aesthetics and a late eighteenth century imperial French palace, complete with huge floor to ceiling windows which let in the twinkling darkness of the imaginary night sky outside. Four large bathing pools were set around the room, and at the center there was a massive claw-legged meeting table that could have easily seated twenty or thirty. Over the table a bubble of colorful info-graphics floated, paused mid-presentation. Gaping men in bath robes and various stages of undress were crouched around it, half out of their seats.

"Bad year for shareholders," mumbled Rainy Day. She was staring at the graphics. A floating tray of shattered champagne bottles wandered by Tanaka, bumped into her knees, and continued on its journey. Tanaka walked backwards out of the bath, dizzy, and sat on the edge with her legs trailing in the hot water.

No-sell fired her gun into the air with a cavernous roar that sent chips of mortar from the ceiling. Tanaka saw a dark-suited and tattooed Ginza kill boy floating face down in the bath she had fallen in and hurriedly pulled her feet out. The rest of the floor was wet with blood and bathwater. Some of the bodies were wearing dark suits, many were naked, and some were wearing the brightly colored robes of hotel staff.

"She didn't have to kill the staff," muttered Rainy Day again.

"They don't exist, man," said Tanaka.

"That wasn't bad," said Love Thy Neighbor from somewhere behind her, "not bad at all."

"Leave!" roared No-sell.

One of the men at the table stood up. He had the silver hair of authority and the handsome face of a twenty year old. "I don't know who you people are, but if you think—" he said and then was cut off abruptly by the howl of No-sell's gun, which Tanaka had admit, was extremely good at shutting people up, and, as she now saw, extremely good at turning them into a fine slurry.

"Leave!" cackled No-Sell and there was a stampede of the mostly nude as impossibly handsome men dropped half-loaded weapons and shot out of their hiding

places and climbed over each other to cram themselves out through the exit doors. A few of them wavered and dissolved, mist-like, as they woke up.

“Love Thy Neighbor, if you would,” said Mr. Himself, taking a seat at the center table. The chair seemed like it was perfectly made for him. Love Thy Neighbor nodded, and with his free hand, grabbed the red cord wrapped around his forearm, planted his feet, and pulled with a grunt. A muscular man halfway out the door yelped and fell flat on his back. The cord which ran from Love Thy Neighbor’s arm was suddenly visibly protruding from the small of the man’s back, like a reverse umbilical cord. The man clearly had a custom built body, muscular and hairless, with a fantastic ass. No-sell and Love Thy Neighbor reeled him in and pulled him, protesting, to the center of the room, which had completely emptied out. They all gathered around him, Tanaka wincing at the pain in her leg. Ms. Fly set about closing the doors, and then crouched, focused on something distant.

“A lot of heat coming our way ya’ll,” she said finally.

“How many?” said Mr. Himself. He had unbuttoned his cuffs and set his thick silver cufflinks alongside his pistol on the table.

“I don’t know, honey,” said Fly, “maybe ten, twenty, minus shielded. Pretty routine.”

“More than you scum can handle!” coughed the naked man. Ms. No-sell gave a high pitched, coughing laugh, and there was a deep scraping sound as she limped towards the door, the point of her steaming gun ahead of her like the mouth of a hungry dragon, and pushed through, the doors swinging shut behind her. The man bent before them got a good look at the bloody mess that was No-sell as she passed and his eyes widened.

“How is she doing that?” he said.

“Oh, there’s a bar here!” called Ms. Fly from across the room.

“Mr. Lee I presume?” said Mr. Himself.

“No way,” said Mr. Lee, “You can’t touch me.” He shook his head back and forth, and laughed. He had the face and body of a young, athletic man, in his late twenties, which was the fashionable age nowadays. There was a company tattoo on his right pectoral and he had large eyes and beautiful eyelashes. His robe was loose around his waist and had the curled black dragon of West Korean Iron stamped around his waist.

“You can’t touch me,” he repeated, as if saying it again would mean something.

“Frankly Mr. Lee, I can do anything I like,” said Himself. “That is not a figure of speech.”

Lee made the mistake of trying to stare him down and Tanaka could see the precise moment in his eyes when he realized just how fucked he was.

“If you think you’re getting away with this,” he said, licking his lips, “you’re wrong. I’m a high lord of the iron kingdoms. I’m the son of Jumon Lee, you understand! I knew you fuckers would come for me! You are all powerfucked.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Himself, “There is a company magus slaving thirty cracker figments right now to try and break our bore. They will very soon alert your sovereign and try and spin down this dream without killing everyone. They will try and bind and freeze us and get a locator on us so they can send a kill team at their leisure to slit our throats.” He paused. Lee was still making the terrible mistake of trying to meet his gaze.

“They will fail,” continued Mr. Himself, “Because sovereignty has no bearing on devils such as I.”

“Would you like a drink?” said Ms. Fly to the bound man. He goggled at her.

“Bullshit,” said Lee. His lip was quivering. Tanaka had seen this before and figured the guy had about fifteen seconds before he started begging.

“I am that I am,” said Mr. Himself, and motioned to Ms. Fly, who began to unbutton her collar. The man noticed and his eyes widened.

“Wait! I’ll pay you,” he said, his mouth sounding dry.

There it was.

“Shit, that’s what it’s about, right? That’s all you guys want right? Money? You just want money. Come on, man, leave me alone!”

“Hold him,” said Himself. Over the man’s whimpering, the deep rumble of sustained gunfire could be heard faintly.

“P-please,” said the man, writhing. Love Thy Neighbor pulled the cord up, and the man strained against it, like a dog on a leash.

“Please, man, don’t fuck with my head. I don’t –Molly!” babbled the man, his face going wide. “Molly!” He said again.

Tanaka’s heart jumped, but nobody else seemed to notice. Her tongue fumbled to form a protest as Ms. Fly’s second set of arms unfurled from underneath her blouse and pulled the man to his feet as gently as a child holding a doll. He began to shake violently. “Molly, Molly Zhang sent you, right? I swear it’s protected! I swear we’re still good! You know her right? You know what I’m talking about! God, please let me go!”

“Sorry, sweetie, it’ll just be a moment,” said Ms. Fly, and grabbed the man with her other arms, straightening his head so he was forced to stare into her nightmare eyes.

“Wait!” said Tanaka, her voice catching in her throat, but before she could say another word, Ms. Fly’s chitinous mouthparts unfurled like a diseased blossom and a thick, glossy proboscis unsheathed itself, quivered, and then rammed itself straight into the center point of the man’s skull. Tanaka threw up a little in the back of her throat and coughed to mask it. The man fell screaming backwards to the floor and slid around like a cockroach that had been hit with poison. Mr. Love Thy Neighbor breathed an audible sigh of relief and jerked his arm back, snapping the red cord. It dissolved with a wet hiss. He shook his hand out and stretched it, then after a moment, gave them a look, then went over to a bath and shoved his whole arm in. Thick tendrils of steam shot out of the water where his arm touched it.

“God damn, this job,” he said, shaking his head.

“Second bore,” burbled Ms. Fly.

“With haste,” said Mr. Himself. Tanaka realized that he was, for once, looking at her. She stood up and tried very hard to avoid smoothing her hair down. The rest of the team had done their job. Now it was finally hers. Nausea rose in her stomach and she dimly wondered again if she really trusted her dermal mix.

“As prepared. Ms. Fly and Ms. Rainy Day will accompany you, Ms. Sunshine,” said Mr. Himself.

“Aye, aye,” said Fly, cheerily.

“Ok,” said Tanaka.

Rainy Day said nothing. Tanaka suddenly realized that other than her brief burst of mancery she had been remarkably quiet. Something had been boiling in there.

"Ms. Rainy Day will accompany you," repeated Mr. Himself.

"I don't trust this," said Ms. Rainy Day to the floor, after a moment. "The Madame is withholding information from us. This is too routine for a seven man team." The point of her umbrella traced the water on the floor gently as he looked up at Mr. Himself. Watching her face, Tanaka saw her bright, mobile eyes were troubled.

"I'm not complaining" said Love Thy Neighbor, wincing as he dipped his arm in and out of the bath.

"The security was heavy," said Fly, her mouthparts settling back into their usual unsettling configuration, "But it's been nothin' out of the ordinary for a job of this size. So why ya so wound up?"

"Why the pairing?" said Rainy Day. She didn't sound accusatory, just tired and oddly interested, like someone picking up and turning over seashells on the beach. "This team is too good. I've never seen a team that's worked this fast. Our bores were instantaneous. Our kill girl can't die. Our binder found our man in less than ten seconds."

It was true. It was nothing like the jobs Tanaka had done before. And the teams she had run with hadn't been able to burrow through security like it was nothing, take fifty bullets and remain standing, or conjure passages out of nowhere in a metastable dream. A tiny inkling of fear lit up in the back of Tanaka's brain. She started getting the strong sensation that she had been sucked into something terrible and realized why Ms. Rainy Day had been looking so grim.

They all looked at Himself, and for a moment, the room seemed to go very still. Himself didn't move, and neither did Rainy Day. The only sound was the faint splashing of their target's residual spasms as the relaxants set in.

"I was told there were complications," said Mr. Himself finally. It wasn't an answer as much as a clear sign that questions should stop being asked. He took off his left glove, and then the other.

"Not out here, obviously," said Rainy Day. Love Thy Neighbor looked incredulous, and rubbed his arm. "So in there," said Rainy Day, motioning lazily with her umbrella to the man on the floor.

"Possibly," said Himself. He let the word hang in the air.

Tanaka looked at Jaemin Lee. His beautiful handsome features struck her as particularly unintimidating. She somehow had the feeling that he couldn't have been that much older than his appearance belied. She had no idea what was under that image, under that carefully preened skin, and she suddenly had no desire to find out. Jumping into people's subconsciousness, even a little pinched off and stable piece of it, was never fun.

"He mentioned Molly," she said.

"Who?" said Mr. Love Thy Neighbor.

"Ms. Papillion," said Ms. Fly, "The Madame's grand-daughter."

"Why?" said Tanaka. A feeling of dread had clutched her innards and refused to let go. As she watched the man on the floor, a strange but wholly expected thing happened. A thick dollop of blood poured from the thin wound in his forehead where Ms.

Fly had impaled him, and then the wound itself began to expand, first to the size of a finger, then to a coin, and even bigger.

As it expanded, the man's forehead distorted around the edge of the wound, like an image around the edge of a glass, or viewed through a drop of water. The hole itself grew and grew, becoming larger than the man's head, until his head itself was bent around the edge like the reflection on a soap bubble, and the hole itself was large enough to crawl through. Which was precisely the point, Tanaka thought. It shimmered slightly, and when Tanaka peered through it, she could see only darkness.

"That's a good question, sweetie," said Ms. Fly, "And I'd just love to find out." She crossed her arms and Tanaka felt the expectant gaze of the others. She let it linger for a bit, as she always did.

"Well," she said, clearing her throat. She stretched her arms out, spun them a little, warmed her face up. She kicked her feet out, left, then right, then coughed a little. Maybe she could squeeze some vocal warm ups in there before she had to go in. It was exactly like she was about to dive into freezing cold water, but cold water was at least just water. There was an entire mind on the other side of that smooth surface, and the thought of entering it was tying her guts into knots.

"Ms. Sunshine," said the midnight voice of Mr. Himself. Tanaka winced. It was a command.

"See you in there!" she said, her voice cracking, and dived in headfirst. Her shins hit the side and she spat curses as she spun into darkness.

XII. Someone Who is Probably Tanaka, and the Hollow Man

Her boyfriend was a terrible kisser.

God this guy is an asshole, she thought. The room was pitch black and her mouth tasted of sweat. The hotel sheets were chafing her ass and her skirt was riding up. The man kissing her had completely idiotic cologne on, and he never liked to make out with the lights on for some reason. His face was smooth and slippery and all he could muster was making sloppy 'o' shapes with rubbery lips.

All she could think about was fruit. Maybe it was a marker of just how uninterested she was, but she couldn't brush it away for some reason. The high pitched whine of some insect cut into her ear, and she pulled away for air. Her mouth was dry and her tongue felt too large. Nothing felt right. How much had she been drinking?

There was a knock on the door.

"Fuck!" said her boyfriend and stopped, thank God. She recognized his voice, and tried to think of why she wouldn't. The air was thick and humid, and a strange impression struck her, of waking up on a floor somewhere where the air was similarly dark and wet, but it smelled like ash. He pulled out and fumbled around in the dark somewhere on the edge of the bed with his expensive belt, while she lay there, panting, thinking of fruit and trying to figure out why her skin felt like a misshapen rubber glove.

"Room service," said a muffled voice behind the door.

"Stay there," said her boyfriend.

"Jamie," she said, her mouth feeling slippery and foreign. The voice wasn't her own. It had kind of a high nasal pitch to it that rubbed her the wrong way, like an insect had crawled down there and died.

“Just fuckin’ stay there,” said her boyfriend irately. She rolled her tongue around inside her mouth and wiped saliva off her face. Her boyfriend really was a terrible kisser. Then she remembered. She didn’t have a boyfriend.

She rolled off the bed in a panic and stumbled past Jamie to where she somehow knew the bathroom was. Her limbs were mis-sized and smacked the floor far too soon. There was a strange weight on her head and she realized she had hair down to her mid back. She closed the bathroom door and flipped the light on. Her nails had bright polish, and her puckered skin itched around her nail beds.

Her friend Molly Zhang was staring at her from out of the mirror. She was naked, and had on smeared and very tasteless makeup, and was giving a wide eyed expression of shock. She swallowed and leaned back against the wall. Molly brought her hands up to her face and rubbed her thin nose and smooth forehead and flat, narrow eyes, then tugged on her hair. As usual, it was died a violent turquoise. Something was wrong with Molly’s face. Her cheeks – she smiled. Dimples.

Ah, so the fruit was important she thought, not quite entirely herself yet. It always took a while at the start of things. She remembered now. She wasn’t actually Molly Zhang. She was just dreaming, after all. As soon as she realized that, she knew innately that she was probably someone else and she was here to find apples. But she had to pretend for a little while that she didn’t realize that

She cleaned up her hair a bit and re-applied her lipstick. The bathroom was a mess. Her boyfriend was having a fit with someone back in the hotel room. Was it a hotel room? She wasn’t so sure. She could hear the sound of waves outside. They were on a boat, then.

She came back out of the bathroom. A faint grey light seeped through the porthole in the side of the small and elegant cabin, and the curtains had been drawn back. The sky outside was dark and uniform. Her boyfriend Jamie Lee was handsomely dressed in a polo shirt and freshly creased slacks. He had a couple of mood dermals stuck to the back of his buzzed neck and he was leaning with one arm above the low doorframe and arguing with the porter. However, he wasn’t her boyfriend, and she wasn’t Molly Zhang. Who was Molly Zhang? She couldn’t remember. Her good friend, she thought, that’s who. Molly was the one with the smiling eyes, the good times, and the stupidly colored hair. She adjusted the sundress she had just changed into even though she didn’t like sundresses and stepped a little further into the room, her wooden sandals clicking on the hardwood floor. Her legs were sore for some reason. They had been walking all morning on the deck, that’s why, she remembered.

Her boyfriend glanced over at her and gave her a look of distaste, before turning back to the porter. The sailor was a well-dressed Nordic looking man with a strange dark birthmark on his forehead. He held a tray with a decanter and several glasses. She squinted, and saw that the man had a dark umbrella slung over his right arm. *This man is my friend*, she thought, and wasn’t quite sure how she knew that, or why an umbrella would signify friendship. The porter glanced at her and there was a moment of confused recognition in his eyes. A fly buzzed loudly past her head.

“Hey!” said Jamie Lee, and snapped his fingers rudely in front of the porter’s face, who looked back at him, dazed. “I was talking to you,” he said. “I wanna know who the hell thinks it’s so funny to order service at five in the fucking morning.”

“You did, sir,” said the porter.

“That’s fucking funny man, say it to me again,” said her boyfriend, leaning in. His dark, long-lashed eyes were wide with macho indignation and she knew his stupid ego was about to blow up. They’d fought so often she was not sure why she’d even come on this trip.

“I’m not trying to joke with you sir, you ordered this whisky,” said the man, slowly. His eyes moved to the umbrella slung over his arm as though noticing it for the first time, and then up and down the cabin. “I think,” he said, as his gaze came to rest on the tray “What time is it?”

“I ordered it,” said somebody that wasn’t Molly Zhang. She stepped lightly past the seething man that certainly wasn’t her boyfriend and ducked under his muscular arm. She picked a can off the tray. It was a lemon sour. Jamie Lee’s perfect movie star face darkened and flushed and she could see he wanted to pick an argument, so she went on tiptoe and kissed him on the mouth. He un-tensed a little and pushed forward into her far too eagerly, smothering her face. He was a phenomenally bad kisser. The porter behind her coughed uncomfortably.

She pulled back before her face was completely covered in saliva. “Let’s go for a walk,” she said in her nasally, dumb sounding voice that wasn’t her own. She flexed her bloated lips against her teeth and smiled. Dimples. The porter’s eyes flashed as though he had remembered he’d left the coffee on.

“Sure,” said Jamie Lee, huskily, drawing her close like he always did, overpowering her with his private brand of cologne. He had a clumsy erection. She tried not to think of how much she wanted to knee him in the privates, and cracked open her lemon sour, taking a sip, and pulled him into the hall with her free hand. They climbed the stairs up to the deck and out of the station into the street.

A thick, greasy rain was falling through the miniscule crack between the canyon walls of the buildings on each side of her so she popped open her umbrella. The crowd flowed around her hurried, their heads down, and their filter masks pulled tight to their faces. She didn’t have a mask on, so the scent of smoke and rain, of sewage and ramen hit her as she looked around. Behind here there was a screech as the rail car pulled out on its rusted tracks. She had a lemon sour in her hand for some reason, so she took a sip.

She was getting kind of sick of being Molly Zhang so she pulled on a different face, feeling her skin tense and slide taut. She was wearing furs, stupidly high heels, and had cigarettes tucked in the front pocket of her coat. She really wanted one.

“Where’s Molly?” said Jamie, ducking under her umbrella.

“Who?” said someone who had probably not been Molly Zhang but was certainly not her now. Her teeth were bigger, she was a little bit older, and her voice was huskier. She was waking up a bit more and hated every moment of it. Inhabiting someone else’s skin, even dreaming, was like putting on a full body glove two sizes too small.

“My ex,” said Jamie, his big puppy eyes searching, his brow furrowed. He rubbed the front of his jacket, which was already damp from the rain. “I thought she was here. I was following her on that boat from Ji-West. The last time we were together.”

“Babe,” she said, her lips flapping, as someone else’s voice burst from her throat, “Forget about that bitch. Seriously. Girl’s got a serious case of crazy.” Jamie looked for a moment as though he’d blow up on her, like she knew he wanted to. After a

moment, he instead put an arm around her back and mashed her into him.

Could this guy get any less creative about the role of women in his life, she thought, as he squeezed her ass. He went in for another terrible sucking kiss and she pinched him hard on the skin of his arm and dug in. She had long, sharp nails.

“What the hell!” he squealed.

“As if,” she said. She pursed her lips dismissively and pushed away from him, and tottered off down the street, the skin of another person’s legs stretching and contracting like too-short stockings. Jamie splashed after her, and she checked herself out in the dirty glass of a coffee stall window as he caught up with her. She was a Chinese meen with way too much lipstick, a beauty mark, and ruler straight, dyed auburn hair. Not bad, she thought, and pulled a cigarette from her coat.

She ducked into the coffee shop as Jamie protested behind her, not bothering to hold the door open. The cramped, attic-like space inside was steaming hot and smashed full of people wrapped in coats and hunched over cups, their masks hanging around their necks or flipped behind their heads. She ignored him and shoved past a huge crowd of sweating white foreigners at the ordering window and leaned forward into the tired looking man behind the counter. He was a young Korean guy with styled bleach blonde hair, bright blue contacts, and a strange looking tattoo beneath his right eye. She peered at it. It was an umbrella.

“I know you,” he said hesitantly. He looked disbelieving.

“It’ll take a while,” she told him, “Give me an Americano.”

He scanned her wrist implant with uncertain hands and drew back from the window to get her coffee. Over the mash of the crowd someone next to her grabbed her arm, hard, and she turned, the protest dying in her throat as she stared into a dark-skinned woman’s face. Only there wasn’t much face too see because the woman had on a pair of ridiculously oversized goggles, or lenses, or something. There were a lot of moving parts and tiny apertures contracting and wheels clicking into and out of hidden slots. It was incredibly disconcerting, and looked like nothing less than a huge set of compound eyes, like an insect’s.

“Dimples, you have nice dimples,” said the woman, as if it was a shared joke, and laughed. She tightened her grip and pulled close. Her breath was hot, her lips were cracked. “I don’t know why,” she said, “But I’m supposed to tell you this: One oh five ten three oh seventeen. Bore stable, marker proceed.” She sounded like she was drunk. Her goggles clicked and whined and tiny lenses slid into and out of place

“You know sweetie, I dreamt I was a fly,” she said, her grip loosening, “I dream I had a million eyes and a face that split just down the middle and could crack a man in five seconds.” She wiggled her fingers around her mouth in imitation of something memorable and completely horrifying. “I could see just everything, sweetie, just about everything.” She drunkenly swayed backwards into a customer who spun away, repulsed.

The woman who was not Molly Zhang goggled at the bug-eyed woman, and in every normal situation would have probably just walked away. But this wasn’t a normal situation, and she was looking for fruit, and she was probably someone else, so that garbled rant had to mean something. The boy at the counter re-appeared with her coffee, with the same confused expression on his face, as if he couldn’t quite decide if she was going to bite him. She grabbed it and gave him a wink as she batted off Jamie

and stepped on feet with her heels to clear her path through the heaving, cramped space.

They went upstairs, scaling rusting iron slats crammed with early morning drunks and bald youths crammed around cracked video screens. Jamie whined and tagged along behind her, very clearly staring at her ass as she climbed. They sat at a small table with a window reinforced with paper thin sheet plastic and a view of the cracked and ugly passage outside, wet and crawling with commuters and the heat of neon signs. The stench and swamp-like air inside was unbearable so she ripped open the plastic and let the wet cool air through the window as she gulped down her coffee and smoked. Nobody blinked.

The cigarette and the coffee tasted exactly the same. Jamie was glaring at her and rubbing his head so often that his pop star hair began to stick to his perfect, sweaty forehead. She let herself relax a moment and lose herself a little - not enough to fall back asleep, not enough to lose her lucidity, but just enough so that the surface thoughts of the person that Jamie dreamed she was slid placidly by, like projections on an archaic screen.

What a cream faced little rich boy, she thought, but didn't think. Can't even get over some junkie Drip addict who spent half her time getting high in a dream world and the other half sponging off her rich as hell grandfather. But she was some rich info-trader's brat, right? Not a true noble. Jamie's purebred landed aristocracy. And he had a fetish for menial girls (and stockings) that pulled his dumb ass down the pipe. I smelled him a mile away, and I know him for what he is, like all the other meen scum squawking about all preened and primped, arms upraised. A ticket out of here.

Those muscles are vat grown. He's got a nice face but I bet he wasn't born with it. He's needy, pampered, and the sex has been terrible, which has basically sealed his fate. She blew smoke out the window and turned to him, pulling herself back together. She wasn't learning much, and she knew she didn't have much time.

"Let's go back to the hotel and get something to drink," said Jamie, running a hand through his hair.

"Why?" blasted the voice from her mouth, "You haven't taken me shopping yet. I've never been this far south in the city before."

He looked at her blankly and shuffled his broad shoulders.

"You're a horny idiot," she said. She flicked the butt of her cigarette out the window hole into the streaking rain and pulled another one. She was going through two packs a day, but she had never smoked. At least she didn't smoke, and she wasn't herself. She was here for apples, she was afraid and unhappy, and her name was actually Tanaka Yui. She remembered a little more and woke up by another increment, which was like swallowing ice-cold water, and she shifted in her borrowed flesh.

"-and I'm glad we're cracking you," Tanaka added.

"What does that mean?" he said.

"What did Molly see in you?"

"You knew her?" He pulled back in surprise.

"No," she lied. The heat was starting to get to her. She ripped open the hole in the window some more and sucked in some of the filthy air outside as her self-realization grew stronger. Molly had dated this guy? A creeping sense of connections, of lines pulling taut, began to fill up the back of her mind, and she swept it aside, trying to

relax and ride the dream.

“I swear,” said Jamie, “That bitch gave me good enough reason. She got so obsessed with her... work or whatever,” he said, rubbing his forehead, “Just over and over. Working on some big stupid project. Went under the Drip all the time. Never even had time to talk or do anything, just... forgot about me. Didn’t even want to get high together.”

“That must be hard,” she said, stone faced.

“You don’t get it. She was special,” he said, his mouth tight, “I still dream about her. All the time, and I can’t stop. I think she fucked with my head, like that thing she does for a living, so I’d always dream of her.” His hands tightened into fists on the table. The air grew thick and the hairs raised on the back of her neck. The crowd and the café around them grew blurred, indistinct, unremarkable, and when she tried to make out details, her eyes slid right off them.

“Actually, come to think, I just dreamt about her,” he said, his eyes wide. The air in the café became boiling and the walls stretched, like a balloon pulled too tight.

“Am I dreaming now?” he said, looking up, his expression wide.

She looked at him deadpan, and set her cigarette down. With one hand, she reached under the filthy table and gently raked her nails along the inside of his thick and perfectly groomed thigh, ever so slowly, watching his expression change and his lips part in anticipation. Then she shoved her heel into his instep.

“No,” she said as he yelped. The café popped back into place and the pressure in her ears normalized. She got up from the table and placed her bare feet on the loamy earth. That was close.

“What the hell?” said Jamie, enraged and standing up from the table so his head almost bumped a crossbeam. Pale, filthy faces turned to him. “If you think I’m going to let some menial bitch like you just string me-”

“You like it,” she said, giving him a coy smirk, and started off into the grass. His face flushed and he sputtered as he followed her, pushing stalks aside.

Tanaka had never seen so much vegetation in her life. It grew occasionally in dark, spiky clusters, or great, twisted growths from the sides of abandoned buildings in the middle districts near where she lived. But what you could see in the city was stunted and stained, just like its people. Here it was lush and thick. There were hills, and loamy earth, and bent trees with dark clouds of foliage. Tanaka knew it was false though, because the sky was dark and covered in soot, and she could see the muted, hellish glow of the city. A slight glint to the distant air revealed the transparent dome set over them, a hundred feet or more above, keeping out the poisonous atmosphere. A private rooftop preserve then, a lord’s garden. She ducked under boughs and down into a dell, splashing across a tiny, artfully crafted stream. It was wonderful, and for a moment the foliage covered the festering sky and she forgot herself.

“I’ll find you!” said Jamie from somewhere up the slope. His voice had lost all menace and had become playful. Tanaka shoved her toes in the mud and wiggled, her heart full of childish delight. She was someone else again - younger, with skin a deep, caramel brown spotted with dark freckles. She had a thin gold ring on her too-small toes, a spray-on party dress across her slender frame, and she was more than slightly drunk. She was sensing a slight theme in Mr. Lee’s subconscious and so imagined herself up a far more sensible dress and did away with the drunken-ness. Then she

missed it a little and brought it back a notch.

Jamie stumbled down the slope and tackled her clumsily, and they both fell into the mud. She laughed in spite of herself, another person's clear, bell-like laugh through a mouth that felt too small and loose. For a moment they were young, barely out of school, rich, beautiful, and hopeful. Tanaka was very jealous as she let herself ride the dream for a bit. They rolled over and smacked each other playfully for a bit. Tanaka made sure she ended up on top.

"Let's go, right now," said Jamie. His breaths were heavy and hot.

"This is getting a bit repetitive, isn't it?" said Tanaka as she straddled him. His face twisted with confusion. He didn't have quite the muscles as he did when he was older, Tanaka thought, probably hadn't started the treatments yet. She had to admit he had a nice body, and his hips were firm and tense. Even if it was his dream.

"Come on!" he said, plaintively.

"Is this all we get as we go deeper?" she said, in her girly voice, cocking an eyebrow, "Steamy teenage sex fantasies and ex-girlfriends? No wonder you keep getting dumped."

"What?" he said. His face was lit up in the soft light by something like consternation. They were both splashed with mud in the softly lit glade, lying there with their bare skin pressed together. Tanaka thought it was incredibly insipid and that they probably didn't have much time and so decided to get down to business.

"Show me that thing?" she said, chewing on her lip. He shifted beneath her and grinned like an idiot.

"No not that," she said, exasperated, and then emptied her mind and put all her concentration into remembering, because here was the important part. She took all her breathe and pushed it out to the tip of her tongue and forced her tongue to be her own, for a while. The whole thing was similar to mancery, but took far less effort, as the other person did literally all the work for you. "The thing you took me out in the woods for, dummy," she said, smiling and batting her eyelids at him, "The thing that I want, the thing that I came for."

"Oh, that" said Jamie, dazed. "What?" A sudden strange inspiration hit her, and the tickling dread that she had before returned.

"The thing that Molly gave you," she said.

A cold recognition lit up Jaemin Lee's face and the blood drained from it. All sound poured from the world, the gurgling of the little brook went dead quiet, and the heat evaporated from the mud around them. Jaemin's body tensed up beneath Tanaka and he pushed out of the mud a little, looking away from her, his mouth drawn shut. When he turned back to her his eyes were full of fear.

"I knew you would come," he said to her, his voice a strained whisper. The whites of his eyes were extremely large. Thick beads of sweat mingled with the mud on his face and dripped off, and Tanaka immediately knew something was extremely wrong. Her heart leapt up in her throat and she wondered for a moment if he'd turn hostile, if this would have to turn into a hack job. She'd never done a hack job. It was the worst case scenario for second level head-cracking, and it was always messy. The subject rarely survived.

Jaemin's eyes were wide with fear. The mud extended in every direction, the artfully crafted artificial forest was gone. His voice was hoarse, his nostrils flared.

“Are you Molly?” he said.

“No silly, I’m your girlfriend,” said Tanaka, and let herself slip back down the pipe a little bit. She wiggled her butt. It didn’t seem to matter. His muscles were quivering with tension.

“What’s wrong Jamie,” she said, concerned. She touched his face but he turned away and didn’t move. His skin was cold and damp.

“She told me to keep it,” he said, looking away from her, off into the looming darkness, barely parting his lips as he spoke, “She told me to take care of it. I remember now. Said she was hiding something, didn’t want it taken, and she’d be back for it. But she hasn’t come back for it. She hasn’t. And I dream of her. And *other things*.”

The way he said *other things* sent a shiver down Tanaka’s spine that she couldn’t explain. Jaemin’s mouth drew shut and quivered, and Tanaka let her gaze wander. They were on a featureless, wet, and muddy plain, dim and hard to see more than a few meters. The sky was black, and there were no stars. It was cold, and Tanaka wished she was wearing something other than her dress. She stood up, feeling her body shift again, lurching and stretching as her flesh changed sizes. A tall man in a thick coat walked out of the darkness about twenty meters away. He had a woman’s thin face, and there was an umbrella hooked over his arm. Another woman was crouched in the darkness beside him, and there was the glint of lenses, or maybe eyes. Bits of her head were twitching. Tanaka turned back to Jaemin, who had returned to his older self. He was naked.

“I haven’t seen her for a long time,” he said, turning to Tanaka. The rims of his eyes were red and wet.

“I haven’t seen her either,” said Tanaka. She stepped forward, her bare feet sucking into the pale mud, and as she did her stride felt far too familiar. She was herself again, not the Tanaka Yui of her dreams with the pop star body and the playful eyes but the pale, lumpy, half-dead Tanaka Yui of the waking world. Her shock delayed her just long enough that it was too late to pull on a new skin. Jaemin locked his eyes on her, his face drawn and bloodless.

“Who are you?” he said. It was an appeal, not a question, and against the odds Tanaka felt a twinge of pity for him. An animal fear was running in him and seizing him up.

She hesitated, and then took a tentative step forward. “I’m here to pick it up, Mr. Lee,” she said, crouching next to him, and trying not to think too much about her appearance. Her dress had also disappeared, and so they sat there, two naked strangers in the mud and cold darkness in the depths of his subconscious. Something was seriously wrong.

“She said she would come,” repeated Jaemin, “but she didn’t come. She told me to protect it. That it was important. It was part of her work. She fucked with my head!” He stopped, his face twisted with pain and anger.

“I’m a friend of Molly’s,” said Tanaka, “I’m here to take it and I’ll fix it up for you. I’ll take it to her and maybe she’ll remember what you did for her.”

“It hurts,” said Jaemin.

Tanaka had no idea what that meant, but nothing had started attacking her yet, so she continued. She put a hand gently on Jaemin’s bulky shoulder, but he only tensed up further. She realized his gaze was fixated on something to his left, and followed his

trembling eyes. There was a door there. It was wooden and covered in scratched white paint, stuck in the mud like a sad monument. She rose and very carefully made her way over to it. She tapped it and carefully felt its exterior. It was slightly warm and damp.

“Thank you Mr. Lee,” she said. He only stared, mute. With trepidation she cracked the door, which opened into a cavernous, darkened space. As she stepped through, her feet found cold stone and stale air, and she felt coarse clothes upon her body. A concrete pathway, lit from nowhere in particular, led through thick darkness to a plinth some twenty meters from her, lit by a dim lamp. Something red and glossy was set upon the plinth. An apple. She took a few steps forward, and two others stepped through the door behind her.

To her surprise, the first was Ms. Rainy Day, not the man she usually inhabited, but the skeletally thin, unnaturally pale woman that she knew was lying next to her up the drainpipe. She still had her umbrella, but it was torn and bent. The other, Tanaka had never seen before. She was a middle aged, olive-skinned asiatic woman with wiry hair packed into a bun and a small, compact physique. Thick glasses pinched her snub nose, and she had deep set eyes buried in dark, bruised looking eyelids. Both of them were dressed in loose, ragged clothes as Tanaka knew she must have been.

“Well ain’t you just cute as hell,” said the real Ms. Fly.

“We made it,” said Rainy Day quietly. She was flexing her thin hands and looking at them as though they would evaporate. “I’m awake. I think. Where are we?”

“I don’t know, but this is base level subconscious,” said Tanaka, scanning the chamber. It felt like a cavern, or some immense deep room where forgotten and rotting things were kept. Other than the small, indistinct light there was nothing visible inside. It felt strongly like being in the belly of some immense monster.

This was a deep point. There was only up from here. The darkness beyond the small path of light had a depth to it that she didn’t like at all, and their voices were swallowed up by it.

“It’s rock solid in here.” said Ms. Fly, “I can’t even get a line up, it’s so deep. I have no idea we got here, sweetie pie, or how you did it, but you did a hell of a job.” Tanaka gave a fluttering smile but was too scared to feel pride. Ice was beginning to creep into her limbs. She fervently wished she had her patches with her.

“Well, shall we finish up?” said Ms. Fly added after a moment. She cocked her head towards the plinth in the middle of the room where the apple sat. Tanaka turned to Rainy Day, but she was turned away, staring at something indistinct in the corner of the room. The sight made Tanaka’s spine crawl. She swallowed her heart and turned to the brightly lit pathway, placing one foot after the other, feeling the rough, cold concrete, but she had barely taken a few steps when something changed. It was hard to say what exactly it was, but her skin prickled and her muscles sprang taut, and adrenaline made her eyes bulge. She stopped dead in her tracks and waited, breathing heavily.

“Did you feel that?” said Ms. Fly, her voice tight. Tanaka didn’t dare turn to look.

“I’ve got it. He’s a hollow man,” said Rainy Day.

“You’re kidding,” said Tanaka. Ms. Fly sucked in a breath and pursed her lips, and Tanaka turned to look at her. Now that she was close, Tanaka could see the shaved skin behind her ears and over her smooth forehead was colonized by dark glossy beads. Military grade implants.

“He dreamed – we dreamed that he knew Ms. Papillion,” said Rainy Day. Her

dead white face was turned to the darkness. Tanaka was surprised to see her so nervous.

“Molly,” said Tanaka reflexively, and questions began to tumble hurriedly out of her mouth, bubbling out from the pit of her stomach. “Why? What does she have to do with this? Why are we cracking this idiot dandy that she dated? Is this why she’s missing?”

“This boy’s a real case,” said Ms. Fly.

“This place is buried too deep,” said Tanaka.

“It’s buried pretty deep,” agreed Ms. Fly, quietly. She had taken her glasses off and folded them.

“Does he have her locked up somewhere?” said Tanaka, her brain pulling wildly, “What is going on down here? Is the Madame using us for some – rescue mission? Is that what this is all about?” Her head hurt. The darkness was liquid and she stumbled backwards on freezing feet.

“No,” said Ms. Rainy Day, “The point is, he never dated her in the first place. They didn’t have a relationship.”

There was a thick silence.

“No fucking way,” said Tanaka.

“I told you,” said Rainy Day, “He’s a hollow man.”

“Hollow men aren’t real,” said Tanaka.

“Of course they are,” said Rainy Day, “I’ve cracked a few. He’s got good enough implants that you could hide serious volumes of pretty much anything you want inside him. All you need is a few moments of unconsciousness, and a little induced memory to elicit emotional sympathy. He probably did meet her somewhere intending to hook up; saw her as just another starry-eyed serf girl he could take advantage of. And what’s he now?”

She raised her eyes pointedly to the empty darkness. Tanaka couldn’t imagine there being a ceiling. Even the door behind them wasn’t set in anything in particular, just standing there in thin air.

“A vault,” said Tanaka.

“Ain’t a vault supposed to be better defended?” said Ms. Fly.

The darkness moved.

XIII.

Victoria Palm and the Motile Darkness

Vicky couldn’t see them now but she knew they were there, bubbling up the tunnel behind them. She concentrated on the rock before them, on lying to the dream, mancery spitting hot off her tongue. *Left turn, right turn*, she thought and said, *straight up, up and out*, and the path bent before her, cutting through potentials. It was too slow. Her will was stained, her mind filled with hissing and the bubbling gleams of a million eyes, advancing behind them. Sunshine’s panicked breathing was barely audible, small and insignificant. The rancid air closed around them.

Abruptly, her hand burst into cold, humid emptiness and she tumbled out into her man’s shape, followed closely by the heavy thud of Sunshine. Her knees smacked against wet paneling and she scrabbled to her feet, searching for exits. Dimly, she was

aware that she was back in the bathhouse/boardroom again, her mind roving unbidden over every feature, wasting time, wasting breath. The hole they had just exited - the hole that was Jaemin Lee's head in this world began to close up behind her, contracting, his features rearranging themselves. It wouldn't help. Her legs moved by themselves, her feet slipping on the wet tiling.

"Status," said somebody sharply, and then repeated himself. Vicky's lungs hurt. She couldn't speak, because her chest wasn't moving properly, but only stumbled towards the doors, counting the cracks in the tiling. She heard the whimpering of Sunshine and saw her doing the same, stumbling on hands and knees to right herself. She was clutching a shiny red apple.

"Where's Fly?" said Mr. Love Thy Neighbor from her elbow as she stumbled past. She barely heard him. Fly was gone. She grabbed the door. Oak paneling, well-trimmed, knob loose and slick with humidity, hard to grasp, fingers not working.

It wouldn't turn. She realized she hadn't inhaled since exiting and took a deep breathe, coughing. A firm, icy cold hand grasped her shoulder and spun her around, and she was staring into the empty non-face of Mr. Himself. He had put his cufflinks back on. Over his shoulder her eyes flickered over the bloodied Ms. No-sell pulling a struggling Sunshine to her feet. Mr. Love Thy Neighbor crouched next to them, his bandages rebound.

"Status," said Himself, his grip iron. It was a command.

"Success," she gasped, hiccupping, "We have... to leave." Sweat traced icy trails down her face.

"Fly?" he said. His pistol had appeared from somewhere.

"We lost her," she wheezed. She could hear the sound of a million legs rubbing over one another. "We... couldn't see. Vault was...sealed. Defenses. Fly was overwhelmed." She choked, drew in another shuddering breath, tried to steady herself. *Easy, Vicky*. She hadn't felt emotion this strongly in a long time. The fear was unmanageable. "I don't know."

"Clarify," said Mr. Himself, but Vicky could see him reading her face, see him visibly hesitating. Her hand scrabbled unbidden for the door behind her.

"What the fuck?" muttered Mr. Love Thy Neighbor from somewhere behind them.

"Retrieval?" said Himself.

"We have to go," said Vicky, panic rising, her feet sliding on the floor. No time, no time at all. Himself shook her by the shoulder, his grip painful. "Manual extraction," she said, "It's too heavy to spirit or bag in time. We have to take it... out through the bore."

"It's a fucking apple," growled Himself.

"It's never just a god damn apple!" wailed Sunshine.

"Boss!" said Love Thy Neighbor. Himself didn't turn at first, but then the raw chainsaw sound of Ms. No-sell revving up her gun cut through the still and humid air and then he turned.

"Krishna's tits," said No-sell.

"Help me," the man on the floor who was Jamie Lee, "Oh God help!" Vicky didn't want to help, because suddenly they were all at the door, fumbling with the latches, their shoes slapping against the floor, her fingers were raw and torn and there were tears in the corners of her eyes. Jamie Lee was a dead man.

Butterflies were coming out from his body, pushing out from under his eyelids, out

his nostrils, bursting from seeping cracks in his skin, butterflies with beautiful red and black and turquoise wings, butterflies with the bodies of centipedes, butterflies with fifty vibrating legs that hissed, butterflies that writhed mindlessly over each other and boiled out of his chest, the size of dogs, their eyes black and open and glassy and wet, their hooked and barbed mouthparts undulating

The corridor hurtled by them, then the stairwell, as No-sell howled and fired mad bursts from her gun as they ran. The fire spitting from her weapon threw insane shadows across the blood splashed corridors and hurt Vicky's ears. Vicky couldn't see, wasn't aware of her limbs moving, stiff and jerky, like a puppet. Her body seemed to throw itself against the walls and push off as though in space, or underwater, as she half ran, half fell down the stairwell.

She wasn't going to survive this unless she focused. So she counted steps. No-sell hurled her red hot gun away and threw herself down the stairs after them. The wet, organic thuds of shivering bodies crawling over each other began to fill the narrow space. She counted rivets, and felt a little better. The thuds grew to a chorus, then a roar, and the scrabbling of claws on metal fill the staircase. Someone was screaming.

Something clicked and she could breathe again. She spat mancery and pushed her hands against the wall, her palms out, the concrete smooth. She watched the patterns in the cracks contract and expand before her eyes. The wall was only there because she willed it, after all. Someone shouted at her and yanked at her arm but she ignored them, and pushed, just so, her fingers going in like it was wet clay, then sand, then water. She pushed through and the smell of concrete overwhelmed her and a sticky, tight veil pushed over her body and she broke through on the other side.

There was nothing on the other side, so her tongue buzzed. *Let there be light* she thought, and there was, dim and indistinct. She stood trembling in a room, completely featureless, the air stale. Half formed and half willed. The far wall warped as the others pushed through, fingertips pushing through like pale worms. She grabbed an arm and pulled the sputtering form of Mr. Love Thy Neighbor through the liquid wall.

"Close it!" said Sunshine, shrill, and she did, focusing on the wall, willing it to stone. They stood dripping with sweat, muscles trembling, ice cold in the tiny room. The cavernous sound of death outside reduced itself to a dull rumble.

"What the fuck!" said the incredulous Love Thy Neighbor. "What the fuck is that?"

"Security," offered No-sell, her breathing hoarse and ragged.

"Complications," said Mr. Himself.

"Fuck your complications," wheezed Love Thy Neighbor, "That's way beyond our pay. Have you ever seen anything like that shit?" He waved, wild eyed, to the wall they had just come from.

Nobody said anything.

Vicky had already moved to the next step. The rumble grew louder. She could already feel the fabric of the dream resisting the impossible room she had added to the building, pulling against it. She could feel the nonexistent air running out, the walls shimmering and trickling away to vapor as the shared reality snapped back into its stable configuration. It hurt. It made her sick, being aware of all these things at the same time. It was partly why she had started using Bliss. But she was stronger than that now.

They watched, breathe caught in their throats as she pulled a door slowly and

agonizingly into being. Every muscle in her body was on fire, and her lungs felt too big for her chest. The rumble grew again into a roar, and she felt the slide and scrape of uncountable things pressing against the wall of their sanctuary, pushing mandibles into stone like maggots burrowing into flesh, sprouting spines and claws into new configurations for digging.

The door was finished.

She collapsed into it, pushing it open, stumbling impossibly into the brightness of the hotel lobby. Her body felt thick, like it wasn't her own, and as the others rushed past her, the small hand of Ms. Sunshine grasped her by the forearm and dragged her stumbling forwards with surprising strength. Sunshine's eyes were wide and her face was set in a strange determined expression. Her left hand was in a pained, white knuckle grip around the apple.

Behind her she felt the door evaporate. But all around her, in her blood, she felt the scrabbling of a million legs, descending with increasing speed.

The floor was slick and shiny as they sprinted across, the car lurked at the far end of the hall, and sitting on the car was the scowl of Mr. Hate, which was loosely attached to his face.

"Mr. Hate, you have my permission to fire the car," said Himself as they ran past. His voice had a rough edge to it. He flung away the pistol he was holding and grabbed the car door bodily, flinging it open as they slid and threw themselves towards it, arms reaching outwards. Vicky's vision seemed to have pulled in around that narrow, dark space.

Mr. Hate looked with a mixture of puzzlement and disbelief at the tattered, bloody group as they piled past. But as Vicky hurled her aching body past Mr. Himself and into the dark space inside, she saw his eyes draw up across the long, wide hall and the beautiful, ruined marble. It slid across the corpses of dark suited figments, over the gilt desks and torn up armchairs, the awful, scorched shag rugs, and the smoke-scarred mural on the ceiling. It rested on the beautiful, soaring spiral staircase, which couldn't be seen anymore, because it was being rapidly filled with a boiling dark mass. The mass had eyes, and legs, and was sprouting pallid wings the color of corpses. It had a thousand thousand mandibles clicking wetly. It was eating the world.

"Holy FUCK!" said Mr. Hate.

He fired the car.

They barely made it out.

Later, they sat in silence in the waiting room in the car as it roared back through the bore, conversation shut off by tension, and the throaty roar of the car's passage sounded more like a cornered animal. The apple sat on the low table in the center of the room, crimson and glossy. Mr. Himself had grasped their blood coin in his iron tongs and was very carefully turning it over and over in the dim light.

It was very quiet.

"Do you think it's destroyed? Targets dead, right? Whole place is thrashed?" said No-sell, suddenly.

Nobody responded.

"Who runs security like that?"

Their faces were cast in the center of the room, their lips tight lines.

“You know, those... things...” said Sunshine, and stopped almost as soon as she began. Her skin was pallid and shiny from sweat. “They had... well some of them had Molly’s face.”

“I didn’t see that,” said Rainy Day. Her voice sounded like it came from someone else. “I swear they did,” said Sunshine, and it would have been quiet again but there was a heavy thump on the side of the car.

The silence cracked abruptly with the heavy sound of metal, of weapons being drawn, of the intake of breathe. They waited. No-sell chewed her lip rings and spat pink phlegm on to the floor.

The door cracked, and Ms. Fly lowered herself agonizingly into the cabin. She was a horrendous mess. Her suit was shredded with cuts, dark with ichor, and her extra arms were out, one of them twisted at a horrendous angle. Her insectile head was rent with wounds and her massive left eye had burst into a glistening mess by the force of some unimaginable violence. She shivered as though freezing as she dragged herself into the cabin and to her seat.

They didn’t ask. It just wasn’t done in this line of work.

Weapons were lowered, and after a moment there was the clink of glass as Mr. Himself rose and began to make drinks.

“You know,” wheezed Ms. Fly weakly, drawing in wet, ragged breaths, “Ya’ll, I have a confession to make.” She leaned back into the seat. “I absolutely hate bugs.”

There was no sound but a small pop as Ms. No-sell dug another bullet out of her leg.

The rest of their trip was silence, all the way back to the waking world.