

Six Inches

Abbadon
ksbdabbadon@gmail.com

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?”

“Eaughh!”

“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, and 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 mancers 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.