

"I'm getting high," said Sunshine.

It was shortly after dawn, or something like it.

"No, you're not," said Vicky. She peered at the sky. About the same level of light filtered through the thick brown smog that blanketed the city at all hours of the day.

It was better to tell by the hellish neon glow of the city itself. Vicky thought it dimmed a little during the day time, or at least it did in Magnasanti. Maybe she was getting it confused with Loop 1, a disturbing thought which she pushed to the side.

"Why the hell are we up here?" whined Sunshine from behind her, "It's bright."

"It is not bright," said Vicky, "Your standards are fucked." She sucked on her cigarette. The air tasted exactly the same, and it had the swamp heat of a day that was slowly suffocating itself. Even in Vicky's sleeveless shirt, the air felt like it was sliding off her skin. They were perched on the ruined atrium roof of Sunshine's building, the end of a journey that had taken a hard-eyed Vicky and a protesting, huffing Sunshine up a rusted ladder and a staircase strewn with the debris of rotted and ancient junkie holes – collapsed canvas, hot plates, bent spoons, tiny plastic dermal cases.

Vicky exhaled. She tried to find more sky, but there wasn't really much visible, just half collapsed jumbles of buildings, sagging and rotten, bigger than any mountain but pitiful in their ruin, and the teeming mass that crawled and poured through the cracks between them. She liked watching them, and could have done so for hours if the weather wasn't so hot and she wasn't under the threat of imminent death.

Sunshine had stopped whining and was peering at her, her round face unreadable. She wore a sweater and a hood that she had pulled tight, and Vicky couldn't imagine it was very comfortable.

When they had woken up, Sunshine had been inconsolable until Vicky had given her enough time to get her makeup done properly. Vicky had wanted to point out that Sunshine hadn't actually washed her face from the morning before and that her eye shadow would look better with more red in it but didn't want to push anything.

"What's happening in there?" groaned Sunshine, "In that weird looking head of yours? Why are we up here?"

Vicky took a long time finishing her cigarette. She briefly reconsidered her options, but found the rest of them pretty poor.

"My name is Victoria Eloise Palm," she said.

Sunshine recoiled as if she'd been bitten, and her face turned sour. She looked away from Vicky and then down, agitated. You didn't do this. In Vicky's profession, you *really* didn't do this.

"Don't tell me that," said Sunshine to the greasy concrete.

"Well I'm not changing it any time soon."

"Stop," snapped Sunshine. Her face was red.

"Why?"

"Because you're expecting me to tell you as well," she said, leaning forward. She pulled her hood back, and ruffled her fingers through her poorly dyed hair. "You think this is going to help us with the kind of trouble we're in? You think we're going to get all buddy-buddy and stick it out together? I didn't want this shit!"

"We have to do it," said Vicky, "Emissary, or whatever her name was, could easily

push our names and profiles out on the dumb net. She wouldn't even have to kill us. You'd never be able to go under again without fifty scrubby little amateur crackers trying to break open your skull. And that would be the best-case scenario, even for me, and I've got suppressor implants."

"Shut up," said Sunshine, rubbing her scalp. Her eyes were red.

"The Madame's right," said Vicky, leaning forward. She felt her forehead wrinkling up, and to her surprise, her face was tight with anger. She thought this would be much easier. Sunshine was a whiny little shit, but Vicky had at least thought the situation would be clear. "Look," she said, "We'd be dead or drooling long before the Madame claws in the right place. We might as well get paid. But truth be told, I smell something rotten. I think she's got a little skin in the equation as well."

"Shut up," repeated Sunshine, her voice growing high pitched, "I don't want to do this." She shook her head, and grasped it with both hands and stared at the floor.

"What are you doing?" said Vicky, curious.

"Disappearing," whined Sunshine.

"That won't work. I've tried it."

"I'm not telling you."

"Suit yourself," said Vicky. Something was knotting in the back of her throat.

"Fuck off!" said Sunshine, raw, and stood up. "You should have left yesterday. You come into my house, you touch my things, you kidnap me, you smoke-"

"And?" said Vicky. Irritation, now. It was irritation.

"-inside my house-"

"It's not much of a house, is it?" said Vicky, hard. And then the knot of irritation turned to bile and she was pouring out words. "And let's be really honest, you're here because you're a weak little shit who'd rather mix chemicals and play make-believe than deal with anything real."

Sunshine gaped, and turned white, and then a deep shade of red. Vicky saw her hands were clasped so hard they were shaking. "Fuck you," she said, her voice raspy with emotion, "You have no idea who I am!"

Vicky thought that was terribly trite.

"Yes I do," she said, gesticulating with her cigarette. "You're an obsessive little chem jockey stuck in a rut. And as soon as one thing happens that pushes you a centimeter out of that stupid little rut, you get all up in arms and start whining because you're uncomfortable."

Sunshine trembled and glared at her. Her eyes were scorching red, and wet. She made to say something, then Vicky cut her off.

"You know where that rut goes?" she said, "It tilts right to the gutter. I am also a weak little shit who'd rather mix chemicals than deal with anything. But I choose not to be that person. You're obsessed with being weak."

"You're a fucking asshole," said Sunshine, her jaw tight.

"You're playing victim. I'm surprised you've got any skin left," said Vicky. "You're a pasty, obsessive little shut-in and you love it."

"You're a fucking asshole," said Sunshine. Her face was deep red and tears were trickling out of her hot eyes. Vicky realized she had gone too far. There was a sharp pain in her fingers and she yelped. Her cigarette had burned down and she dropped the butt, sucking her burnt finger and tasting ash.

She spat. When she looked up, Sunshine was watching her impassively with a barely concealed sneer on her face. Vicky felt her throat block up again, and the hard lump of irritation there sank until it was deep in her gut, and turned to ice. She thought she was going to be sick for a moment, that there'd been something on her fingers, but then she realized it was guilt.

Somehow, Sunshine must have seen it on her face because she dragged a sleeve across her leaking eyes, crossed her arms, and leaned back slightly. Vicky started to reach into her pocket, looking for the loose cigarettes she had stashed there, and then thought better about it.

She rested her forearms on her thighs, leaned forward, stared at the floor, and let the heavy curtain of her hair obscure her face. It was a well-practiced and reflexive move, but one she hadn't used in a long time. She tried very hard to work the knot of guilt of her gut, but it wouldn't budge. That was problematic. She stared at the patterns of cracks in the broken panes of the atrium roof.

They sat like that for a while.

"I get angry," ventured Vicky. "At people who remind me of myself."

"You're unbelievable," said Sunshine, "I bet you don't have any friends."

Vicky shrugged at that one.

"It's too hot," said Sunshine after a little while longer, "Why are we up here?" She rubbed her eyes again. Vicky looked up and saw her squinting at the sky. The sun had come out a little bit and threw a sickly light on the brutal glass and metal ruin around them. Insects buzzed through the air.

"It's good to get outside, once in a while," offered Vicky. She couldn't help herself. Sunshine gave her a long, appraising look of disdain.

"Look," said Vicky, slowly. Sunshine cocked an eyebrow.

"The fact that I am an asshole is well established," finished Vicky.

"So it is," said Sunshine bluntly.

She tightened her lips and opened her mouth again to speak, but something caught her eye and she cursed in surprise as her face wrinkled in disgust. Vicky saw a dark smear of mascara on the arm of Sunshine's sweater.

Sunshine gave an angry look to Vicky, then unzipped her sweater and pulled a cracked hand mirror out, examining the dark and running smear around her eyes. "God damn it," she muttered, and then seemed to notice something else. She squinted and pursed her lips, and her brow furrowed. "Am I really wearing two colors of lipstick?" she said.

Vicky didn't say anything.

Sunshine squeezed her eyes shut, looking pained, then her face fell slack in defeat. She sat down and clicked her mirror shut. She went to zip her sweater up, and then paused and threw the whole thing off. The brightly colored patches pasted to her skin were garish in the sunlight, the skin around them puckered and sore. Sunshine picked at them hesitantly, and smoothed a few down, glancing furtively at Vicky.

"Ruts," said Vicky.

"Shut the fuck up," said Sunshine.

The insects buzzed through the air.

"I'm sorry," offered Vicky, almost choking on the word. She hoped that it would unfurl the knot of guilt that was yanking on her stomach but it didn't at all, which

annoyed her immensely.

“No you’re not,” said Sunshine.

“You’re right,” admitted Vicky, “But I’m trying.”

Sunshine looked away from Vicky for a moment. When she looked back up she ran a hand through her hair and rested her head on her palm. Her eyes were unattractively narrow, but their irises were large dark and very beautiful, Vicky noticed suddenly. They peered out from the pale skin surrounding them, bright and deep.

“You’re actually pretty good looking,” said Vicky.

“If you want to smoke, go ahead,” Sunshine said ignoring her.

“No, I’m ok,” lied Vicky. She swept her hair back over her shoulders.

“Do you really have no friends?” said Sunshine, with an odd expression on her face.

“Of course I have friends,” lied Vicky. She was starting to sweat in earnest now. Sunshine grimaced and hung her head for a moment, then looked up.

“My name is Yui Tanaka,” she said. “Tanaka’s my family name. Call me that.”

Vicky straightened up.

“I still want to get high,” said Sunshine

“Me too,” said Vicky.

Sunshine, or rather, Tanaka, cocked her head and gave her a discerning look. “Do you really?” she said.

“Always,” said Vicky, “But it would kill me. Let’s go inside.”

It was morning, Vicky now realized, as the comparative silence earlier in the day had given rise to the muted roar, the wheezing, labored breathing of the gigantic city. The screech of rail cars worming their way through the colossal junk heap that was south Los Angeles began to cut through the thickening air. They began to clamber across the rusted and bent ruin of the atrium to the stairwell.

“So, we have two things to do,” said Vicky as they picked their way down, “find out how to destroy this bloody head case hiring us is, and find out what happened to your friend Molly Zhang.”

“Molly was working with that... person,” said Tanaka. She handled the word ‘person’ with extreme care. Vicky sensed that they both had no desire to talk about what happened for the reason that they’d have to contemplate the depth of the shit they were buried in. “Maybe we can... I dunno, hit two birds with one stone, or whatever that saying is. If they were working together.”

“Working on what?” said Vicky, picking her way around a gaping, rusted hole in the roof.

“I don’t know. Something big, if Molly’s been missing for this long.”

Tanaka stopped.

“Let’s get me high,” she said. Vicky saw the smug look on her face and refrained from admonishing her. It was very hard.

“The reason being?” she said slowly, trailing off her words.

“My Bliss guy, the Apocalyptic Apothecary, knew Molly pretty well,” said Tanaka, picking her words carefully, “He could probably tell us what she’s been up to.”

“That’s quite a name,” said Vicky.

“He’s probably got a tiny dick,” said Tanaka, rubbing her eyes.

“We’ll do it after lunch, and we’re not doing it in the mess here,” said Vicky, happy to have somewhere to start. Truth be told, she was very worried they’d have to start directly with the Madame. They’d have to go back to her later, anyway, to press her for information. Vicky was not looking forward to the encounter. “We’re just burning time anyway until we hear from the Madame. We’re not going to sleep much. Does your building have a pharmacy?”

Tanaka nodded, but she didn’t look enthused. “Hey. This guy is kind of a whackoff. He’ll want a lot for the information. I mean, a lot.”

“We don’t have to pay,” said Vicky.

Tanaka winced. “True.”

“You think your drug dealer will be ok with us just busting in?” said Vicky.

“No,” said Tanaka. The word escaped her mouth after a long grimace and a very painful pause. “He’ll probably never speak to me again. Might even try to get back at us.”

“You’re ok with that?” said Vicky. She fumbled for a cigarette. Ahead of them, the jagged hole of the stairwell gaped, the scattered detritus that littered it belching out onto the rooftop. She wondered when its occupants would return, or if they ever would. Looking at Tanaka, she saw the smaller woman was following her gaze.

“No,” said Tanaka finally, “I’m not ok with it. And you’re still an asshole.” Vicky realized the knot of guilt that had been contorting her gut had mostly melted. It was a relief. She was starting to think she’d become human again.

“But like you said,” Tanaka muttered, her eyes to the filth cluttering the stairwell, “Ruts.

They had lunch at a pho stall buried in the burnt out shell of a transit car that had been hauled and lashed to the side of an old world bank.

Rainy Day, or Victoria, as Tanaka guessed she was going to have to call her now, had only been in LA a few months. Before then, she had been in Jing Jin Ji, working private contracts for the Triads, and before that she was a private girl’s academy dropout.

It turned out she was, or had been, very rich.

“I didn’t peg you for nobility,” Tanaka said. Victoria shrugged. She had a baron for a cousin. She’d learned how to lace a corset and lay a dinner table. When Tanaka asked about Vicky’s family, the thin woman went tight lipped and gave her one word responses. She smoked incessantly and even more when she was talking about herself, so Tanaka gave up. Victoria seemed relieved.

She asked Tanaka about Molly. Through spoonfuls of pho, Tanaka accounted how they had met. Truth be told, at first, they’d spent most of the times they’d seen each other checked into nirvana, in the odd half friendship forged by circumstance. It was only later when Tanaka had started working at the House that Molly had opened up more to her, taken her under her wing.

“Who is she?” said Victoria, as they sat on the roof of the burnt out transit car. It wasn’t raining but Tanaka wished it was. The air wasn’t bad today in this part of the city, so their filter masks hung around their necks as they slurped their soup. However, the heat was oppressive.

“Rich. Bored,” said Tanaka, trying to think about other words she could use to

describe her.

“Sounds like a lot of my classmates,” said Victoria.

“Do you still - talk to them?” said Tanaka, curious. Victoria cocked an invisible eyebrow at her and went back to her Pho.

“Molly was... smart,” said Tanaka, “Smart, but kind of shallow. She had a crush on me, so truth be told I think that’s part of why she kept me around.”

“Kept you around?” said Victoria. She had her ratty coat on, even in the heat of midday, but Tanaka understood why, having seen what was underneath. She watched the other woman intently for a moment. The curtain of dead looking hair hid most of Victoria’s face, but even through it you could see that her eyes never stopped moving. It wasn’t nervousness, but something else, a kind of pre-natural awareness, like a bird flitting from place to place. Tanaka got the sense, looking at the other woman’s hair, like it was a curtain, another coat, hiding something scarred and damaged underneath.

“Well?” said Vicky, a look of amusement on her thin face.

“Well yeah,” said Tanaka, her cheeks flushing. “Molly,” she coughed through a mouthful of food, “She kept me around. I mean, strictly speaking, I’m nobody. She surrounded herself with people, you know. Celebrities. Lords. I’m just some classless little meen.”

“Lords? The Madame’s not nobility.”

“She’s not?” said Tanaka, surprised. “How do you know that?” Vicky gave her a flat expression. Tanaka was learning not to get too irritated with the bizarre woman’s habits.

“Is she a good head cracker?” said Vicky, as if in apology.

“The best I’ve seen,” said Tanaka, “she’s a mancer, but she used to be a changeling. She kind of... roped me into it I guess. Talked about it all the time.” Tanaka tapped the edge of her bowl with her chopsticks, thinking. “It was kind of a... religious thing for her, same as the drugs. Some Chinese medicine stuff like... ki, yang, yin, samsara, all that stuff.” Tanaka hated how air headed she sounded. She ought to have known more about this. That or her Buddhist phase was far more superficial than she liked to think of. “She loved talking about circles, and bubbles, and breaking cycles, and dharma and stuff. It was pretty fun to listen to when you were chilled out on something I guess.”

“Definitely like my classmates,” said Victoria, and continued in a sing song voice, “Bored and rich. Rich and bored.” Tanaka noticed she had barely picked at her food, and wondered how much the thin woman actually ate. She cringed at the thought that she was beginning to feel slightly sympathetic, and then shuddered a little as she realized that should she try and quit, she might be in the same physical shape in a few short months.

“I met her, in the real world, you know,” said Tanaka, with sudden realization, “She was pretty much the same, same appearance, same color hair, same attitude, same circle of friends.”

“In LA?” said Victoria.

“Yeah,” said Tanaka, and swallowed, “I don’t know if she lives here though, she said her family was from Jing Jin Ji. What if she’s here? We could - we could ask the Madame.” Tanaka trailed off as she realized how futile that would be.

“Bad idea,” said Victoria, slurping down the final parts of her soup. Looking

down at Victoria's plate, Tanaka saw that she had very carefully removed and separated out the mushrooms and the bean sprouts from her pho into neat little piles.

Tanaka was about to say something disparaging, but then saw that Victoria was staring intently people from the crowd that was filtering lazily down the street, her eyes sliding from figure to figure. She followed her gaze. A filthy couple, locked arm in arm. A stooped elderly woman, leaning over a counter strewn with secondhand pharmaceuticals. A drunkard, squatting and smoking in the gutter with a toddler crouched low by his heels.

"Look," said Victoria, her voice distant, "I'll let you in on something that just occurred to me. The Madame doesn't know one spot about where her granddaughter is."

"What?" scoffed Tanaka, "Of course she does."

"She doesn't," said Victoria, her eyes still flickering about. "I'm sure she knows only as much as we do. She cut her own deal with that Emissary woman."

She was right, of course.

Tanaka put her bowl down and rubbed her forehead. Her eyes were sore from crying earlier and her skin was damp with sweat.

"We best move quickly," said Victoria.