

X.

Victoria Palm and the Bullet Hotel

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

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

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

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

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

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

Their kill girl, Ms. No-Sell, was extremely good. As Vicky watched, she hurled an insufferably kitschy coffee table about five meters where it frisbeed into a security fragment and took him in the face with a wet crack. Vicky heard Ms. Sunshine make a small distressed sound as the figment crumpled up against the wall and sort of smeared down to the floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I've got it," said Sunshine, squirming. She concentrated, then put her hands together, breathing deeply. Classic mistake. You didn't really need to do anything at all if you wanted to make something, just act as if it was always there. Acting like you had do something special to bring it into being just made the dream harder to convince. That

was the trick. Vicky's muscles twitched as she fervently pulled her mouth shut and pushed her hands to her sides to stop herself from correcting the little woman. She had to wake up next to her in eighty minutes and she didn't want to get locked out again. She was out of cigarettes.

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

"You're holding it by the barrel," said Vicky.

Sunshine adjusted her grip.

"Well let's be glad you're not our mancer," sighed Ms. Fly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

attempted (and often successful) under-Drip murder a surprisingly real and not at all uncommon occurrence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was. But Vicky was uneasy.

Was she uneasy at the danger they were in? Was that why she was thinking of death? She didn't know. She'd died a lot before. The other problem with dying, Vicky

thought, is that the fact that it wasn't real didn't make the experience any more pleasant. You usually forgot your regular dreams. Here, fully conscious and lucid, dying could be a remarkably real experience. Pain was real here, and could be even more intense than it could ever be in the waking world. A remarkably strong willed person could certainly try to ignore it. *I am not being shot*, the person could think, *these bullets are not real and I am perfectly fine. This is just a dream.* But the same lucidity that allowed them to be there, to be conscious and share their consciousness with others, and feel and breathe, demanded that the pain was there all the same.

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

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

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

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

A man close by was shooting her in the chest.

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

It was a bullet.

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

"Good work," said Mr. Himself.

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

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

"I'll get better," she said.

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

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

"That's not fair," whimpered the hardass.

Mr. Himself promptly shot him in the balls.

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

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

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

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

Everyone grimaced.

"You fucking criminals," moaned the man after he'd stopped screaming.

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

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

"How is she doing that?" whined the man.

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

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

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

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

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

"We need a new approach," said Himself, "What's the time on the first bore seal?"

"Thirty five minutes," said Ms. Fly hesitantly.

"I'm gonna throw up," moaned the man.

"Die," said Himself.

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

"Die," said Himself.

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

"Come on, man," said Sunshine weakly.

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

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

"Die," he said.

The man died.

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

"Would you really do that?" said Vicky. Mr. Himself didn't say anything, so Vicky was uneasy.

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

She looked closely and saw the droplets of water around Himself were actually bending into tiny lines around his body as though sliding through some warped lens. Vicky had not done much commuting into the very deep corridors of the Madame's

shadowy empire, but every time she met its denizens she was reminded anew why she needed to get out of this business as soon as possible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ms. Fly looked incredulous and crossed her arms.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Next, a figment. It was hard to make figments. But it was also the best way to fool a dream, and the best way to get around ‘popping the bubble’ as it had been put. No human being had the raw mental power to keep a dream stable and understandable to

all its participants. So they were meticulously hand-crafted. Anyone could buy a dream, of course, but they had to have the hardware to spin it on, which you weren't getting away with without some serious investment, since they were spun up on some extremely heavy biomechanical hardware made partly of the fragments of dead men's brains, and curated by the enhanced techno-savants known as Maguses. This made sure the dream was rich and believable - stable and fully realized, which was more than anything a regular old human brain could do. The only people authorized to fuck with this were those given sovereignty.

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

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

So Vicky had to be very careful.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm fine," said No-sell, a look of disbelief on her face.

"She's fine," said Vicky, without blinking.

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

"The elevator had just enough room for seven people to fit inside," said Vicky, "and normally, its use wasn't allowed by guests. However, there was some trouble at the hotel that day and the regular elevators weren't working. Sarah knew she might get in trouble with the management, but the guests seemed in a very sorry state, and she was

very happy to allow them to ride along to see Mr. Lee. After all, the guests were the top priority at the hotel, and she was very happy to please them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How are you doing that?” said Vicky.

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

“Doesn’t it hurt?” she said.

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

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

“Would anyone like any tea?” said Vicky.

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

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

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

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

“Well done,” said Mr. Himself.

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

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

“That's a little indulgent,” said Tanaka.

“It's in vogue,” said Rainy Day.

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

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

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

“Proceed,” he said, and then chaos broke loose.

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

Hot water sloshed around her thighs and Tanaka realized she had run into a shallow bath. Raw images of the last fifteen seconds ran through her head like a bizarre

slide show and she wobbled slowly to a crouch as blood rushed to her head. A burning somewhere in her lower extremities told her she had been grazed somewhere, but she didn't care to look.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Leave!" roared No-sell.

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

"Leave!" cackled No-Sell and there was a stampede of the mostly nude as impossibly handsome men dropped half-loaded weapons and shot out of their hiding places and climbed over each other to cram themselves out through the exit doors. A few of them wavered and dissolved, mist-like, as they woke up.

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

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

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

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

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

“How is she doing that?” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There it was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Second bore,” burbled Ms. Fly.

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

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

“Aye, aye,” said Fly, cheerily.

“Ok,” said Tanaka.

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

“Ms. Rainy Day will accompany you,” repeated Mr. Himself.

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

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

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

“Why the pairing?” said Rainy Day. She didn’t sound accusatory, just tired and oddly interested, like someone picking up and turning over seashells on the beach.

“This team is too good. I’ve never seen a team that’s worked this fast. Our bores were instantaneous. Our kill girl can’t die. Our binder found our man in less than ten seconds.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He mentioned Molly,” she said.

“Who?” said Mr. Love Thy Neighbor.

“Ms. Papillion,” said Ms. Fly, “The Madame’s grand-daughter.”

“Why?” said Tanaka. A feeling of dread had clutched her innards and refused to let go. As she watched the man on the floor, a strange but wholly expected thing happened. A thick dollop of blood poured from the thin wound in his forehead where Ms. Fly had impaled him, and then the wound itself began to expand, first to the size of a finger, then to a coin, and even bigger.

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

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

“Well,” she said, clearing her throat. She stretched her arms out, spun them a little, warmed her face up. She kicked her feet out, left, then right, then coughed a little. Maybe she could squeeze some vocal warm ups in there before she had to go in. It was exactly like she was about to dive into freezing cold water, but cold water was at least

just water. There was an entire mind on the other side of that smooth surface, and the thought of entering it was tying her guts into knots.

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

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