

***Six Inches***

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## *I. Tanaka and the Pulse*

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

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

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

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

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

She could probably disappear in here. Nobody would notice.

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

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

## *II. Tanaka and the other Tanaka*

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

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

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

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

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

Looked about right.

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

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

Next was the most important part, the dermals. She popped the swatches of artificial skin carefully out of their cases, tapping each one with a click to shake them lose. 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 were yeomen, and Tanaka was even worse off than the menial 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 and it showed. 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.

"Eaaaugggh!" 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?”

“Eaugh!”

“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.”

“Aaeeugh!”

“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.