

It was early morning when the call came. Tanaka heard it, or dreamed it, she wasn't sure which. A woman was talking to a man whose voice came out artificial and tinny. Tanaka thought he must have been a badly formed figment, like the early, cheap ones that used to talk to her when she was in company primary school and used the ECOG to go on field trips.

The smell of tobacco smoke permeated the air, and she woke up a little more, her nose wrinkling. Rainy Day had hung up the call and set the light on dim, but Tanaka could see through cracked and aching eyes the tiny little pinprick of the Magnasantian woman's cigarette.

"Don't smoke inside," she muttered, to nobody in particular, and tried to return to sleep, but the persistent tickle of cigarette ash irritated her nose. She felt like death.

Rainy Day was rummaging around. Abruptly, the light in the cube brightened to painful intensity, and Tanaka made wounded animal sounds until it dimmed again.

Something wrapped in plastic was dropped unceremoniously onto Tanaka's face. Unwilling or not, she was vaguely conscious by then, so she opened her eyes and peeled it off her sweaty forehead to look at it. It was a stimulant pill.

"Hold on," said Rainy Day. She was seated on the foam, smoking hurriedly, shirtless and hunched forward. Her ribs were pulled taught against her skin, and her fingers were making rolling motions, restless and thin. She blew out a rushed cloud of smoke and turned to Tanaka. "Do you have an ashtray?"

Tanaka wanted to kick her.

"Eat that," said Rainy Day, gesturing with her cigarette towards the pill. "We're wanted at the House, but not by the Madame. Mr. Himself just called."

Tanaka was sure that her patches were ok. She had checked them before sleeping, and she wouldn't need another kicker for ten or so hours. Even so, her stomach lurched.

"What's going on?" she asked, fully awake.

Rainy Day didn't answer. With a pained expression, she looked at Tanaka, then rolled over to where her coat was folded in a neat square on the floor, and rummaged through the pockets, sticking her almost-finished cigarette between her fingers.

She paused, pulling something out. It was a metal cigarette case. When she flipped it open, it was completely empty.

"Fuck," she said.

Drip Unified time was not too far off from West Pacifica, and although on Loop 1 time was irrelevant and eternal, the House still kept strict hours. The night's revelries were at the peak of their full and dirty swing, and would soon subside. The jazz orchestra had filed off at some point before their arrival and had been replaced by a piano playing frog accompanied by a cat singing soprano. Tanaka knew that this particular cat was a bit of an asshole.

The music was barely audible anyhow, over the dull roar of the café's patrons, who still streamed and lurched in loud and drunken crowds from floor to floor and table to table, and sometimes table to floor. Tanaka and Rainy Day, wearing their street bodies, still had trouble squeezing in the entrance as an impressively dressed gate

warden stroked his mustaches and cross referenced his gilded copy of the guest list.

Tanaka felt no small pleasure when the frog from the previous day goggled at them as they passed through the inner gates of the house and onto the main floor, past the looming coat check, past the stately kitchen doors, and across the heaving main floor, where it was possible to look up into the crooked, molten ribs of the ancient building all the way to the top. They clambered over drunks, criminals, and wild-eyed cat waitresses bearing heaped trays of steaming food to the fifth floor, where they found their private booth.

The whole team was crammed inside a boat suspended off the balcony and lashed to a crimson pillar by golden cords. It wasn't hard to recognize them, but it was strange to see them in their street bodies. Love-Thy Neighbor was easy to spot even without his bandages, but he now sported a shorter cut, suspenders, and wafer-thin eyeglasses that made him seem a lot younger than Tanaka had thought. No-sell had golden, glowing skin, the face of a goddess, six arms and some kind of punk rock ensemble, but still sported far too many facial piercings for Tanaka's comfort.

Fly had the wry face and tight bun that Tanaka had seen before, and was wearing a knitted pink sweater covered in patterns far too many kittens. Mr. Hate looked exactly the same as he had when they met him in the car.

"No mask, huh?" she mumbled as she shuffled in next to him. Rainy day pushed in on the other side and Tanaka realized there was only six of them. The boat swung a little as they sat down.

"Ah well, never really bothered, myself," said Mr. Hate with a shrug. His voice was soft and pleasant, and barely audible over the roar of the café. He scratched his broken nose.

"You look like that c-pop star," said the goddess Ms. No-sell, eyeing Tanaka.

"Sure," said Tanaka, trying to stamp down irritation.

Nobody said anything else. If anything, the group looked haggard, and Tanaka knew exactly what they were all thinking about.

"So," said Rainy Day, reading her mind, "Are you all done for a while, too?"

"Yes," said Love Thy Neighbor, almost immediately.

"Need the money," muttered Mr. Hate. Fly said nothing, and No-sell gave a grimace, and took a long drink.

"Does anyone know just what the hell all that shit was about?" said Love Thy Neighbor.

"Sweetie don't start this," said Fly.

"You know what I'm talking about," said Love Thy Neighbor, "what did you see in there? What was stuck in that fuckboy's head?" He pointed accusingly at Tanaka.

"Who cares?" said No-Sell past the rim of her drink as she drained it completely.

"I've got children, man," said Love Thy Neighbor.

They dropped silent, letting the dull roar of the restaurant fill the booth again. The boat swayed lightly on its golden tethers and Tanaka could imagine they were floating on the air in some kind of surreal sea of noise and food, the battered survivors of a bizarre shipwreck.

"Why the hell are we here?" said Love Thy Neighbor.

"For answers," said Mr. Himself.

He was sitting in the middle of the group. Perhaps he had always been sitting

there. Tanaka had no idea how she hadn't noticed him before, and from the reactions of those seated around her, neither had they. Himself looked exactly the same as before, down to the driving gloves.

The hole that was his head tore the bright air as he shifted, pulling something out of his suit jacket and setting it on the table. The apple rolled there, bright and glossy.

Ms. No-sell reached out one of her numerous arms and snatched it from the table before it could roll off and hit the floor, looking at it incredulously. Their eyes all turned to Mr. Himself.

"What is this?" said No-sell. "You haven't delivered yet?"

"There's been no contact from our client," said Himself, "Nor our mediator. Which makes *this* particularly troubling." Before he had even finished speaking, he produced his small set of iron tongs and very carefully plucked something from his suit pocket, a small packet wrapped in stained cloth. It came undone as he shook it and set it down on the table before them, and Tanaka saw that it was the pact coin. It threw off an evil light in the fiery glow of the café.

"So what?" said No-sell, exasperated. Mr. Hate rubbed his gnarled brow and leaned back, and Love Thy Neighbor's face turned to a barely concealed look of irritation. Mr. Himself said nothing, but placed his gloved hands upon his lap, and sat still. Tanaka waited for some announcement, but nothing happened.

"So what if the client's a little late on cracking the pact coin," growled No-sell, and cocked her head at Himself ruefully. She pointed a golden finger at him, wrapped in jewels, and cocked an eyebrow. "I was in the middle of curling up with a very attractive piece of ass."

"Hold on, now," said Fly, "What's wrong with the coin?"

"There's nothing wrong with the coin," said No-sell, throwing all six of her palms in the air.

"There's something very wrong with the coin," said Ms. Rainy Day. Her handsome face and eyes were fixated on the evil little artifact, and Mr. Himself gave the barest of gestures, an open hand invitation for them to look. They all leaned in, even No-sell, who broke off her glare to see.

"Oh," said No-sell, as she saw exactly what had all captivated their attention, pulling them in unwillingly. The coin's sticky red surface trembled and contracted, as though a living thing. The figures and words that were etched into it swirled madly from form to form, making intricate patterns, mutating into fractal spirals, and bubbling and warping through disturbing shapes.

There was, indeed, something extremely wrong with the coin.

"How long's it been doing that?" breathed Mr. Hate.

"Since extraction," said Mr. Himself. "I have had difficulty reading it, but as far as may be gleaned from it, the pact has changed. It's duration was, as per normal contract terms, one day. As far as I can tell, this is changed, and it is now *indefinite*."

They all leaned back. The boat creaked. A huffing waitress cat swung by their booth, saw the looks on their faces, and immediately put her head down and withdrew.

"*Indefinite*?" said Tanaka.

Ms. No-sell folded her arms (with some difficulty, Tanaka noticed), and set the apple down on the table. Tanaka felt like someone had a clamp over her heart and was tightening it by degrees.

“The pact coin, has, in fact, been tampered with,” said Himself, his fingers arched. “I strongly suspect this complication was built into the contract.”

“I didn’t know it was possible to screw with a pact coin,” said Tanaka. Her mouth suddenly tasted bitter, and the air seemed very thin.

“It’s not,” said Love Thy Neighbor, with about the same dazed look as Tanaka imagined on her own face. “Nobody can do that to a coin. There must be some kind of mistake.” He rubbed the thin stubble on the sides of his head, his eyes fixated on the undulating surface of the coin.

“You can,” said Rainy Day, “If you’re skilled enough, and stupid enough to try it.”

“Stupid being the key word,” added Fly.

“This was an intentional act,” said Himself, “Not an act of stupidity.”

“I knew a Western Digital face who tried to duplicate a coin once,” said Rainy Day, “He didn’t understand why the company doesn’t meddle in the affairs of ghouls. It took them less than three days for someone to fry his brain, and I don’t think they were even paid for it. So whoever did this is extremely stupid or extremely cocky.”

“Or extremely powerful,” said Himself.

“So you want us to stick around?” said Mr. Love Thy Neighbor, “I’m out already, I’m paid! We’re not a team! We got what we came for. The job is deader than my grannie!” He jabbed a finger at the apple on the table and motioned around widely in disbelief. When nobody met his eyes, his expression darkened.

“Come on!” he said, his voice sharp, “This is bullshit!” He slapped the table suddenly. A bright watch chain jangled out from his suit pocket, and his smooth, dark face wrinkled in anger. There was no motion from anyone but Mr. Himself, who turned to face him, and for a moment, they sat like that. Love Thy Neighbor held his pose, but seemed to falter a moment.

“Tell me you knew about this,” he said, his expression more level.

“I assure you I did not,” said Himself, “And I advise against leaving.”

“Technically,” said Mr. Hate, his thick eyebrows raised, his eyes turned down, “We are still a team. The coin hasn’t been broken yet.”

“Don’t pull any of that trash,” said No-sell with a dismissive wave of three of her hands, “They’ll break the coin. They always break the coin.”

“What if they don’t break the coin?” said Tanaka, her voice quiet. Everything was in there, down to their DNA.

No-sell leant back. Love Thy Neighbor ran a palm over his smooth forehead, his face turning dark with what Tanaka now recognized as fear. He put his elbows on his knees and cradled his head in his manicured hands, head cocked at the coin.

There was silence in the booth, as much as there could have been with the ocean-like roar of the restaurant and the tinkle of piano music. Tanaka could hear her pulse again. She thought if she listened very carefully, she could have heard all of their pulses.

They waited. Nobody moved.

“So what now, team leader?” said Ms. No-sell finally.

“We go upstairs. We deliver the package,” said Mr. Himself, the stars in his head suddenly painfully bright, “And we press for information.” He stretched his fingers, an unusually restless motion, and separated his heels, leaning forward.

“Aggressively,” he added.

Tanaka could see the outline of his gun pressed against his jacket. She licked her lips.

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Their passage through the short, fragrant corridor to the Madame's office was led and lit by the glowing, hungry barrel of Ms. No-sell's gun. The light sent strange glimmers off the glassy eyes of the porcelain cats lining the cabinets set into the walls.

To Tanaka's surprise, the doors to the Madame's office had been surrounded by a small crowd of eavesdroppers. Apparently the Madame had been raising a storm in her office with someone for hours, even (unthinkably) canceling appointments. Now, the Madame's deep, satanic voice was raised in heated conversation with someone and filled the corridor wall to wall as they strode forward unwelcome into her sanctuary.

The drapes were drawn. The black room was dark, as usual, but the hearth flared hungry and strong, and several fiery lamps were strung around the room. It threw harsh and hellish light on the massive bulk of the Madame, who had drawn herself almost full up out of her desk, so far that Tanaka thought she could see her hair ornaments scraping the high vaulted ceiling.

As they entered, the fire in the hearth burst into a crackling roar and the light of the lamps flared as the Madame swung her looming face towards them, her eyes aglow. Against her will, Tanaka cringed, expecting terrible retribution. Even Ms. No-sell faltered.

"Oh it's you," said the Madame, her expression dropping to one of mere irritation. The fires of the hearth receded and crawled back and the lamps dimmed, and the Madame seemed to deflate a little. "Put those silly things away," she said, waving towards them with a single taloned hand.

Tanaka lowered her gun. The others did not.

The Madame coughed operatically and waved thin smoke away from her face. "This damned hearth," she muttered, "I will forgive the fact that you let yourself in. Sit down, and drink some tea." It was not a request. She raised an eyebrow at them and motioned to a large oiled ceramic teapot on the corner of her desk, as if she'd been expecting them. "I am discussing *particulars* with your client."

She spat the middle part of her sentence out with extreme distaste, almost baring her teeth, and it was then that Tanaka noticed the second person in the room.

It was hard not to miss her, now that Tanaka looked properly. A soft light was coming off her. Tanaka couldn't quite understand what she was seeing at first, just a jumble of images, like someone had folded a frozen video screen and crumpled it together in the middle of the room.

Then the woman stood up and Tanaka realized she was wearing a video screen, or something like it, draped like a robe over her body. The screen was covered in scattered images: company logos, animals, corpses, lovers, advertisements, stills of what looked like raw meat, cartoon characters. They were bleeding, dripping into each other, sliding like glowing wax.

It was a robe, she now realized. It was worn loose, covering her whole body and pulled tight around the woman's head like a cowl or wimple, leaving only her oval face visible. She was barefoot, bare-handed, and completely hairless. She had the serene half smile, Roman nose, marble white skin, and half lidded eyes of a Christian saint. The rims of her eyes were extremely red.

As she stood up, she cupped her hands in front of her stomach. Her smile grew to one of serene joy as she took them in, her face grew ecstatic and pure. She turned her palms slowly towards them and stretched her arms out awkwardly as if she was drunk or underwater. The whole thing was so artificial that Tanaka found it disturbing, and took a step back.

“Welcome,” she said. Tanaka instantly feared her from that single word. Her voice was bright, pleasant, and slow. It was perfectly enunciated. It didn’t so much resonate class as it was carved from it. It was the voice of nobility, luxury, and awful, distant power.

“I am the Emissary,” said the woman.

“Emissary to who?” spat No-sell, to Tanaka’s left.

The woman didn’t respond to her at first. Then her face lit up, the corners of her mouth lifting, her eyes going wide and then crinkling up. But it was all wrong. It was like watching someone get a hilarious joke at half speed. All meaning was drained from the expression. Everything was exaggerated, too big, and too slow. It sent chills rippling down Tanaka’s spine.

Then the woman laughed and it was worse. Tanaka couldn’t even recognize the sound at first. Each laugh was clear, pure joy, and drawn out so slowly that it could have been someone playing it back to extract the sound from it. It couldn’t possibly have come from anything human.

There were tears in the woman’s eyes as she laughed, and her gaping, open mouth was pulled back in a terrifying rictus. Her lips and tongue were very red. There was something almost obscene about it, and Tanaka had to look away.

It kept going.

“Sit down,” said the Madame, “We have much to discuss.”

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They sat.

The Emissary sat too, her white hands folded over each other. The Madame sat, ensconced behind her desk in the flickering darkness. They did a lot of sitting. No tea was served.

Finally, Mr. Himself reached out with his short iron tongs and placed the pact coin on the edge of the Madame’s desk, in easy reach. They watched it writhe and glitter in the lamplight.

“Break it,” said Himself.

The Madame took a long look at the coin. Then she reached down into her desk and produced a slightly longer, sharper looking pair of tongs and a small silver hammer. She set the hammer gently on the surface of her desk, then grasped the coin with the tongs and turned it over, peering at it over her spectacles with her ferocious gaze. Her dark lips pursed.

“Well,” she said to the Emissary, clearing her throat. Her predator eyes narrowed. “Are you going to reveal any other hidden and poisonous ways you are attempting to manipulate my employees.”

“Associates,” said Himself.

The Madame raised a razor-thin eyebrow and threw a disparaging glance his

way. "Nobody has dared tamper with a pact coin in this house before. It is a serious matter," she continued. She set the coin down carefully, took her spectacles off, and rubbed her eyes slowly and deliberately.

"Usually the punishment is cessation of business with this house, followed by excruciating death," said the master of the House. The Emissary made an expression. Here's how it was: stupidly slow, lips pulled back, teeth parted, mouth hanging open, pale brows high, eyes half closed as if dying or in religious ecstasy.

It was a smile, maybe. It was a long, serene smile, open and idiotic. Tanaka had never wanted to leave a room more in her life.

"Well, let's get this over with," said the Madame, tapping her nails on hard surface of her desk, then pulled a ledger from the stack on her desk. Her spectacles shot back on her nose. She ducked below the desk again, rummaging deeper, sticking her entire, massive arm inside, and came up with a thick golden seal in the shape of a cat. It was slammed into a bloody red inkwell, and then the paper in three separate places.

"Your business is concluded at this house," rumbled the Madame. Fingers of steam drifted off the paper where the ink lay wet. "Your coin has bought you the blood of devils, of hounds in the shape of men." She shot each word out with a little hiss of steam from the paper. "Are you satisfied with their gory prize?"

"Give me what I asked for," said the Emissary. Her expression hadn't changed. It was perfectly happy. Saintly even.

The Madame gave her a terrifying look. "Very well," sniffed the Madame, "Gentlemen, if you would." She tapped her tongs on the dark, oiled wood of her desk. All eyes turned to Himself. He leaned back and pocketed his own tongs, and reached deep inside his coat pocket. When he brought the apple out, it shone in the heat of the lamplight like a jewel.

The Emissary's eyes opened painfully wide, the skin pulling taut and bloodless. Bright streaks of blood were shot through her eyeballs.

"Bring it to me," she whispered, her voice ecstatic and hoarse. She spoke extremely quickly, her eyes and lips wet and trembling.

"I do not bring," said Himself, his dark voice resonant, and what happened next was so fast Tanaka could hardly catch it.

The Emissary's face spasmed horribly. Muscles quivered under thin and luminous skin, and for a second Tanaka saw it snap into something primal and terrible: bloodless lips pulled back in an animal snarl, red gums exposed, nostrils flaring and taut, brow rippled into a pure expression of rage. The air pulled and Himself shot straight forward.

But he didn't actually shoot forward, Tanaka realized a second later. It was as if a giant had pinched the fabric of the world and pulled forward, so that the world around Himself moved, and Himself didn't budge an inch. Then it snapped back to normal, just like that.

It was over in a second, and then they were on their feet, hands on their weapons, chairs clattering to the smooth floor.

But the Emissary did nothing further. She had tilted forward off her chair, hunched over on the floor as if in pain, her body twitching and swaying. Then she brought her face up and Tanaka realized she was sitting on her haunches with the apple

held between contorted fingers.

She was devouring it. She ate it as though she had never had food in her life, pushing it into her face, choking, spitting out chunks and slurping them back up, pushing it in with long fingers, wrapping her teeth around it. Her eyes were desperate and glassy, and there were tears in them. The noise was unbearable.

She finished, core and all, and retched, hacking out chunks of apple onto the floor. Then she knelt, and lapped them up like a dog.

The Madame looked on from her desk, her expression unreadable. "I take that for satisfaction," she said. She picked up the ledger between thick fingers as the Emissary slurped the final bits of apple off the floor. Saliva and tears dripped from her face, and she made a low moan, swaying back and forth slowly.

Tanaka gripped her gun, which suddenly felt like a child's toy, and caught the Madame's expression. It was hatred, deep and unexplained. Tanaka had never seen the Madame hate before, and never wished to again. The master of the House of Cats wasn't much for wasting her time on hating you. If she disliked you, she would just get you out of the way, preferably with as much noise and mess as possible, to make busy work for the rats to clean later. The Madame sometimes dipped down as far as disdain, but never further. This was something new. Something terrible.

Tanaka wanted to leave, but she couldn't turn away. She was trapped, just like her heart, banging away in her chest.

"This contract is concluded, and we must let the sleepers rest. So say I," said the Madame, her mouth tight, and threw the ledger across the room. It flew with unnatural speed and slotted itself into a bookshelf with a loud crack. Tanaka swear she saw a burst of flame as it snapped in.

The huge woman seemed to settle somewhat, settling into her desk and rubbing her hand as if she had touched something distasteful. Then, deftly, she picked up the silver hammer on her desk. They all looked then, even the woman in the multicolored robe on the floor, as the head of the hammer rose up into the dark air, and down with a bright arc. The coin shattered with a surprisingly organic sound. The flurry of tiny plinks as it flew apart and ricocheted off the surface of the Madame's desk was sweet relief to Tanaka's ears. She felt a knot unfurl in her stomach and saw the rest of the group visible relax out of the corner of her eye. Mr. Love Thy Neighbor exhaled audibly. Tanaka could see cold sweat on his rich, dark skin. Even No-sell seemed to drop the tension from her body, her six arms relaxing a little, the point of her gun dropping to the floor.

"We're not finished," said the Madame.

"I thought as much," said Mr. Himself.

Tanaka's stomach seized up again.

The pieces of the coin were crawling across the table, like tiny crimson slugs. Slowly at first, but then increasingly fast, as though drawn there by a magnet. They met each other, like droplets of rain on glass, fusing with an audible hiss.

"While your client's methods are reprehensible and I find her personally abhorrent, she and I have discussed conditions for the better part of a day," said the Madame, her eyes following the thin rivulets of red crawling across her desk. Her mouth was a tight line. Something was terribly wrong. "As you see, she had been tampering with your contract. Rather than continue to break my Law and invite my extreme



displeasure, we both decided on an agreement to all of our mutual benefit.”

Tanaka’s mind reeled. Nothing seemed right anymore.

“I have arranged for a hazard bonus of a quite ludicrous sum, and she agreed to stop tampering with the fundamentals of my business. In return she wants exclusivity for a period of no more than 72 hours, after which she will allow the coin to be broken as usual. The terms and goals are similar to the first. If, after that period has passed and she still continues to push my good will,” said the Madame, and her dark claws came down tight upon the burnished wood of her desk, “I will personally make it my agenda to see her excised from the universe.”

No-sell’s gun revved up. “Would someone mind explaining to me,” said No-sell, “What the fuck is going on?”

The droplets came together on the desk with a bright hiss, and cooled rapidly. A jet of steam rose into the air and wafted lazily over the hearth.

A new pact coin lay there, thick and shiny.

“I have forged for you,” said the Madame, “a new contract.”

There was commotion.

Tanaka found herself raising her voice, somehow, but she didn’t really know what she was saying over the clamor of voices. Somewhere in it, Rainy Day put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back, his eyes hard. No-sell was waving her gun. Ms. Fly had her hand on one of No-sell’s arms and was trying to direct the barrel of the gun away from the Emissary, who was crouched on the floor with a dreamy smile on her face.

“It is against the Law of *all* Houses to forge contracts on other’s behalf,” said Himself, finally. He hadn’t moved.

“It is,” said the Madame, her upper lip tight, “But as I am sovereign, and the law flows from my immense and blackened heart, I’m making a few exceptions.”

Ms. No-sell spat in the hearth.

“Fuck you!” said Mr. Love Thy Neighbor, his throat raw. He slammed his hands down on the edge of the Madame’s desk, and then pulled them back, realizing what he’d done. He pushed away slowly as he met the Madame’s gaze.

“Careful,” growled the Madame.

“A few exceptions?” said Love Thy Neighbor, his voice tight, his face wrought with desperation, “*Everything* is in that coin – you think I’m comfortable with that being around an hour longer than it needs to be?”

“However will I get away with it?” said the Madame, flatly.

“I want out,” said Fly, her kindly face hard. There was a chorus of agreement. Tanaka felt oddly exhilarated. Love Thy Neighbor caught their eyes, then pointed a shaking finger at the Madame, which withered abruptly under the force of the Madame’s expression. He opened his mouth, and closed it almost as fast as the Madame drew herself up in her desk, looming almost to the ceiling. The fire in the hearth flared.

“I fought for you, you ungrateful little prick,” sneered the Madame, “Rather than waste the resources of my House hunting down some apocalyptic idiot who has the resources and tools to off you all before I inevitably find and skin her I have turned this into a business opportunity.”

From the floor, the Emissary smiled her idiot’s smile. She was rocking back and forth on her heels by the edge of the roaring hearth, her glowing robe throwing off

strange light onto its metal rimmed corners.

“How long would it take you to get a kill team to each of them with what you can pull from the coin?” said the Madame, around Love Thy Neighbor.

The Emissary’s smile grew wider. She settled on her haunches a little. Tanaka hated looking at her. It was like looking at very well-made doll with the face of the Virgin Mary. Nothing about her seemed to suggest a living being.

“Not long,” said the Emissary, dreamily, “Not long at all.”

The Madame raised an eyebrow pointedly at Love Thy Neighbor, and the fire in the room died down as she sank into her desk. Even in the dream world, the Nigerian was sweating through his suit. The rims of his glasses were bright in the lamplight.

“The coins were forged because the Houses need a Law, because there must be honor among thieves,” boomed the Madame. “The Old World needs the Loop, and its Houses, and their legions of ghouls and so whatever you may think, the power only flows one way here. They are afraid of us, which is why they must take our blood, because it thinks it protects them. Has it occurred to you we haven’t discussed pay yet?” said the Madame.

“Look – “ started Love Thy Neighbor, and was cut off by a single raised, taloned finger.

The Madame said a number. Love Thy Neighbor stopped cold. No-sell lowered her gun and Tanaka sat down, dazed. Mr. Hate raised his shaggy brows, shrugged, and joined her. Fly took her glasses off.

“Now Ma’m you’re just bullshitting us,” said Fly.

“No, no,” said the Emissary. She had stood up. Her beautiful, luminescent face was written across with motherly concern. “No, you shall have this. You deserve it. You are poor and lost and broken, but you shall be so no longer. You shall have all this and more.” She reached a pale hand out towards the group, turning it palm up, as though expecting something to be there. “You shall have glory.”

“Who the fuck are you, really? Magus? Some doped up face having a laugh? What’s your fiefdom?” said No-sell, tipping her head back. Tanaka could see a slight tremble in her shoulder, a tension in her jaw.

“I am the Emissary,” said the Emissary.

“Real fucking funny,” said No-sell.

“It is, isn’t it?” said the Emissary. Her lips were red and perfect. Something hard slid under her skin and Tanaka shivered involuntarily.

“Please don’t mistake me. You are instruments,” said the Emissary. She stepped forward into the shadow of the hearth and her glowing robe threw a nimbus around her face.

“Some people don’t like to treat instruments well,” she continued, “But I do. You are instruments of perfection. The world to come will be kind to you. You are my new apostles.” Her tongue pushed its way out of her mouth like something alive, slid across the corner of her mouth sluggishly, and withdrew.

“All I need is your time,” she said, “Bring me a few more things. That’s all. Just a few more things.”

Love Thy Neighbor was shaking his head. “I don’t care,” he said, his voice hoarse, his lips dry, “I don’t care about your fucking money.” He knelt suddenly, placing something on the floor, looking around to make sure they were all looking at him. It was

his gun.

With surprising violence, he kicked it straight into the hearth and threw his hands up before anyone could react. "I'm out, ok! You fucking hear me? Send your bullshit after me!" His voice was hot and raw.

The Emissary smiled and held her left palm out, shyly, like a child showing a parent something caught in the garden. The coin glittered there, stark red against her bloodless palm. Tanaka immediately glanced to the Madame's desk. It wasn't there.

The Emissary touched the corner of lips, as though contemplating something. It was a surprisingly natural motion, an illusion which was quickly ruined by the skin-pulling rictus of her awful smile. Tanaka thought the woman would laugh again, but she didn't. Perhaps it was worse that way.

Love Thy Neighbor looked at the coin and up to the Emissary's pale, round face. His eyes were deep pools of shadow, and his lips pulled back from his too-white teeth in a grimace. The Emissary closed her eyes and grasped the coin tightly, as if focusing on something. After a moment, she opened them again, and they were wet with mirth.

"Oh Jonathan Arbor," said the Emissary, and her smile pulled, pulled on her beautiful face. "I didn't know you had children."

Love Thy Neighbor froze.

After a moment, he turned away from the light. The shadows gathered over his face, and in a moment Tanaka saw the room was much darker and colder than she had realized.

"I'll contact you when the next job is ready," muttered the Madame. She slid another ledger out from the pile on her desk, smashed her red seal into it in three places, and that was that.