

There are those nights where no amount of sleep is really restful, just filled with dreams of the life that you used to live. It's no good for anyone, leads to regrets and contemplation of what should have been changed to keep you from where you are now. Instead, you roll yourself out of bed, get yourself dressed, and you head downtown.

Everything has sort of been a haze since you arrived. Hell, even the arrival itself was hard to explain, not to mention the changes. Red skin, natural not just painted on a whim or for cover. Teeth jutting out like a beast, and eyes that could make out the darkness. Maybe it was symbolic; a measure of all of the blood you had spilled, a maw fit for the voracity with which you took so many lives, and the recognition that you lived in the black. You could only hope that it could be symbolic like that, because there wasn't any other way to explain it. Certainly not one you liked.

Sure, the doctor took care of it all, but you saw the before screens. She may have matched you to your ID damn well, but that monster, that beast, that's what you really were, and there was no denying that it kept you up at night. So you shuffle your feet through the streets, staring at the pavement as the rain comes down, and you see it glinting in the corner of the pavement next to a building. There was blood on the sidewalk, slowly being washed away by the rain, but the gold trim catches the light and catches your eye, so you pick it up and raise a brow, looking at the service medal's black lettering.

**“CTPAX3HAKOB”**

You would laugh if it wasn't so random. Removing the pin's clasp and pulling the bit of blood soaked fabric away, you use it to pin your tie in place.

It's probably the closest you've gotten to a smile since you got here.

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When your mind is at ease, it manages to make everything seem that much more organized. Even when you know for a fact everything around you is a mess because you can see some of the world that really is. Streets make sense when before they looped in on themselves, and alleyways that wind down take you exactly where you know you need to be.

The rain hasn't stopped, but in this city that isn't a surprise. You learned to ignore it, like you did the fog and snow back home, and your jacket certainly helps. The lapel is up, keeping the water off of your neck, and you've taken so many twists and turns that it doesn't seem like you should know where you are anymore. But just like before with the glint of metal on the sidewalk, something else catches your eye while you quietly shuffle through the alley, ignoring the overflowing drain.

It's that hazy sort of light that comes off of things that are far too bright for the rest of the world. Almost as if sunlight had managed to pause in the middle of its travel from the burning star billions of kilometers away, leaving a tangible residue of warmth and brilliance in a place that was far too dark for the likes of it. The archway could easily be missed from the street, and it goes down a bit before feeding out into a small courtyard.

Looking up, you can see the sky, but it isn't raining here. The grass beneath your feet is soft, and the air feels cool. You duck back again, looking down the alleyway, and sure enough it's still pouring out. But in this courtyard, the disorganization makes sense. A simple little stone bench and a matching tea table sit a little off center, and as you sit, looking down the archway, everything feels a little bit bigger in here than it should be. Everything seems in flux, but stable, a constantly changing place of chaotic peace.

You can see the kettle that belongs here and the ashtray too, even if they aren't there yet, you know they'll have to be. It just makes sense. That same sensation floods again as you sit and pause, listening to the calm air around you without any sign of a storm even though you can still hear the rain fall outside.

Serenity, that's what it is. Not just peace, not just calm, but serenity. You know you can't stay forever, but you know it will be here when you come back, and you'll be damned if you tell anyone else about it, because you know nobody would appreciate it the way you do.

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Luck is a hard thing to justify. It always seems to be there when you least expect it, and asking for it almost never goes well. Even bad luck can be random, but the balance doesn't seem to really work out. Always tilted one direction or the other, the up and the down hardly ever level out, they're always in flux.

Deciding to head in for a drink was a split second decision. Take that extra effort to step up to the bus fast enough to catch it and head back to the Loft, or keep on walking for down town? You could have flipped a coin it was that indifferent. But walking in the rain was a lot more soothing than it seemed. It worked out for your favor in the end, didn't it. Got to the bar just a bit before closing, managed to get your usual seat and catch Zee's attention as he was about to set in to his evening's cigar. The place was almost dead.

The lady in the blue dress was lively, wasn't she? Sitting there, enjoying a cigarette and a glass of the high end scotch, constantly making those come hither eyes with a smile that lead more than a few sailors to their deaths. It always was a weakness, though. Like the cigarettes, and the scotch, and the drugs, and the blood. Her siren call worked, and you spent an hour at the bar and what did it get you other than an hour wasted?

It got you a card with a phone number and an address, you lucky son of a bitch.

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Sometimes things just went wrong. There wasn't really any reason for it, no sign from some god that you didn't believe in, just outright being in the wrong place at the wrong time. After all, nobody's perfect.

It's amazing what can be accomplished when you have a fridge full of air and bottled water in a world like this one. It starts with a trip down to the Stuffer Shack, but it isn't the first, and it sure won't be the last. There's a crowd out front, and they don't look like the pleasant type. It's doubtful that people get that uniformed to go grab munchies. Hey, whatever, right? You aren't a part of this, but that rumbling in your stomach says you've been pushing off eating for far too long, and now you have to go and do something about it, don't you.

So in you go, past the men with the unnecessary ordinance to rob a convenience store, ignoring the looks you're getting from masked helmets. There's a slow turn of their heads, the kind that speaks of recognition, the sort that leaves you wondering just what it is they are actually here for. You don't even make it to the door before you hear the arming of a weapon. It's a mad dash to the side, and someone's Comet is taking all of the beating.

Well, almost all of it. The sound of metal rolling along asphalt is an easy sound to recognize. It's inconsistent; pinking and clattering as it bounces around. Sure, you spring to your feet, and it's just in time to get out of the way of the explosion from under the car, but as the Comet goes flipping you catch more than your fair share of shrapnel in the calves.

Walking home like this is going to be unpleasant, and now you've got a handful of mercenaries to deal with to boot.

You should have worn your better suit.

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You're bleeding, in a pretty sharp amount of pain, and you can see the red at the edges of your field of vision. The world feels like it's on fire and you aren't sure what you're going to do about it now. There are still guns going off behind you as the three of them try to suppress the destroyed vehicle.

But there weren't just three of them, were there. You're thinking now, aren't you? Thinking like you had been taught, like you were trained. You're outnumbered, outgunned, and in a bad position. Eyes open as you look out into the night and think of the world that is compared to the world that was, and what you would do if you had some help. Then it dawns on you, you're not alone anymore. They're there with you, and the medal reminded you of that. You set your hand on it and close your eyes, breathing heavily as you start to push yourself up along the car.

By the time you're standing, Walthers is right there with you, cigarette in his lips and gun in hand, raised and firing at the men in combat gear. Sure, you get a few shots off as you start to stumble back and away from the car, catching one of them that had been looking to flank the two of you coming around. The bullet catches him in the neck, dropping him cold with a spray, putting a round in another one's knee and taking him out of the mix. Walthers starts a slow and steady retreat, grabbing you around the shoulders and saying nothing.

He always was the quiet one, especially now that he doesn't even seem to be all there. Bullets pass through him like plumes of smoke, causing it to stray before seeming whole again. He gets you around the corner, sure, and you start to make your way off again, leaving him behind.

Just like you did the last time.

Barely able to get yourself through the doorway of your apartment, you drop there with a cringe, dragging yourself into the bathroom. It's a good thing you thought to get that medical kit, because you feel like you've lost a lot of blood. Nothing for it now but rest and a hope that you manage to keep yourself from dying of exhaustion until morning.

I guess we'll see how that goes, won't we.