Horrors upon horrors. One after another, after another; I thought I'd understood the reasoning as to why our hotel room hadn't had a stove.

It was a hotel. Why would hotel rooms have a stove? They weren't meant for long-term living or to be a home.

I'd thought that I understood. But that couldn't have been further from the truth. And I couldn't have been more wrong.

My reaction to my new apartment lacking a stove or a kitchen, just a vending machine that spat out more synth trash at marked-up prices, also had been…interesting.

Unpleasant. Deeply unpleasant. But interesting.

I'd chipped a tooth. And if I had any doubts as to what I'd decided to do with myself while I was here, as to how I would change the world, they were put to rest at that moment.

No one cooked anymore.

One of the essential social rituals of man and beast, food sharing, the first building blocks of a community, had been made 'obsolete'. Pride in one's work, the simple joy of knowing that you had done your best to make something the people you cared for were happy and fed, gone.

Destroyed. Turned into another blatant sociological control mechanism by bloodless, soulless monsters.

I'd never been so angry… And knowing, without a doubt, that hell was real and that these monsters would get what was coming to them was cold comfort.

They couldn't get there fast enough.

I pressed the button for my breakfast, ignoring the beep of my Agent as the vending machine took from my account and dispensed an XXL burrito into my waiting hand… Now, with twenty percent nearly real meat. Whatever that meant.

Let's see.

Bugs. Or bugs?

What was it?

Unwrapping it, I took a bite. Moved it from one side of my mouth to another. Scowled.

Bugs. It was more bugs… Of course. Cricket, I think—and buffalo worms. With bug cheese and bug lettuce, with a tortilla wrap that… Oh. They'd replaced some of the flour, or equivalent, with bugs.

I see. That was where the twenty percent was.

Of course.

Shrugging as I shelved that for later retribution, I took another bite; the flashing lights and loud noises of a Nicola ad forcing itself through the duct tape coverings I'd forced on the vending machine as I turned to sit at the table while Lucy snoozed.

Continued to snooze.

It was nearly noon. But I didn't blame her for wanting to stay in bed a bit longer. At her age, she needed sleep… And it wasn't as if there was a lot to do in the first place besides.

The television had nothing to offer us. While Lucy had started gathering a tidy brain dance collection with the sad excitement of someone who had never owned anything, I'd set boundaries quickly. And limits.

Time limits, that is.

Having my one friend and ally become a…brain potato? Yes. Brain potato… Lucy becoming a brain potato, just another hopeless addict trying to escape the real world no matter what it cost, was not what I would call optimal.

Life was pain. Life was struggle. Life was me turning off her wreath and dragging her to Reconciliation Park so that she could touch some grass instead of living someone else's memories of touching that grass.

My chewing slowly stopped as I thought that over, the burrito pieces sitting heavy on my tongue.

… *Hate.*

It was like everything here existed to make me mad.

Lucy continued to sleep as I looked out the window, head cocked as I followed each droplet's trail on the glass. How they moved. How they pooled. The streaks they left.

And I nodded.

Slightly acidic. Not enough to cause severe damage to the skin on light contact. More than enough to ruin clothes.

That was fine. I'd live.

And more water on hand never hurt.

With three large bites to finish up, I went to get dressed in something I wouldn't miss; I had a lot to do today, and it was best to do it while I still had the advantage…and before Lucy woke up.

Yes. That was necessary.

Publicly turning one's hand towards cooking was the sort of thing one did once they were sure they wouldn't embarrass themselves… And shelving that until it required pulling down later today.

… *Food.*

Yes.

Focus.

I stepped out, noting that an umbrella might be a good investment as the faint smell of ozone carried an even fainter chemical tang that made my nose wrinkle, and there I went. Towards the elevators. The parking lot, rather. Then, onto the street.

Then, up on the nearest roof as the rain slid off me in streams, unable to stick like it wanted—the best way to travel.

Step by step. Moment by moment. I'd get where I was going eventually. North. South. East. West.

Where? I wasn't sure where real food could be found, something cookable I knew how to use. Were the spices the same? Were they even available?

Who could say? Not me.

But, again, I'd get there when I got there.

We'll see.

I hummed.

A market, maybe?

==========

Unblinkingly, I stared at the perfectly preserved orange behind the glass. Large. Round. Glaringly…orange.

I licked my lips.

It even still had the stem on. And a tiny green leaf for flavor; It was as much an advertisement as food and couldn't have been more evident if it had tried.

… *Beautiful.*

Yes, Inner. Yes.

I licked my lips…because it was working. For the first time, an advertisement was working. I was hooked. I was lost.

… I had difficulty feeling angry about finding what I'd been looking for. And so close to my Megabuilding, too.

Heywood. The Glen; The Coyocan shopping hub was five minutes from my apartment if I bothered to move at a moderate pace…and they even did deliveries.

At a heavy markup, sure, but they did them. That was an option.

How...convenient. How easy and sinfully seductive for someone as busy as I was, or even busier if possible.

How much like something I'd been expecting to do one day, delivering groceries while heavily armed and barely paid.

It was almost nostalgic. I'd even say that it was-

"Are you here to buy? Or are you here to loiter?" The cashier sneered in a much snootier tone than one would have expected from a glorified bag boy. A bag boy wearing something I could only call a modern rendition of a tuxedo, all hard lines and shades black, but a bag boy all the same. "If the second-"

Ah. How embarrassing. I'd been in my head, thinking, long enough to receive the customary, passive-aggressive commentary from the shopkeep. And I hadn't even noticed.

"I was only admiring the selection before I decided to buy," I interrupted him in customary return, my tone short and cold as I leaned on my new umbrella. Purple, blunt, and sturdy enough to give me a certain dangerous air… I had a stick. And it was heavy. Hear me roar. "But, I see that I've outlived my welcome. So let's be done with it."

He flinched at my reply, recoiling under the weight of my attention; a light sheen of sweat appeared on his brow as I didn't react how he'd believed I would, changing our dynamic in a single strike.

I'd shaken his confidence by *being* confident. By refusing to show fear or worry, only the flat expression of the veteran haggler. Of a merchant who had been offended but not yet to the point of leaving, an expression that was not so much an expression as a way of life.

The ultimate poker face, as presented by the daughter of two merchants, spies, saboteurs, and assassins.

I furrowed my brow with honest irritation to introduce that extra hint of a threat.

He flinched once more with honest discomfort.

But mostly merchants. And that was what I needed at this moment.

I wasn't a *child* in neon pink kitsch right now. Now, I was a *customer,* and *he* was in a line of work where offending a customer may very well have had some severe consequences.

What if I had been a corporate executive in a child-seeming Gemini? Some wealthy scion slumming it as a lark?

What could have happened if I'd been half as psychotic as the average person I'd met in the last two weeks?

… *Silly of him.*

Exactly. He'd have been in real trouble then.

It costs nothing to be polite.

And there was only one other customary response to what he had done: It was the cashier's turn to stare, sweat no doubt pooling under his arms as I pulled out my agent, my fingers dancing across the buttons with the ease of hours of practice as I filled my virtual shopping bag. Fruits. Vegetables. Rice and sugar. *Beef.*

Whatever came to mind that I felt could fit Lucy and I's fridge, I bought…and, yes—the orange. It was coming with me—no ifs, ands, or buts… And the price began to rise. And rise. And rise, unlike my eyebrows, which stayed precisely where they were even as the toll passed nine hundred eurodollars for what I considered, at best, a week's worth of food.

… *Absurd.*

Yes. Yes, it was. Things could be better. Certainly?

Yes.

And so, as the Cashier smoothed his features and decided that he would pretend he hadn't doubted me, even as this interaction haunted his sleep, I burned half of my stipend on basic life necessities, and my plans became more complex.

My motivations became more nuanced.

Food security. Water. Housing. Basic infrastructure. Governance. What came after everything was said and done, and my plans finally came to fruition.

Whatever those plans were. I wasn't sure yet. That was a work in progress. And it would be for a while yet.

"I would like this all bagged." I smiled. "Individually."

He flinched.

"Please."

One didn't decide how to rebuild a world in a weekend. Not without resources and funds.

One step at a time.

… Speaking of…

==========

My name is Haruno Sakura.

I am the daughter of two merchants, spies, saboteurs, and assassins. An example of a species that had survived an alien apocalypse and would have to face at least five more before they were done.

A hunter. A gatherer. A soldier. A survivor.

"Andrei's fucking dead!"

"GET TO COVER!"

I had just dislocated my trigger finger putting a round of 577 nitro express through several inches of steel into an occupied room.

It was excruciating.

Also, it was something other than what I had expected to happen, even if I should have. Or, at least, it was something I should have planned for.

The Malorian was a gun meant to be used by people with skeletal enhancements—and limb replacements—full-grown men and women of the ‘borg’ persuasion.

Not twelve-year-old organics, strong as I was or not. That the recoil hadn’t thrown me into the wall at my back could only be attributed to me bracing myself by sticking to the floor.

Lesson learned.

And, as I silently walked down the hall while the distinctive sound of a tech round punching its way through concrete and where I had been sounded out, I popped it back into place.

…

I shivered.

… *Ah.*

Another tech round and a shower of plaster had me moving again with my now working fingers shifting into a tiger seal, my hair standing on end, then flattening, as the humidity in the air gathered and coalesced into a copy of me. A copy that went down the hall I’d just come from while I continued on my way, a Malorian of its own in hand that it aimed at the wall…and dry fired.

Damn.

Too much to hope for, I suppose.

Rolling my neck, my fingers came back together into the tiger.

Tiger. Tiger. Tiger. Three more of me came into being, the outside air flowing in giving me all the needed material to send one up into the vents. Another into the hall the first had gone down before leaving out the window, and the other where I had been going before I’d decided to lie down and wait.

And finish fixing my finger while trying not to cry.

That had really, really hurt.

So, ignoring the screams and panicked gunfire as my clones converged through the walls, the windows, and the vents on anything still alive, I focused on applying the green haze of medical chakra instead. Straightening out the kinks and sealing the cracks as things began to quiet down, the sound of knifework and CQC replacing that of anything else in less than eight seconds.

Gurgling. Splashes… Nothing… And a lot of dragging before the door that had indirectly led to my finger's current state opened, and I was beckoned off the floor by myself.

"Trouble?" I asked as I got back on my feet, a light misting of water cleaning me off as I got up.

"No. The borg was dead before we breached. Resolving the conflict was simple," was my clone's flat answer as it made way for me and closed the door. "And the bodies have already been stripped."

"Hmm. Anything good?"

"Money. Ammunition. Weapons, armor, and cyberware of varying quality. And fragmented instructions on cyberware extraction. I suspect that will be the norm for these raids." My clone paused. "We will have to find a fence."

While Viktor was happy to take cyberware off our hands, anything else was unlikely.

"Yes," I agreed as I walked in on my clones arranging the spoils, streaks of blood on the tile leading to the bathroom, and piles of plate, aramid, and kevlar telling me what had happened to the scavs. "And a laundromat."

While water control had many uses, sometimes, it was best to leave the work of repairing and cleaning military materials to the professionals… Whoever they were. Wherever.

I scratched my cheek and sighed, my clone wandering off as I did so to help with packing. "Logistics."

Every clone sighed as one but kept on working; They knew the stakes. And they knew we were on a time limit.

For multiple meanings of the word.

… *Work.*

Yes, Inner. Yes. Lots of work.

I hope Lucy appreciates this.

==========

Lucy woke up with a dribble of spit on her cheek and hair stuck to her face…that might have been connected.

She didn't care to know. And no one would *ever* know after she wiped away the evidence with the sleeve of her shirt and rolled over in bed to bury her face in the pillow.

"Soooo niiiiccce."

Lucy didn't think she'd ever get tired of clean sheets. And a bed that wasn't a cot. Never. Never ever. Ever never.

… What was that smell?

It was kinda…good?

Lucy rolled over again to check but ended up with Sakura's face shy of uncomfortably close to hers.

Sakura blinked as she pulled back a hand… Had she been about to poke her in the head? "Good afternoon."

Lucy blinked too, and didn't bother commenting on that closeness. Or the poke that didn't happen. Sakura was just being Sakura. And there were more important things to worry about. "What's that?"

"... Good-"

"The smell."

"Guyodon. Rice. Beef. Egg. Onions… Soy sauce. It's very - good." Sakura stood up with a small cough into a fist and a light blush that vanished so fast Lucy wasn't sure it had existed. "Fresh. And I made a lot." She put her hand out again. "Want to - help me eat it?"

"... Yeah. Sure. I'm feeling hungry." Lucy rubbed her eyes before putting her hand in Sakura's, letting the other girl pull her up. "And it's 'do you want to eat with me', gonk."

"Ah."

"Good try." Lucy rubbed her eyes once more…then again as she realized that an entire corner of their apartment, next to the terminal and the fridge, had been turned into a kitchen. Pots.

Pans. There was even a stove, and other things she didn't know the name of. Cooking things. "How the hell-"

"You are a very - deep sleeper. No worries. No questions." Sakura pushed Lucy into her seat, still too shocked to resist, a bowl and chopsticks already prepared in front of her… It was still steaming as Sakura took her seat as well. "Eat before it gets cold."

Lucy, eyes still bleary, glared.

Sakura, her eyes somehow *brighter* than Lucy had ever seen, snapped her chopsticks while giving Lucy a prodding look.

And a nod.

"... You can't hide the truth forever," Lucy grumbled as she snapped hers. "Guyadon, huh?"

"Guyodon."

Lucy poked the bright yellow part of the 'egg' on top of everything, wrinkling her brow as it burst and started to run. "... Sure."

The synth egg seemed to be…off. Not rubbery enough. Or maybe it was because Sakura had cooked it? Maybe?

She took a sniff…it smelled alright. Or, at least, she'd eaten things that smelled worse. Not that this smelled bad. No, not at all. Just… Who cooked? Why bother?

Lucy poked it again. Then, she jabbed it, spearing it through and revealing the synth meat, rice, and onions hiding beneath as she lifted the 'egg' to her lips.

And took a bite.

…

It was the best thing Lucy had ever eaten.