

A/N: Story was scrapped/not done. Read at your own risk.

Some years before the Cascadian Conflict

“May I have your name?”

“Robin Kuo.”

For a moment the man behind the kiosk thinks he recognizes the name, but shakes it off, continuing with his eternal script. “Are you here in Daegu for business or pleasure?”

“Business.” The employee of that port barely looks up as he stamps her ticket, the sour spray of the port’s water putting a sticky aura in the air that bites at anyone there. Airships moored against the docks bounce and ebb with the foamy waves as cargo and passengers pop their umbrellas or air filters and continue into the lines for customs. It was 5PM, and yet it was dark like midnight. The sky showed nothing but the ethereal glow of steel skyscrapers and glass towers, packed, edge to edge, the glowing lights of inhabitants and advertisements the size of buildings providing the only light.

There was nothing natural here. A revelation that had hit Robin Kuo, mercenary flight chief, wrench monkey, and sometimes back seater, the first time she had returned home from the Periphery as a mercenary. She had gotten used to the fresh air, the freedom; green grass and trees and dirt and plains and the clear skies.

This was not her first time however. All she could do was frown as she was waved through the lines of customs besides tired people, weary people, in the dark, urban world of the Federation Core. Off of her cap, sour rain (salted skies, as a local like her would call the weather presently) dripped off in the open air.

Dreadful, but this was business as usual as she was moving forward in a line that had been frozen in time, exposed to the elements, sick and coughing and all in wanting to just go off to another place, to their business.

She had business here, she didn’t lie. Robin had never been a particularly good liar. There were no lies to be had in aircraft maintenance.

“The Khan and the Prime Executive met today to affirm a new wave of servicemembers-“

“Malagasy invites you to take a vacation at its warm sands and blue oceans, filled with exotic wildlife!”

“Feeling down? Bring the sunshine inside with Henderson’s new Illuminatrix.”

Ruffling, the foley of a rifle on a synthetic poncho. “Ma’am?”

The sound of advertisements, of distant radios and news which had once been her ambient normal had taken her into the past, distracting her as two soldiers were on either side of her. The people

waiting in line in front of her and behind her moved off on the concrete. The Federation MPs had their way. They always did.

Robin had perked herself to full cognition as she realized where she was, what was happening. The weight on her right hip had felt damnably heavy as she knew two Fed MPs, soldiers, flanked her. Their faces blocked by the lack of light and the rain.

“Huh- what?” She had steadied herself.

She knew the sound of hydraulics and machines better than anyone. Looking down almost at her right foot had been two glowing red eyes, breaking through the sheen of the rain, looking up at her. It wasn't a dog, but people liked calling these augmented servitors as such. Four legged machines that knew the smell of contraband, not by training, but by software. The exactness of it. If God had made Man in his image, then Man hadn't done the favor further down. An ugly machine. Not like the planes she worked on.

Forceful. “Could you stand still for a second, the *hund* detected something on you.”

She knew what. For a moment the shock of worry and fear was through her bones like the acidic nature of the splashing waves around them, twisting within her. Though she had settled. She wasn't the timid, in-over-her-head gun for hire that she had once been a few years ago. She was a professional. Professional had their papers.

The mechanical *hund* had, in its sonic whirring from its vocalator, spoke its private language to the two Fed MPs, and they nodded down at it. “Are you carrying miss?”

She nodded immediately, keeping still. “.32 revolver. Inside my waistband.”

“Right.”

“I'm licensed. Private security. If I could get my docs?” One of the MPs had reached out a hand toward her waist and, presumably, hopefully, her pocket, however she recoiled back before the touch. “It's in my pack.”

The offending MP had backed off, unamused, but the other, the captain by the looks of his ranking insignia, hadn't been amused. “Let her do it, we're almost off shift anyway.”

She had slung the backpack she carried off. A digital scheme had been over it, worn down, Federation standard issue. “Where'd you get that pack?” The MP that had tried for a touch had asked harshly. Robin had been kneeling now, going through her pack for the leather documents case. She hadn't even looked at him as she answered.

“I was uh... in the service too, few years ago.” She came back up and out, unclasping the worn leather of the case and finding the certification papers and registration. The Federation always made a point of assigning people records. It was moments like these that she understood the Boss and his wish to stay away from Federation systems. The papers she handed them had been only for the gun. Not about what type of “private security” she was.

She was of the Sicario.

It's an ancient name. It beckons back to the stories of empire and religion that goes beyond even ancient history. For her it carries a weight she doesn't like to think often upon.

The MP captain hadn't looked up as he looked at the laminated papers through rain and a flashlight's glow. The *hund* had continued to stare up at her as she felt the eyes of the other MP burn through her body behind her. It made her skin crawl enough to concentrate on the salted skies, pricking at any exposed skin. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." It seemed so long ago that she had made the decision to become a mercenary. Further long ago still since she had decided to leave the City at all, for the Federation which maintained it. "I was in Logistics. Did a tour out of Byzantium and Bethlehem."

"Right. Okay. Papers are alright. But you're safe in this city, you know that?" He had handed back the papers to her harshly. "There's no need to be carrying a loaded firearm."

"Understood."

"Come on Zheng, she's not worth our time." Talking over and through her, it reminded her of why she remained in the Sicario Mercenary Corps after all that time. The Federation MPs had walked off, and, for a moment, she had looked to her appendix holster. She'd need to wipe it down if the *hund* was able to make it out. Serves her right for not servicing after her last range session.

"Hey lady! Keep it movin'!"

Always the sunny disposition in this city. She was holding the line up. She held her middle finger up instead behind her as she fell back into line.

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This was her City. Built on the bones of an Asia no one in the world much knew about. The Calamity wiped the slate clean, started it over from scratch, and yet there were remnants. She was one such remnant, at least, in her blood and bones. She was half-something, belonging to an island that didn't exist anymore: disintegrated and sank as the world turned over and burned.

What rose up in its place was... something. She didn't call it a something when she lived here; how could she? What else did she have to compare to the eternally misty city, shades of blue bouncing off buildings that rose above the industrial cloud layer, beat back by the entire Cordium infrastructure that kept this city going. Metal shapes, the future incarnate in angles and blinking lights that seemed to choke out existence above crowded streets. This was her normal, this was life.

There was nothing wrong with it as she walked shoulder to shoulder with people, faceless, heads down in the crowd on their way through weekday life, the rain beating them all down as her feet took her on familiar paths.

There is no fanfare for her, or even people like her: the working-class people of the City who are, more often than not, peddling, or trying to keep the very base of it whole. Stalls, shops, offices, they line every single inch of the ground level sections of the sky scrapers that reach up and out. She hears that the only buildings that compare to these gargantuan towers are in Cascadia: their pillars of communication. Everyone's too busy to mind each other, too worried about themselves to care why the world they are in is the one that remains.

She stops on a sidewalk crossing, waiting for the tired Federation MP to stop traffic for the pedestrians to cross. Great cargo trucks, automated, beam along with inane, color-popping advertisements on their sides. Potato chips, 100% real salt.

She had never grown anything before she joined Sicario. She never had seen anything grow, except for maybe people. Everything in her life was built, was delivered, was sold and bought.

There are mechanics hoisted up by climbing gear on the side of a nearby server building. Coolant is leaking down the side, and she knows what the solution is: Buy new pipes.

Though that's expensive, that means shutting down the servers as coolant is dumped and replaced and the pipes are ripped out. The City can't afford to stop, none of its aspects can. From the sewage department, to the food processors and Cordium plants. Nothing can stop because if it stops it all breaks down.

It is only when she lives a life, outside of the Federation, does she understand that these towers of her City, her youth, are very much emblematic of the Federation as a whole: They keep building, higher and higher. Not for a reason any reason she can see. She knows this Earth is large enough, good enough, for the people that live here to not keep building.

Alarms go off. It's not an enemy attack, or insurgents prodding at the perimeter of whatever base Sicario is at.

It's a Geothermal storm, whipped up by the Cordium charge in the city catching onto the material in the very clouds above. The Federation MP directing traffic books it into his patrol APC as everyone caught out in the rain dashes with half a minute to spare into the nearest open building. For Robin and the thirty or so other people, it's the cramped lobby of a doctor's office, and everyone is leaking onto floor that is more grate than ceramic.

The Geothermal storm hits. Distant thunder. The temperature of the entire City rises and when the rain comes it both washes the city clean, momentarily, and scalds it as the smell of salt rises from the steam.

Through tempered glass she tells herself that the Federation, for all of its conquest, reaching out into the Periphery and building its resources and empire, is all in service to this:

A stray cat is caught outside in the rain, and for the umpteenth time in her life, she sees the poor thing melt in the streets as people wait out the storm.

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Her mask is a gift from her service days: mostly needed post-Geothermal storms, due to the latent Cordium that's in the air. It's better than most peoples as she breathes in and out the filtered atmosphere.

Maybe the fact that people see it's a Federation military standard that they drift away from her on the sidewalk, giving her precious distance to walk down. She was a soldier once, technically (the same technicality that she can use to claim that she's still a soldier now). However, it's not anything she would say. Back then, she was logistics. Her weapon while wearing a Federation Military uniform was a

clipboard, a tablet, and her ability to keep inventory. She only knew how to use a rifle, barely, because that was the base minimum of service.

She knows more than to keep inventory however. She knows how to fix things. It came with the job. When Federation supply trains were less than diligent, or the airships were delayed, improvisation was something she had to be good at if the tanks needed their drive trains up and ready or shelter needed to be erected without the prefabs.

It all comes from somewhere however.

It comes from her childhood, her past.

In Sicario, she is the rare type.

She is one of the only ones who still remain devoted to her family.

She rounds a corner into the actual market district. Pop-up markets peddling goods and services are everywhere there's an empty corner or building, however the actual market district of the City is where, officially, the residents are supposed to get their food.

She overhears the radios broadcasting again from news panels and the great screens plastered on almost every building. It's the same story:

"The Venetians today have officially declared that they are joining a defense Pact with Norden and several Periphery states. This treachery has, according to the Chief of Staff, brought upon the full attention of Federation Peacekeeping forces in Byzantium. More as this situation develops."

As a younger woman, Robin only thinks of, not the fighting that would happen, but what trade is being lost, and what deliveries will be late because of it. That region of the Periphery, she remembers, is where a sizable fishing and vegetable market lays. She used to not think further than that, but Robin is older now, and she has found herself in a career that makes her see that other, unspoken side of the coin that the Federation mainstream media would never elaborate on.

The food in the markets here, are out of the markets of where they came from.

It's food in her mouth that's out of a family that might've been the one that grew it, that fished for it.

She doesn't want to think about that, but she has to, because she's been there to those places and seen what the Federation wouldn't want her to in order to keep these dark towers up, and the Federation in place.

She has to think about it because her family is integral to the system of the City.

For a moment of a reprieve as she walks through the market district, warehouses and stores left and right, people with protected carts and bags with groceries pass, she checks her notepad. A notepad, not a phone, or a tablet. Good old pen and paper. Less able to be tracked that way. On it is in her chicken scratch: SHOPPING LIST.

She's not above shopping for her team. **Hitman** treats her well. Comic's list is bare essentials, reading like a list not too different from her own care packages when she was deployed. The former

National Guard woman has always treated her better than other officers in the Federation. It's the maternal streak in her, combined with her history, Robin muses. She once had a small army of engineers and logistics crew that, she thinks to herself one day as Comic actually helps with maintenance, reminds her of better times.

I know how you grease monkeys were, back in the service. Don't fail me now, you hear? Normally I'm the one who takes care of my plane, but I trust you.

Yes ma'am.

Diplomat has an air of a brat to him. Of course, she still holds it against him, but it's not out of any true malice. She has five brothers of the same sort as Diplomat and it's a nice reminder to why she's here. Diplomat's list is full of extras, hot sauce, sunglasses, new socks, reading material for boring days, so that is on the way out.

Monarch's list is... interesting, but he knows that she was going to be out here again. He knows that before she became a mechanic, before she ever put on a uniform, she had lived a certain life that made sure she never knew want, and could always find something if she really needed it. She glances at the list before putting it away; salt and silver, and-

Someone cuts her off, bumping into her, and she is returned to the present as she finds herself in a place that has eluded many in that world, but not her: **Home**.

It's not a very majestic name, but in this ward of the City, Kuo Mart has staying power beneath those who speak English. It's her name of course, in big red signage in five different languages. A warehouse converted to big box store.

And she approaches it on one side of the street, seeing neon lighting advertising a clean warehouse for groceries and home supplies. There's even a veterinarian office inside. And a bakery. And a little food court. And, lastly, not many people realize: the living accommodations of the Kuo family.

Numerous signs, beat back by the weather, reveal deals meant to combat the competition: Weekly deals, discounts for service members, new arrivals and special items found only there.

Business is good, but it's hard to not be in business when people need to eat.

And she does something no one in this city does: She stops, she stands still, and she looks at home and imprints it into her memory. She looks at home and compares it to all of her yesterdays and confirms, that yes, she has returned to where she began.

Masked people move around her as she faces the challenge that she has faced every single time she has returned home ever since she left to become a Mercenary.

The question that runs through her head and stays her feet like an anchor is the one that many in Sicario deal with: Can they ever return home again? She doesn't know, and yet here she is: watching trucks and cars move in and out of the meek parking as the great autoloaders work in tandem with the shift in the back to cart in huge crates of produce and supplies for the store. They're all uniformed in jump suits, reflective bands on their arms making sure that people knew where they were in the eternal dark of the city. A smiling fox is on there back, the store's mascot. Kitty the Kitsune. It smiles out and everyone, promising good deals.

She tips the brim of her hat, just a little further down as she finally makes the journey and jay walks across the street, off to the side, just a little, just to look, just to see who's working today.

It's her family.

Naturally. She has a big one. Older and younger siblings in each and every direction. Some are actually her brothers and sisters, some are just cousins, but in that family they're all closely knit enough that the difference is nill.

Romeo, Lee, Li, Fan and Young Misha. They're helping the truckers unload their wares into the store along the cargo dock. Misha is checking to see if the shipment of eggs is completely unbroken this time around as Li confirms with the truckers that nothing has changed with the schedule for deliveries. One of the truckers is belligerent, but she works her charm, tapping her finger along her clipboard like a metronome.

It's a habit inherited from her big sister.

It's a habit inherited from Robin.

Satoshi and Mari, younger children, no more than ten, harass what she assumed to be Bao as he directs traffic, in and out of the parking lot, picking up carts for reracking back in the cart park. Satoshi hangs off Bao's leg as Mari plays with steam coming up from a nearby heating vent for the Cordium conduits beneath the streets. Bao shouts at her in his hoarse voice and she gets the message, albeit leaving him with a tongue stuck out at him as she scampers back into the store.

She spots Auntie Sue through the large glass doors leading inside, looking over all the checkout aisles and the younger teenagers working the registers. Her hair is up in a bun barely maintained as customers constantly egg her on about deals or coupons.

"You can go down to Federation Street if you want to barter!" Robin imagines her saying with a newspaper wrapped in her hand, held like a weapon. *"Have some respect!"*

Across the street the tech stores keep blaring out their news, televisions and audio systems all on spewing some sort of sample media to prove that they worked. They worked for over twenty years as that sound was behind her, and Robin moved past her family's mart, to the alley just behind it.

Dimly lit, a grey water canal made in the depression of the alley down the center, wires and tubes and machines coming out of the walls. It's the familiar drone of all its buzzing that signals to Robin that yes, she is home. Off down the center is a small staircase, leading up to the building Kuo Mart's second story. What was once this warehouse's sprawling office suite had been turned into the home of the Kuos.

But she wasn't going in there. Far from it. Her bed, her room, as they told her, would always be ready and set for her to finally, finally, rest her wings and return home. Though that day wasn't today and she wasn't really sure if she wanted to go into the mart at all, to let them know she was here.

It was enough: just seeing it still standing, seeing her family still survive, still go on without her.

Krk krk rkrkrk

Any emotional misgivings she had been thinking about were dropped as her engineering side came out. The one that prioritized the sound of breaking over anything else.

She steps into the alley proper, and her ears, her subconscious, leads her to the sub-generator

Krk krk rkrkrk

The sound goes again.

She waits.

Krk krk rkrkrk

Once is a fluke, two times is a coincidence, three times it's an issue.

It's the size of a small motorcycle, built into the metal walls, the exhaust grate breaths out at her and she is thankful she is wearing her mask as she takes out a tool from inside her jacket.

It's a utility knife chiefly but Robin flicks the heel of its grip open, a metallic male plug jacking out as she dislodges the access latch and stares into the beast. An older model, ten years old and put out by Henderson, but the OEM was actually a Periphery group if she remembered. Her family bought this in order to keep the disinfectant scanners ongoing inside, making sure the produce didn't suck up too much of the city's infamous air.

The male plug interfaces with a slot made for it as just double checks the hardware as she can see through the grate. She's okay with software, especially nowadays. Magadan's software is dead simple compared to Henderson, so she's more familiar with the MADB designs. Still she's more comfortable with hardware overall.

There's a smaller screen on the grip of her knife, reading back an error code: 4248. The first two digits denote where, and the last two denote what. She cranks the knife one way and the knife's screen changes: 5 GEAR INC/CYCLE PRESSURE NO.

Something's not broken per se. There are backup systems that keep generators going, however there's an obvious trunnion or a gear that's reliably not putting out enough torque and it keeps backing up the machinations of the machine.

She could fix it, maybe, probably. She takes the utility knife out, only for the hilt of the blade to light up as she depresses her thumb on a certain button on it, peering into the still running generator through the exhaust grate.

The grate itself is popped, wedged out by the knife as she kneels and sees it going in a mass of pipes and machine.

She was the Kuo family's mechanical genius. High marks in school, and then in the Federation service college she opted to go into. A miracle worker. She wanted to fix everything; from broke bicycles to cash registers to people. And yet... Why did she become a mercenary?

She reaches in, carefully, to the engine of this generator as it still runs, checking its various gauges and whether or not anyone has been doing regular maintenance on it.

Based on how low the oil is, no.

She laments. She sends back money for a reason. The money is a replacement for *her*.

Robin doesn't know how long she takes, carefully wedging her hand and her knife through the workings of the generator, making sure not to maim herself as she troubleshoots the issue. To turn it off would to clue someone in that she was back here, and that was the last thing she wanted. Though, in the end, it doesn't matter as she hears footsteps, and a voice, that creep up behind her and yell with the sound of a wooden bat dragged along concrete-

"I thought I told you assholes you get out of-!" It's her voice, but that makes sense given who's talking.

"Sybil." Robin speaks slowly, raising her hands up, mask off. "It's me."

Sybil Kuo.

Robin finishes her work, putting the grate back on with a friction fit before she turns herself, hands still up, tipping her hat back. It's like she's looking in a mirror, but in reality, she's just looking at her twin sister.

Robin's black hair is contrasted with Sybil's dyed red. Once, that was the only thing differentiating the two. Though today, now, twenty-six years into their lives, there's more. Robin's shoulders are stronger, for they carry a weight of wars. As Sybil grabs her sister's hands in surprise after the initial gasp of shock, she feels them worn down as Robin's masks clattered to the floor.

"What are you doing-?" Sybil doesn't finish her sentence before Robin hugs her true and hopes she doesn't feel the gun she carries.

It's silence as Sybil accepts the hug from the prodigal daughter.

Moments, seconds, minutes, a lifetime.

Robin holds back tears as she usually does and composes herself on her sister's shoulder before she breaks. "Yeah, hey, hi."

"Robin, what's- how? You're back?"

One of the many questions she went over in her head a thousand times. She never finds an answer good enough. "Just visiting. I'm passing through town on the way to my next base."

Her sister looks at her with the skepticism as befit the answer. She's never stayed for long. She's never returned truly. Though she can't complain when she does show up.

"Sorry, Robin, I thought, jeez, I thought you were-" Sybil pauses, dropping her bat to the ground completely. "You know, that doesn't matter."

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Sybil is tired, but that's normal. All of the Kuo family perpetually is just by running this store. It's a family run business, which is not a norm in the City. It was all big companies, conglomerates.

“Maybe another month like this it might’ve blown out itself.” Robin reports. She is comfortable with machines. Machines can be fixed. All they leave behind is oil, stuff that can be cleaned up. That blackness drains from her hands like the salt of the rain into the sink in the family’s kitchen.

Sybil has her arms crossed, the hoodie she wears is one that makes it known its not her shift tonight.

“Yeah...” Sybil starts uneasily. “We just keep forgetting to hire a handyman. There aren’t really any good mechanics around, ever since the Federation put out better contracts for them.” There’s a little pointed blame in there, at Robin. She couldn’t blame her. Maybe there was something more to her words but Robin is more concentrated on cleaning.

Robin can only dry her hands as she looks at the stove, seeing the teapot on it. It’s over five hundred years old, if the tales *Bà said were any true*. Beyond faded pictures of robins and flowers are on its white surface.

“How’s the floor?” Robin asks, trying to dig out beneath her finger nails.

Sybil shrugs. “Same old, same old. Not any busier or any less. Apparently, Auntie Lin wants to try a new pate for our sandwiches and there’s like, a social media group made against it?”

“Our sandwiches aren’t that good.” Robin says, reminding more herself as the water keeps running.

“No, but people grew up on them.” Sybil points out.

“I grew up on muktuk, but I’m not making a group for spearing geothermal whales.”

“Well there is.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” There was a joke in the family that often when the two of them spoke, it was as if they were talking to themselves. Robin can only chuckle as she remembers that, talking about whale skin and meat.

“Where’s Mom and Dad?” Robin asks with such a jerk, she surprises herself.

Sybil has an answer immediately, gesturing to the mess of paperwork on the table in the kitchen. “They’re out on business in Cascadia. They say they want to open up a store there. You know? Move the family out of the City, to someplace nicer... Have you ever been?”

Robin ignores the words, all that matter to her is that they’re gone.

“Oh, I just... I just thought I could see them” Her voice drops, there’s disappointment and sorrow and, for a second, she’s a girl again. She misses her parents.

“The Federation can’t be pulling your leash that hard. It’s inhumane.” And she’s upset. They usually are....

But they don’t know.

They don’t know because she never told them. All they think is that she’s a civilian contractor with the Federation, working on bases overseas because she’s just so damn good at it.

She's good at her job, yes, but not for the Federation. Not anymore.

Sicario is due out to the Periphery again. Near the Caribbean, the Bahamas. Sunshine and soft seas. Ocean water that she might actually be able to dip in instead of be sprayed down and melted with.

She doesn't even have a full 24 hours. Just a night before a Gungel pilot swings by with a seaplane and picks her up.

It's all the goodwill she accrued recently with the Boss that has allowed her to come out here at all to make sure she remembers what *home* is before they go off on another journey across the planet.

"Are you getting my money, at least?"

"Screw the money, Robin!" Sybil snaps. "We need you back here."

Robin can only steel herself, put on that strong face that is exactly the reason why she is needed home. "Duty calls, sis. I'm sorry, but, I'm just too valuable to the Federation." Duty, service, it's all what the Federation has taught them growing up. It's a song and number she can recall easily as she half-lies to, in some way, herself. "Why? Am I really needed?"

Sybil's lip quivers. "I mean, no, but, you were always the strongest child. People miss you, Robin, I miss you god damn, and I see you in the mirror every day." She steps her foot down making sure she has Robin's attention, but it was unneeded. "You disappear for months, and you don't tell us where you're going, and we can't reach out to you, do you know how that makes us feel?"

Sybil doesn't need to ask, because Robin knows. A family as big as theirs, as close knit as theirs, they know the inevitable: tragedy.

The insides of their home is padded, insulated, the sound of the outside city and even the mart below is barely perceptible as flowery wallpaper and comfy, natural lighting emulators paint every room from behind curtains, faking windows to nature. Given the fact their home is a redone office space, the "floor" of the office is just one giant living room as the side offices are bedrooms. But because of that, it's made comfy in a way that eludes Robin everywhere else, couches and cushions everywhere as those who took the morning shift are lounging and asleep, napping, not hearing Robin as she returns. Robin and Sybil stay quiet, they need sleep, and there should be at least enough time to say hi to all.

Of all the pictures of the family that paint the wall, there is a memorial set up.

Danny Kuo: five years old. Held in his arms by Auntie Sue and Auntie Phuong. He would always be five years old. The City swallowed people whole sometimes, and the Kuos know that loss very much.

The thought crosses all of them often: What happens if they lose Robin?

Robin, in her private moments alone, far from home, she thinks of it too.

"Chill out, alright?" Robin winces at herself. She sounds like Dip in that moment. "I'm not doing anything dangerous, and it's good money, right? I just... I just gotta get out at the right time."

Sybil can't fight against that. It is good money. Every quarterly check that Robin is able to send back allows the store to stay above waters much better than the other markets. More than that, it's necessary at this point. The finances are designed around the money Robin sends back.

This cycle which sends Robin away, which Robin convinces herself she needs to do, it's self-fulfilling.

But why can't she stay? Why does she have to be in Sicario?

The question she asks herself when they ask her to stay is answered the same every time: Being in Sicario feels like she's serving something greater than herself, greater than the whole Federation. The three of them: Comic, Diplomat, and Monarch... Tending to them and their aircraft fills her full of unknowable faith in an unknowable something that it gives her wings and flies with them. It is the indescribable feeling that all of Sicario knows now. It was a fluke, a mistake, a miracle, but it is nothing short of holy what Hitman feels like to be around: as if they are destined for greater in this world.

The closest thing to a religion that Robin has felt in that dead world is seeing the battlefield change in a blink of an eye when Monarch flies onto the field.

Does it mean more to her than family? No. Though this goes beyond that idea now, unable to be articulated by her, unable to be explained:

It is of the matter of affairs attended by her mortal soul.

She has to be with Sicario in the same way the world had to burn over. It simply must.

"Hey, uh, I got a few hours. I can take a look around the floor. See if there's any quick jobs I can do, and detail the rest. Would that be alright?" She pauses, and something is on her tongue and she regrets having come into the home at all. "I wish I could stay. I do."

Sybil wipes tears forming at her eyes and nods. "Yeah, yeah, I know the rest of the family down there would love to see you."

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The rest of the working family does love to see her. Much to the chagrin of the customers, the entire store almost stops as the working staff piles into the furniture section of the store. She is picked up by the strong Andrew and rides a wave of her family as young and old poke her with questions and items that they know she can fix.

Little Mari asks if Robin can fix her mask, and if there really are places out there where the rain doesn't sting and the ground isn't so hard.

Young Misha says he's gonna become a soldier, just like her, and after an uncomfortable laughing around the food court's table, she advises him not to as he pouts and only slurps down his bubble tea.

Uncle Yukio asks if she brought any souvenirs like they talked about last time she swung by, and, unfortunately, Robin had honestly forgotten. There is something her wallet... but that's for her and her alone.

Li is happy, same as anyone else of course, but she gets to business fast; there's a list of broken stuff and only so much time before dinner.

"You are staying for dinner, right, my tweetie sweetie?" An old voice asks over Li's shoulder.

Tweetie sweetie. Easy bait taken for someone named Robin.

Robin almost spills her shaved ice delivered from the food court as she turns as sees who she knows as Ba Noi. (Grandma in an old language).

“Ba!” Robin says as she flies into the arms of the seventy-year-old woman. She looks no more than fifty; living in the Federation does have some benefits.

Whispy dark hair, dark as hers, cascade over her shoulders from a hairband as her wrinkled face behind thick frames make her eyes seem so, so wide to take all of Robin in as she rushes her. Perfect white teeth are smiled with as Robin hugs her grandmother.

“Of course I am!” Robin declares, and the family present cheer.

Ba doesn't need to work, that much Mom and Dad have made clear to her, however she continues to work as Kuo Mart's greeter, and she has become perhaps, alongside Kitty, the welcoming face of cold and hungry people come to Kuo Mart to provide for their family. There's a hunch to her back that has come with age, but it does nothing to dissuade the pep in her step as she walks and keeps up with those nearly sixty years younger.

“Oh my little tweetie sweetie has returned the nest at last?” Ba asks with hope in her heart.

It breaks Robins as she backs away, laughing uncomfortably. “Not this time.” She laughs again to herself and cannot find out why. “I'm sorry.”

She can't bring herself to look at her grandmother's face, but Ba helps her anyway as her chin is touched by old, rough hands. “Oh, it's okay, I understand. I do.” She looks at the family she has nurtured and brought up, and despite what sorrow there is in Robin not remaining, Ba reminds them all is okay. “Even if you are not here, you remain in ours hearts. Isn't that right?”

And the family agrees, and for now, it's enough.

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It's enough for her to exchange her soft-shell jacket to dry out, and put on a family jumpsuit. It's enough to feel a little disappointed the toolkit she gifted them last summer to not have been particularly used, and instead for her to take it and break it in proper.

It's enough for her to walk the store of her youth, never forgetting its layout, and read down a list of things that need her to be there for.

And it's definitely enough for her that wherever she looks, there is family.

Sybil follows her mostly, like a shadow. And they talk of what life she was missing here. There are interjections from the other Kuos in earshot, but that is what she missed. She knew her family, loved her family, and they all comfortably fell back into the groove of living, working, existing with Robin as if she never left.

She's on her back beneath a lifted cooler in one of the frozen food section that refuses to turn on as Sybil sits near her, handing her tools when she requests. Only three hours and half the damn list that

Li passed over is done, and all of it is the complicated stuff: like the loaders or the exoskeletons. The cooler she was working on was the easy stuff, relaxing to her.

“I swear, you would be such in hot demand here, Robbie.” Sybil reminds her.

“Oh yeah? In what way?” Robin slides out from beneath as she kicks the side of it. It’s an ice cream cooler, and slowly it rumbles back on. Her jumpsuit is oil and grease covered, but it’s a welcome feel to her. “Not like we need anymore kids in this family.”

Sybil puts on a shrewd face as she picks at the hem of her hoodie’s sleeves. “I mean your skills. You’ve seen the City now. It’s seen better days. People like you are needed to put it back together. I mean I hear the Governor is hiring a commission of people to make sure this entire place doesn’t crumble down, and I know you used to talk about that.”

Robin knows what Sybil is doing. “That’s some awfully enticing bait you’ve got there, Sybbie.”

“It was worth a shot.”

“Yeah? And what happened with Mom and Dad moving our family to Cascadia if whatever they’re doing goes through?”

“Well,” Sybil shrugs again, she’s the sister that went with the flow. “We’d still be somewhat set up here. Some of the older family members, they might not be comfortable being outside the City.”

Robin laughs. “Yeah.” There’s a rag yet to be used in her toolbox and she motions for it, and Sybil delivers gently, only for Robin to rub her hands down with them. “That’s what I thought so too when I left for the first time.”

“That there is a robin.” Comic points out the first time she goes to Oceania with Sicario. It’s three months in and Comic perhaps gives her her first conversation that isn’t about the work they do. Robin is shocked. The name she gets “Wrench Monkey” is the one she’s known by in Sicario at first. To hear her name said so politely by the combat pilot, it draws her to Comic, and then, eventually, Hitman as a whole.

She looks to what the pilot points out, and on a branch is a small bird, smattered orange across its breast and face with round black eyes that stare at her. All she can do is stare back. “Is... is it real?” Robin asks.

Comic laughs, but then despairs when she realizes that perhaps for the first time in her life, she has seen a bird.

The industrial, technological cityscapes of the Federation stretch continent wide, from here in the City, all the way out to lands once ancient and holy from before the Calamity. Nature has lost the battle against the Federation, and it retreats out to the Periphery, where she, and people like her, find its company haunting compared to what they knew of the world before.

Maybe it’s in the way her head lolls over one way as she stands up fully, maybe it’s the thinness of her cheeks or the pace of her breath, but Sybil notices something of Robin. “Have you been taking care of yourself?”

She's missing a toenail from when a piece of shrapnel punctured the cockpit and her boot during a routine patrol over the Periphery. Monarch is an amazing pilot, however he's not untouchable. Besides from that, she came down with Cordium sickness when she was tasked with removing the material from the treads of Sicario's tanks during one op. The Cascadian's call it the "transformation", the process in which the body dries up while the victim is still alive, scaly and flaky. It's the closest she's come to death in a long time, and the day after she recovered, she was back to servicing Hitman's aircraft like nothing.

She did it without complaint.

In the same way she hadn't even gotten a breath of rest, coming home, putting pieces back together of a near 24-hour market.

"Yeah." She lies, nodding. She hasn't even eaten a full meal that full day. Her next fix is, fittingly enough, the broiler over in the food court. Sybil needs to be distracted, get her off her ass, Robin decides as she fishes her notes out of her pocket. "Hey, I've got a shopping list I was meaning to pick up while I'm here."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's for some people I work with. They'd be awful grateful." Sybil takes the list, looking it over, seeing the names for each of them.

"Huh, some funny nicknames here. You got one?"

It's not a nickname at this point. It is her name. "Nah. I'm not that cool."

The twin sister laughs as she nods to herself. "Yeah. Sure. It's quite a bit though."

"Just have one of our trucks leave it at our dropbox at the port tonight."

"Alright, sure."

Maybe it's the way she is trained to respond to trauma, calamity, and disaster. Maybe it's the way she's used to it, though when glass breaks and people start screaming, she doesn't flinch, her head only is on a swivel. Something is wrong toward the front of the store as glass and steel scream.

One of the family rushes into the backroom. It's Bao, and he has the younger children in his arms. "It's the Magadan's." He speaks to Sybil as he keeps the kids in the back.

Robin doesn't know what Bao means when he refers to the Slavs of the Federation, but Sybil does as she picks up a nail gun.

It is with a stark realization to Robin she left her gun, her actual gun, wrapped in her jacket. Though it's no matter. She doesn't care as she and Sybil rush through confused customers and aisles to the front:

A pickup truck has slammed through the front door, the steel frame of the glass doors are broken and shattered as young men, no older than her, make their presence known. Clad in suits, so unlike the thuggery about.

Robin wishes she has her gun as the leader, pinstriped arms holding a baton, has a boot over the slumped form of-

Oh God.

It's Ba, face down, motionless.

In a thick, accent tone: "I thought we told you people this market is off limits until they fall in line!"

Auntie Sue is halfway torn between staying back, keeping the rest of her family at bay and pouncing at the man himself. Six people are in the store, and they're currently bashing in the windows at the front, throwing down groceries and carts from customers caught on that side.

Robin can't stop looking at her. It's Sybil and the lead thug that exchange words, yelling them at each other. Promises of violence, promises of retribution. Racial slurs.

Her skin crawls, her heart aches, and she remembers the fire in her heart that reminds her who she is and why war still exists.

Sybil and the lead thug, pinstripes spattered with blood, glass scattered on the floor like snow, finish their poison in the air as Robin feels the need to move in her feet boil.

In a shear of metal and the roar of engines, the truck in the doorway moves away, and those that came with it in the parking lot drive off almost as suddenly as they arrived.

There's a sticker on the bumper of one of the trucks: Rubicon Ordinary. Robin holds it to memory.

As soon as the coast is clear she is the first over that imaginary line to the unmoving form of Ba.

Grandma is bleeding, and she's busted, and-

She groans, she pushes herself up with strong arms hidden by her own jumpsuit, decorated by pins and patches made from the young children. Some are shattered, some are broken; they fall to the ground like her glasses as Robin holds her mouth with her hand in shock as she sees what it looks like when an old woman gets a bat to the face.

And yet Ba is still smiling through it all, through the pain. Her teeth are shattered and, before Robin can eep out any sound of disgust, it is Ba that speaks first.

"Oh thank God I'm wearing dentures." She spits out between gurgling, going to her knees as Robin hangs over her. Her teeth aren't real, so she doesn't mind spitting out the dentures to the floor, shattered. She goes down soon after, and for the first time in decades Kuo Mart shuts its doors early.

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No MPs are called, no one wants to deal with the Federation authorities as the inhouse veterinarian pulls some of his supplies over to help mend Ba, she carried to her bed upstairs. Customers scurry out, despite their need for groceries. There's blood on the floor and the dirty underbelly of the city kills appetites.

“What in the blazes was that?!” It is Robin that is yelling and on the asses of her family now, and all of them avoid her gaze. The only one who has any reprieve is Auntie Sue as she warms up dinner for all of them. All twenty or so.

It is Sybil that finally speaks out. She can't let go of the nail gun in her hand and Robin remembers she was the same way after the first attack on Sicario, holding a rifle just in case, weeks after she joined. In the Federation no one ever even shot at them. It changed her fundamentally. It changed her the first time, the third time, the tenth time, and the hundredth time.

Sybil's voice is small, ashamed, as she explains. “Some Working Boys from Little Magadan. They started harassing marketeers like us a while back while the Federation MPs are busy dealing with what the Cascadians in their section of the city are doing. They told us if we didn't pay up their “fees” they'd come in “deal” with us.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Robin holds her hands at her hips. “We've got a big enough family to fill out an entire platoon and we can't even hold down our own turf?!”

And there it is. She speaks like a soldier. She is the matriarch of their family. She just doesn't know it yet.

An older Uncle is surprised she even thinks of them like that. “What are you talking about? We can't just fight them! If the Federation MPs actually pay attention to us they'll tear us all apart! Kick us out of this City!”

“Besides,” Sybil looks at the nail gun, and suddenly Robin remembers she had first confronted her with a bat. “We've driven them off when they were messing with our generators and stuff before, but they've never done anything like this... It's mostly just stealing stuff from the store without us knowing. It's what most of your cash goes back into covering, Robin.”

“I can't believe this shit!”

Robin is a soldier now. More than that: she is a mercenary.

It is a reckoning she takes on more than she cares to think about: She has **killed** people for less. She has never revealed such a thing, and she will never admit it, but it hangs over her like a suggestion from that the family can all pick up. It is an unspoken detail, felt across grooves like how the blind glide over their braille.

It is by the way her eyes narrow, and her teeth bare, and hands clench and her voice is full of hoarseness and spit.

She has made herself among a band of men and women who are bad people, and every once and a while, it shows.

There is a presence she knows from one man: Monarch. It inundates every single room he is in, and every battle he flies out. It is the feeling of gravity and weight that comes with a responsibility left unsaid and unclaimed which Monarch exudes.

It is, in a word, scary.

She sees the children slink behind their parents, and the adults look away to the floor as the sound of bone in a metal tin is heard distantly.

Dr. Marcos is removing shards of teeth from Ba's mouth, and it is like slow rain, each time it falls.

"We are a family." Robin points to the ground and the history that has been built here. "We do what we do for it, no matter the cost."

There is an assumption of Robin in Sicario. She's cute and plucky and well-meaning and a good person. All of that is true. Though she is more and people forget that until they see her in a flight suit in line with those they call Hitman. She has become more than just Robin Kuo.

She has another name, after all.

"Robin..." Sybil says. "*We're not like you.*"

Silence. The truth. Her twin-sister says to her.

The rice cooker dings and everyone lets it echo as, eventually, there is nothing to do but to melt away to have a quiet dinner.

Everyone wants to ask Robin what to do, what's going to happen, if everything is going to be okay. Though no one does as Pres takes her seat at the end of the table and listens to teeth, dropping into tin.

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She can't sleep the night, even in her old bed, even with a homemade dinner in her belly (banh mi and gyudon). Her old room is the same as it was, but all she can think about is her cot and bunk with Sicario. This isn't her room anymore than the glow-in-the-dark stars pasted onto the ceiling are real.

Her "room" is a storage closet, and quite frankly its one the larger personal rooms. She hasn't grown since she was a teenager after her initial growth spurt, so she still fits, though in the course of her life she has become so much bigger than this. Posters of the Federation, of stars and peacekeepers, are still there, surrounding her, promising her of a more fulfilling life that she has found, not with them, but with criminals and hired guns. She doesn't have a change of clothes so she sleeps in what she came in, however she can't even do that as she stares up at the glow in the dark sparkles.

Normally she'd be on her tablet, working things out, going over supply manifests and reports put out on the Mercenary network about new techniques for maintenance and what free airfields are providing what services.

All she gets is her hands to her face, a groan, and the realization that what she is going to do is far too easy for her to get to her feet about.

Maybe it's because she knows what it's like to lose people, actually. She has had many friends in Sicario. She has lost enough. She knows the walk she does to Ba's room is the same weight she walks with when Sicario brings home casualties.

For the pilots, Boss spares no cost to retrieve their bodies if they die. She has seen Ronin, their SOF group, go out for weeks on end just for the sake of retrieving a dead Hitman or Assassin. Often, when they return, where they have come from has been erased entirely.

She thinks of Ronin, of Sicario, as she enters Ba's room silently.

It's an office, proper enough to actually be a room, and Ba is neatly tucked into bed with her head slightly elevated, as if in a hospital bed. Dr. Marcos tools are nearby on a stool, and Robin avoids looking into it. Thankfully the dim light of night helps her as she looks down on what she assumes to be a sleeping Ba. Her face is so puffy, the lines on her face gone just from the swelling as an ice bag is wrapped by a cloth to her mouth almost.

She needs to see it, to feel the rage inside. She needs to see her grandmother like this and hope that the rest of her family feels the same.

In her internal thoughts standing over her bed, Ba's head shifts over and Robin nearly freaks.

"Oh! I'm so sorry--"

Ba breaths out haggardly. "Oh it's fine, my sweet. I've dealt with worse."

Robin in her life, standing there, has realized that she has not been in the eldest Kuo's room much at all, and especially not in her adult life. Vague shapes and objects that she didn't recognize as a child are starkly clear now for her, having been through the service she has. No one ever enters Ba's room. Not ever since grandpa died, not ever since she made a big fuss about a bunch of the children getting in there one day.

Ba catches her staring at the room: at the flags, at the cabinets of medals, at the pictures of people holding each other arm to arm, or candidly taken, in what is unmistakably a Federation FOB.

"Do you know I was a soldier, once? Robin?"

She knew it in the same way she knew she was breathing. She didn't think of it too much until now, thinking about it. She knew her grandmother had been a soldier once, though it didn't register. Not at all. Ba offered Robin no advice when she joined, and no one ever made note of it in conversation, but everyone had known.

"Ba..."

"Yes I was." She says with as much satisfaction as anything. "My last deployment was before Oceania... fighting those mercenary low-lives. I was an officer with the Peacekeepers."

And framed in one corner in the room is a dress uniform: the bars of a Lieutenant Colonel are displayed proudly.

"Ba, you never told us." Robin knows little about the Peacekeepers. Even in the service no one ever invoked their name for fear of bad juju. Though they were there. Special forces, the nationalist pilots who believed with zealotry the ideals of the Federation.

"Mm. Back then the frontiers, the Periphery, was wilder than it is today. And my cadre was the reason it is tamed now." The final border wars, all of it leading up to Oceania and the great mercenary

conflict, was something Ba was there for. "It's funny..." She chuckles, the crinkle of ice and the moist sound of blood in her mouth swirls as she clears it. "I spent all that time out there only to see the same type of people here."

"What do you mean?"

Ba says with resolution not often seen in grandmothers. "Those boys, all they believe in is money. They don't care who they're fighting, or why. They're just like mercenaries and they deserve what's coming to them. I swear on my husband's grave."

"...Soldiers." Robin says. She crouches down by her bedside, and Ba runs her hand through her hair. "That's what they call themselves in those gangs." She knows that's what they call themselves because every mafia, every criminal gang, operates by similar lines. It's efficient that way.

"Soldier." Ba says through a bout of pain. "The difference between a mercenary, and good soldiers, is that a soldier fights for something that matters, **because** it matters." Ba breaths contently as she closes her eyes, settling into her pillow all comfortable like. "I'm proud you went into the service. I'm proud you're still there today. I'm proud with how you still send as much as you do back to this family. **You're such a good daughter.** Don't you forget that."

Ba remains awake for a few more minutes, but those minutes feel like hours, and when she finally sleeps, Robin only notices that she has bit through her palm with her nails.

When everyone wakes, Robin is gone, with nothing but a note left for the morning shift.

Something came up and I had to catch the next ride out! I'll be home for New Years!

I love you all! – Robin.

The message is longer of course. There are messages left for every single sister, every single brother, every single cousin and uncle and aunt; Mom and Dad as well.

There is a sweeping sadness, almost as if a mourning, but this passes. This is what the Kuo family has known as normal: that Robin was caught up in so much greater things that it invoked in her the need to be there.

To them, that was okay. She would be okay.

It is Sybil's message that has a little extra: it's a picture. A proper, film-made picture. Wallet sized.

On it, there are four people, all in similar jumpsuits, all posing for a half-candid, half-memory saving moment in time. There's a woman, annoyed looking, short, dirty blonde hair, but a crack of a smile on her face as she dodges a man, running past her. The man is obviously stirred up into a mischievousness, perhaps as the victim of, waving a fist at the subject of the picture: It's Robin herself.

Robin has hopped onto the shoulders of... someone, wearing a pilot's mask and helmet. She rides on their shoulders and poses her arms like wings: on her face, a pair of aviator sunglasses.

On the picture's lower bezel, Sybil sees in its glossy reflection her own amused smile as, in Robin's chicken scratch, there is assurance:

I'm being taken care of, don't worry!

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Robin radios out to Gungsel 1 on a secure line to pick up the pace and move up the time of her pickup. The former Academy instructor doesn't mind at all: she enjoys the pressure. Though when she asks why, Robin doesn't say. She's too busy to find a proper excuse for what she has come to do as she melts into the city, through crowds, following their waves till they get to Little Magadan. She searches nothing up on the public info terminals, and asks no one, where the Rubicon Ordinary is.

She knows how to track targets now.

Slinking through the darkened streets of this forever city she is reminded why she prefers distant battlefields again. There's a sense of purpose there that is better than whatever she is doing, following cars, people, on the hints of her destination. Sometime, thirty past two, she finds what she's looking for:

It's a bar, a little slice of brick and mortar nestled between office space and empty lots, made up in the ancient orthodox looks of a motherland Magadan. She studied those megastructures as a kid, and to see it condensed into this seedy affair, it feels right. Still, it runs at this late hour, the low glow of artificial lights are unkind to her eyes. She fiddles with the safety of her revolver, looking in from across the street, wondering if she can make that final crossing as lonely cars drone past in the night.

There's no one else here to share this burden. The Boss isn't here, with all of his bombast and order and commanding presence which he uses to take care of all of his friends, and all of his enemies. Sicario isn't there, for her to blend into the unit and just because another mercenary. Monarch... She thinks of Monarch, lining up all those shots for her. He isn't there to aim true for her, to make sure it happens. He isn't the one taking aim, choosing who to kill here.

It's her. It's only her.

Her name is Prez.

Crossing the street and she feels the wind beneath her wings, and maybe, just a little too aggressively, she opens the wooden and glass door to emerge to the stand of a waiter. The smell of a restaurant hits her. Sauce and meats. It's rather homely, low chatter, the clang of the late dinners being made and a kitchen being used. It almost levels her, and the thick accented voice that greets her takes her off guard as again she realizes what she's doing.

"Privyet, just one?" The waiter is dressed in a rather wrinkly black and white affair, but it is late and people out like her aren't really expecting much.

"Uh uh uh.... No." She shakes her head. She rehearsed a story, real easy, on her walk over. "I hear you have a bunch of serious workers here? You know some real... hands on sorta people?"

The waiter raises an eyebrow to her, his bald head reflecting unkind white light. At the corner of her eye she sees the boys at the bar start to notice her. She can't afford to look back at the moment.

"We're... we're not quite sure what you mean... Are you here to eat?"

"No." Prez says, locking eyes with him. "I'm looking for some new blood. Let's just say I help run an outfit, out in the Periphery."

Every Lord had their Signature.

Every Lord had their mark.

Every Mercenary was branded by the Cabal.

Nowadays associations are hidden, those who had anything to do with them have gone to ground, however she is not exempt from what she is:

She pulls the collar of her shirt down, and the golden mark reveals that she is someone to ask the questions she is presenting.

The waiter looks with confusion, and then horror. "Oh. Oh! I'll uh, gather up my working boys now."

The waiter flies to the back frantic, and all the young men ask what is wrong. Not more than five seconds later they are lined up in the center of the restaurant and the waiter beckons her over.

There's no one else there, and behind the bar she sees the bar tender take back shot glasses and vodka bottles as he seems like to call it in for a night.

The boys all line up in front of her. Like called from the garrison.

It's almost too easy. All of them are bigger than her, bearing the marks and scars of a life not well lived, knuckles bruised and bloodied.

She herself is dripping from the rain, going down to the red carpet.

-WIP- A/N: Basically the waiter lines all the boys up like it's gym class and Prez is posturing as if she's gonna recruit them all as mercenaries. This is a lie.

The safety's on.

Only one of the boys recognizes her issue and what it might mean for him: A chance. He throws himself back, knocking over a table as ice and buckets fly. In slow motion, Prez jerks her thumb back to hit the safety of her revolver and pulls the trigger as well as, reflexively, her left hand grabs her right forearm to steady herself. It is the boy that moves that makes her twitch her aim at him, and she finally pulls a trigger that breaks like glass.

He never makes it to the backdoor before the shot comes, right through his heart, as the muzzle flash blinds the room and the sound of his head cracking against the door is heard; he falls.

She is engaged.

Three of the boys are shocked, reflexively they duck, try to dodge, but in a row they all bump into each other as the last, the one that banged a bat against Ba's head charges at her. Head first, head forward.

No head at all as Prez turns over and she points, she aims, and the hammer resets itself and falls again and another gun shot as the boy's inertia takes over and she barely jerks out of the way from being grappled by a dead man. Behind her he can hear the boy's body collapse into the tables and chairs as patrons all scurry out the back, screaming.

Prez and the boys however, they make no sound as they are in their own world. They cannot beg, they cannot forgive, all they can do as Prez pulls the hammer back again is look down on them, trying to clamber over each other away, is die.

She pulls the trigger six times first, and six times after that, and another six times before she realizes that it's twelve too many, and five are dead on the ground. The kitchen staff in the back, in their clattering, all swarm out with the sound of pots and pans and soon enough the gunsmoke rises and the smoke detector goes off.

They're dead. She killed them. That's enough for her.

She dumped the cartridges into her palms, thumbing in several more to replace. There was a rhythm to it. Gears clicking, pinions spinning. Hammers being rolled back and aim being taken one last time before she realizes that this mission is over. RTB. So she does, turning around as swiftly as she came, stopped only by the sound of cowering as she passes over the waiter.

"Wh- what are you?!" The waiter scrambles away on his back, unable to move. He's a cornered rat, scrunched against wood that would've costed her one year's salary. "A hitman?!"

It was three flights into being Monarch's WSO that Galaxy finally tells her that she needs a new name. A tacname. It would replace her name on the ground, which isn't flattering by itself. She doesn't have much time to consider however. It is Monarch, saying but a single word in suggestion, that gives her a name that sits well inside of her soul and agrees with it. In the course of her life, she becomes Hitman 1.

Prez doesn't answer his question, she doesn't do anything but think as he looks down on the white sauce and pepper and parmesan that coats this man from an exploded dinner. The red isn't food, and she realizes she too is splattered, just a little. Kneeling down there is nothing for her to do but to remember the Boss. She winks, putting as much bravado, as much threat as she can into it before she opens the door and the rain meets her.

It doesn't sting her skin. Instead it welcomes her as she welcomes it, washing her clean as she disappears into the City, into the dark, and into History.

-