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by stanley lieber

He completed the job and moved on to his next assignment, walking back a hostile takeover of the previous target's assets—such as they remained. It was not unusual to chain related jobs together in this fashion. Some found the interconnections too daunting to keep track of, but he wiped the slate clean after each payoff, only calling up details as the mission demanded it. Really, there was no other way to work.

Second job completed, he contemplated a short break. The frenetic pace of the last few months was, finally, beginning to catch up with him. Normally he would spin more plates. But this time, he told himself he'd get a little rest before he headed back out there.

It was not to be so.

Wedge into the future was a recurring client he couldn't quite shake loose. If it wasn't the money, it was the access that came with the jobs. Hand in hand with the devil, he'd happily leverage one job to help dislodge another. This might have shared an affinity with the aforementioned job chaining. He didn't spend a lot of time thinking about the structural elements.

It was a rush order. Make sure the girl didn't find out the truth about her brother. Okay... The requirements were open-ended, but still he had to account for his time in the measuring system. Take too much time and it would kill his efficiency. Take too little and either they would commission a new time study or else they would cut headcount. Neither was desirable. The best strategy was usually to match his reported time against the big matrix of times he kept hidden in a locked file, then fill in the rest of his timesheet with some innocuous work units that didn't have a time requirement. That way, he could spend as long as he needed on the real job. Everybody won.

It turned out he didn't need much time. The hostile takeover had been poorly executed, without even bothering to file the proper paperwork. The assets had been reclaimed easily. He had only needed to prevent the sister from finding out the cost. Since his services had been hired through a cutout, and the brother had been dispatched in a deniable phone accident, he needed only to rely upon the sister's habitual lack of curiosity about the details of running the family business. And that was a relative certainty.

Sometimes a job worked out just this well.