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by stanley lieber

Back in Japan, things were quiet. Between jobs he would shop for texts. He couldn't read the language, but he liked to move his hands over the pieces of paper. His collection was by now immense, but he never let his hobbies interfere with work.

From time to time he would notice the presence of others in his line of work. Usually just at the periphery of whatever job he was immersed in completing. He always assumed they were alternates, ready to step in and take command if ever he appeared to falter. He never did, so he was never able to find out for sure.

He began to notice them skulking around the periphery of his downtime, as well. It was true that sometimes he found it difficult to relax, but somehow he doubted they were there to help. After a while he would set up little tests. He would purposely fail to let go of his tension, bearing down on the frustration, and watch to see how they would react. Results were inconclusive.

Discipline continued to elude him. He could feel his grip on the controls slipping out of his grasp. He even lost his temper, once, during the last job. The sister had distracted him with questions, and he had found himself actually enjoying the conversation. When he noticed this he flew off the handle. It wasn't her fault. He was still mad at himself, now. Anyway, she was dead.

The vacation wasn't helping. The alternates just followed him around, never bothering to step in and offer advice, or even to force the issue and take command. He guessed that their options were limited when he wasn't actually working.

He decided to take another job. Maybe something out of the country, another change of scenery, a place where he could stop being reminded of all the things that he hated about himself. He pulled up the listings and searched for a match.

Things fell into place. He completed the job. Afterwards, returning once again to Japan, he recognized the familiar sense of disappointment as it descended over his mood, the big let down after the massive expenditure of effort. So, work wasn't helping, either. It made him angry. Everything seemed to make him angry, these days. It was almost as if he had no control over his mind, and by extension, himself. That would eventually pose a problem for his work, and so he could not simply stand by and watch as the sequence of events played out to its logical conclusion.

He retraced his steps, searching for the root cause of the problem. He traversed smoothly over the majority of data points, but the tape kept getting stuck on the sister. Something about her manner, the dry assertiveness of her voice, had lodged in his mind.

Belatedly, he got some rest.