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by stanley lieber

No, there would be no New Era. Daisuke dropped the pretense he could return to his old life. Japan or no, he was much too busy with each day's fresh batch of problems at work.

The operator had moved him to a desk inside his own office. Sitting there, watching his boss breathe, Daisuke found it difficult to concentrate on his work. It didn't seem to matter. The operator liked having him within earshot, just in case he decided to say something that required an immediate response. Daisuke had faced more challenging work in the past.

Much of it was listening to the operator talk on the phone. He spent a lot of his time chatting with one particular fellow, Slate, or Snake, or something like that. Very deferential. Totally unlike the way he spoke to people in real life. He could only imagine what the other guy must have been saying during all those calls.

Daisuke worked in the office for five, maybe six years. He began to forget what it had been like in the field. The moment-to-moment hustle and bustle conspired to grind all the reflection out of him. He was left with a smooth, matte surface. Blank. By the end of each day he wanted nothing more than to lay down on the floor and never get up again. That, he imagined the operator covering the phone with his hand and saying to him, could be arranged.

Daisuke had begun corresponding with former employees. One in particular, a man named Stan who had returned to his previous job as a mail carrier, had become a good friend (or at least someone who would answer Daisuke's frequent letters). From Stan he gradually pieced together a clearer picture of the events that had taken place shortly before he was hired. Daisuke was surprised at what he learned.