

Sleep was no longer an option, so he stood up and walked to the front door. Outside was winter. He opened the door and inhaled the freezing air, his bare legs recoiling from the cold. He wasn't awake. He wasn't sure he would ever be awake.

No discipline. Watch it pass. You will insist that you see it; this is a lie. There is nothing. There is nothing left. You choose to renew from the source. What you ignored is now animate, in motion. Dare yourself to name it. You cannot refrain; stop, now.

He knew all of this already. There was no news on the front step, so he closed the door.

The radio didn't work. Rather, there were no broadcasts to tune in to. He turned it on anyway and listened to the dead air. It didn't really sound dead. And what did that say?

Already, he had broken discipline. He started the water on the stove and opened a packet of tea. Chewing up the packaging, he spit a small piece of it into the frying pan. Gradually, his orders came bleeding through... He accessed the relevant materials, committing the important bits to memory, and then destroyed the remainder with fire. Breakfast was concluded.

There was a new wrinkle: Permission had been withdrawn for him to take the target in Japan. He would need to follow him out of the country, perhaps all the way to America. Fine, he wasn't known there.

He resumed his discipline, allowing his mind to drain itself away.

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.

Wedged 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.

—

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.

—

Perhaps a month later he was still thinking about her. This couldn't continue. He tamped it down and got on with his life.

A dog whined in the kitchen. He knew that he didn't own a dog. It was curious; where could the sound be coming from?

He'd been on his own, what? Seventeen years? He'd lost track. That man who was not his father had given him the go ahead, in his way. From then on it was solo work. He realized then that the sound in the kitchen was the dead dog that had followed him home from the test site. She came to visit from time to time, and he always forgot who she was until she was gone again.

He needed to pull himself together.

He thought about visiting T's parents in New San Francisco. They were always ready to welcome him. But was he ready for them? They couldn't possibly understand the background of his problem. But their nature was conducive to trying. And then there was Sonja.

He thought about it for at least twenty minutes. Then he decided to put off the decision until the following week. Right now, he had work to do.

New York was lousy with t-shirts. That should have been his first warning sign. When he concentrated on them they would go away. So he knew for sure something was up.

New San Francisco was looking more and more attractive all the time.

By the next day he had decided to pack it up and go. He finished with his current job and filed the paperwork. The business would have to survive without him, at least for a while.

Telegraph Hill was a tougher slog than he remembered, but he persevered. His reward at the top of the hill was a locked door to the compound, with no way to contact the inhabitants. He didn't want to just barge in. He tried once again to raise them on the phone. This time, Sonja answered.

"Hey, handsome," she said.

"..." he said.

"You got away once. Not this time. I got us assigned as partners. And you know what else?"

"..." he said.

"You've been chosen as the new Chief. Mom and Dad are getting too old to hold field positions..."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" he said.

"...So we decided that since T was already the leader in New York, you'd make the best replacement."

"This is great," he said.

—

The Bay Area was too expensive. He'd planned on finding an apartment in the city, but it had quickly become apparent that this wasn't going to happen. He'd made a promise to himself that he wouldn't touch any of the New York money while he was in San Francisco. He ended up with a room in the compound. No rent.

Sonja visited him often. Her room was just down the hall, so presumably no one would notice as she came and went. He'd lived through worse.

Taking on the family's assignments gave him time to think. The relative anonymity was a relief. These weren't prestige jobs, where his reputation hung in the balance of every minute decision made under fire. Mostly he just did as he was told. The money wasn't great, but, again, no rent.

Maybe a month of this and he was ready to think about what had happened in Japan. When he'd taken on the job he realized immediately that there was less preliminary data than he was accustomed to. He figured he'd have to work a little harder. It hadn't occurred to him that he was being set up for failure. And why hadn't it occurred to him? It troubled him that he was missing even these obvious clues. He needed to pull himself together.

He carried on in this fashion for some months. The mindless work allowed him much too much time to stew on his own failures. By the time the family was ready to make his interim position permanent he was well and truly ready to leave. But for some reason he stayed on. He hadn't quite sorted it all out, and in any case they needed his help. He couldn't just abandon them to the lions. He settled into his role as the chief. They even called him that: The Chief.

The Chief wanted discipline. Minds tended to wander. He knew from his naval experience that this was bad for propulsion. Focus must be restored. The first step would be to eliminate (or at least, curtail) distractions. He banned non-work media from the compound. Networking had already been forbidden, but he replaced the honor system with active countermeasures; devices would simply no longer work.

Uniforms would now be required during shifts. His own brown jacket and fatigues would serve as a model. Fright wig optional.

Revisions would continue until morale improved.

Before long, the family business was running just like a real business.

Maybe that was the problem.

—

The business was failing. His standards were too high. Profits turned to steam and evaporated under the intense pressure of map revisions, course corrections, arbitrary edits, and total do-overs. To be fair, the staff were not equal to the task. Blood from a turnip, and so forth.

So, another failure. He couldn't take much more of this. He had felt that the blunt Earth could not appreciate his thundering footsteps. Maybe he was just clumsy. What was there to measure himself against?

New York. But he wouldn't go back there and look at that sky.

"Chief, what's next?" an underling asked. The Chief stared straight ahead.

Born of the pink triangle, rolling to his feet with the plan still fresh in his mind, he'd lost the plot somewhere along the way. Coming to Earth had been a mistake. Coming to New York had been a mistake. Coming to 1986 had been the worst mistake of all. His efforts to prevent the inevitable had perhaps only hastened its arrival.

And now New San Francisco. The whole arrangement had been displaced, transplanted a full century forward into a future it would never have otherwise known. Megatokyo was not his Japan, and New San Francisco



resembled the Bay Area of his youth only in its bare geographic outline. Everything else had shifted unpredictably. It never even got foggy here.

He didn't know what to do. He was certainly not going to call and ask T for help.

He'd have to consider taking on venture capital. This was an avenue he had studiously avoided, and for good reason. He wanted to keep control of the ship. Investors meant a board, and a board meant even more perceptions to manage. This, too, would be bad for propulsion. It was no way to get from Point A to Point B.

He'd just have to find another approach.

—

Nah. He shut down the business and liquidated its assets. On to the next gig. Which was... what? The ship stood by him, always. They would find something to do with their time.

Not calling T.

Each befouled arena narrowed the field of possibilities. Some locales he wouldn't touch as a matter of pride. What was he doing to himself? He couldn't sustain. His reputation would be ruined. He'd have to start over from scratch. Again.

He put these thoughts aside and moved on to the next item, which arrived presently. A couple of stops in the midwest, and then back to New York; not for himself, but for the job. he made another promise to himself to concentrate on the task at hand, to try and pull himself together. If for no other reason than the fact that he was tired of saying the words, "never again."

The midwestern locations were nondescript, rural. The targets never became aware that they were being stalked.

New York would be trickier. T always expected him, even when there was no reason to expect him. The Chrysler Building was keyed to his biometric signature. Upon entry, ambient lighting and temperature would adjust themselves to his preferences, alerting onlookers to his presence.

And then there was T himself. Killing his twin brother would be complicated by the (slightly) younger man's physical invulnerability, class 100 superhuman strength, powers of flight, ingenuity, and sheer dumb luck. He would have to be exceedingly careful.

This job couldn't have come at a better time.

—

He smelled solder. Something in his room was burning. But he had already checked out; nothing could be burning because there was nothing there to burn. He pulled on his jacket and left.

The ship crossed the country in a handful of minutes. This was not in the manual, but he and the ship went way back, their mutual understanding transcending any supposed laws of nature. They were meant to be.

The sky was fluid mercury as the ship set down in New York. He docked with the Chrysler Building's air-ship terminal and disembarked for the gift shop. He'd pick something up for the ship before continuing on with his task. His brother could wait.

Waited in line longer than he had planned, but he was certain now that he'd been spotted. The building, at least, had recognized him, and flickered the lights in the gift shop accordingly. He'd have to work with it.

T never showed up to greet him. It turned out the elevators were out of service. Perversely, T had moved his office to the 61st floor observation deck, so it was down, down, down, many flights of stairs to the family reunion. Okay.

"Brother," T said, as the former chief of the west coast branch of the company strode silently into his office.

"I'm not your brother," he said, staring directly into T's visor.

"Fine. But do have a seat," T said.

He remained standing.

"Please. You're making this more difficult than it needs to be."

Conceding the point, he raised his weapon and squeezed the trigger.

—

His brother's death affected him more than he expected. Beyond the fact that T was not really his brother was the reality of their shared history, their unique perspective as time-traveling entrepreneurs, and the commonality of their interests. This hole in the black inkwell of his heart would not be so easily filled.

He would of course assume command of the New York operation. The real estate alone was of staggering value. After cutting headcount and streamlining his operating costs, he was confident that he could right the ship in time to avert catastrophe. Something good could come of

this yet.

The job had set things right, but it had also set so many things wrong. Just one of many examples he was now prepared to cite: Was he, himself now a target? The burgeoning line of thought set him on a course he found difficult to steer. Why had T been taken out? And by whom? Where would the money trail ultimately lead? He allocated considerable company resources to finding the killer, even as his instincts told him the investigation was a lost cause. He owed it to his brother to at least try to get to the bottom of this.

Inside the Chrysler Building sat an intimidating inventory of T's belongings. Seventy-seven stories, most having been used for storage at one time or another. One elevator shaft was completely filled with loose baseball cards, the result of a failed venture into the speculator market. Excavating the various piles of collectables was complicated by the need to employ the talents of experts from various fields related to the contents of the piles. Who knew what treasures might be hidden amongst the duplicates, rejects, and lames. A proper checklist needed to be created and reviewed.

Within a month of his brother's death he was settling into the indignity of his new routine. Paperwork, paperwork, and other, new kinds of paperwork. He began to understand why he had always worked in the field. He preferred to keep his hands free of bureaucracy and his eyes on his own paper. ("I'm allergic to your text," as the man who was not his father had said.) It was no great surprise that T had become deranged. Trapped here, as he was, toiling behind a desk in this office where he had probably had to raise his hand before getting up to use the restroom. It was an embarrassment to their legacy, and he

was glad that his brother had not lived to see himself in this light. The final dissolution of their partnership, affected not through any kind of direct action by their enemies, but through the slowly proceeding degeneration of the self. Self-inflicted.

Whatever came next, things would be different.

