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Where would you like to go today? The tone was flat. She closed the book. Cameron spent the whole morning looking for conflict, but it hadn't been necessary to look; Andrew piled into the vehicle and away they went.

At certain angles the glass seemed to depolarize, and the glint of morning sunlight cut into her eyes, making her sorry she'd awakened for... this. Andrew was deep into his book, never looking up. She leaned back in her seat, still not sure she was really awake.

Dapples of whatever on the dashboard. She noticed housekeeping had skipped the car. Andrew, of course, couldn't care less. She tried not to touch the arm rests with her fingertips. Andrew elbowed her absentmindedly.

Tried again to listen to her book but it was no use, she couldn't concentrate on the words. Her mind kept wandering to the scenery, trees and bushes whipping by outside. She made her window dark and closed her eyes.

Thump. Thump. Thump. She was awake again. Seams in the highway.

Andrew had dozed. Nearer to the coast, now, she could begin to make out the island's visual effects. Mostly, the sunlight still disrupted the integrity of the images. That and its reflections on the water.

She was thirsty, but Andrew had finished off the last of the grapefruit juice. She watched him sleeping.

The big curve around the mountain came right on schedule. The car banked, reducing its speed only slightly, and Cameron was tipped off-balance, momentum pressing her firmly into her door handle. The fluid in her ears shifted and she gritted her teeth at the familiar lurch in her stomach. She hated the car.

Andrew had awakened and moved on to another book. She decided to have a look at what he'd been reading before he fell asleep. There were crumbs in the pages, she realized, as breakfast debris rained into her lap. She stared hard at him but still he didn't look up. Why would he care, she acknowledged.

The car wanted Andrew's attention but he told it to shut up. Finally he threw his book against the dash. Cameron tried to sink into her seat, ducking her head to avoid his flailing arms. Now he was trying to kick out the windshield. She put her hand on his shoulder and said his word, which calmed him, for a while. He apologized.

It felt as if they would never arrive.

They finally did. The boat was leaving, but they'd made it in time; the ramps were still unfurled. Cameron grabbed her bag and headed for a ramp while Andrew fiddled with his trunk. The car pulled away and returned to the flow of traffic. Cameron waited at the top of the ramp for Andrew to slowly roll aboard. "Do you really need to bring all those things," she asked, knowing that he did. He growled at her and rolled away, leaving her to wonder, again, why she put up with him. She'd have plenty of time to ponder the question during the voyage home.

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Over the years, as the voyages to and from home became familiar territory, and the peculiarities of each trip became less distinct, melting gradually into the overhead map of her childhood, it would come to seem that there had only ever been one trip. They were always returning from America.

Her brother would probably say that their ability to do so was a privilege. It sounded like their mother talking. Cameron knew she could do as she pleased. Roppongi beckoned.

The taxi set down and they disembarked. Andrew was anxious to hit up the parlors, while Cameron went to her room to unpack her things. Housekeeping had gathered her mail into a neat pile on her writing desk. She sat down and began to go through the stack one by one.

The letter she'd sent from America had arrived. She looked at her own handwriting. She couldn't remember having written the letter, but she did remember addressing the envelope. Whatever she'd had to say to herself would hopefully prove interesting.

It didn't. She'd written a list of books to read, once she got home. Half of them she'd read on the boat, the other half she hadn't really been serious about. She had already bored herself.

School would start soon. She hoped to avoid the scoundrel Shinji bin Sony. He loitered, selling those t-shirts with the recent celebrity catchphrases printed on the front. Nobody bought them. Why would they; his family were criminals, nobody wanted to get involved. As she packed her backpack she tried to think of a way she could excuse herself when he inevitably presented his wares in the hallway. She didn't come up with anything good.

Andrew bought Shinji's shirts every time he came around. He seemed to think they were funny.

It was snowing again. Cameron decided to take her coat. She finished packing her school materials and headed out for a walk. She'd have dinner down the street. Cook was fine, but sometimes she needed to get out of the apartment. She pulled on her mask and braced herself for the noise of the neighborhood below.

Who could say why she wanted to go. Each time they returned home she promised herself, never again. Then, when the next opportunity presented itself, she would change her mind. Even with her brother tagging along, she found she could never resist. Her parents, if they were ever to become aware of her innermost thoughts, would probably find this funny.

The next trip would continue through April. That was a long time to be alone with him. This time, she'd have to take charge of his schedule. She thought she could handle it.

She couldn't handle it. His drama ate up all of her free time. She told herself, never again. Even as she made the promise she knew it was a lie. America was where she went.

In Seattle they had searched for the book he wanted. An import chain that stocked books from home. The volumes were sold out, except in America. The logistics were annoying to think about, but, Andrew insisted. He could run you into the ground.

For herself she would collect local histories, typically self-published, and perhaps only available at the offices of municipal governments. Andrew hated visiting the courthouses and small country libraries. Unless he happened upon a venue in which to gamble away his allowance.

Cameron would amass a substantial collection of the local histories, sufficiently unwieldy to transport that she'd have to ship them back to Japan in a separate compartment. Most of them would survive the journey. When one didn't, Andrew would grudgingly agree to help her

track it down.

He was not entirely useless.

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Cameron fried an egg. Cook encouraged her. She used too much oil, and she left the egg in the frying pan for a bit too long. Breakfast didn't taste very good, but at least she had the toast. Cook beamed at her, gratified.

Shinji had actually showed up at their apartment. No warning. When the sensors went off she even let him in. Of course, he'd brought the t-shirts. (Andrew obliged.) But what he had really wanted was to talk to her. *Her?* she had asked. *Her*, he had said, winking conspiratorially.

Shinji offered a proposal that seemed preposterous on its face. He wanted to sell his shirts in America. And who did he happen to know who frequently visited America? Cameron wasn't so sure about the idea. Andrew, obviously, was all in. Of course he was. Where would they begin?

Cameron felt she needed to exercise some control over her life. She'd start with breakfast, and hopefully expand into more meaningful territory. This proposal would mean curtailing her book hunting; they'd need the separate storage for Shinji's shirts. She decided to go along with it, if only because at least this was something different than her usual pattern, stumbling around all tired and grumpy from arguing. And anyway, America was America. Right? Andrew could keep the money.

Five or six shipments later, even she was sick of America. She wondered if it was really necessary to accompany the shirts on every single trip. Shinji insisted. Well, let's just have a look at these shirts, she had said. Shinji froze, and she knew right then and there that

something was wrong. She had had to choose her next words carefully. "I'll be the one to chaperone the shirts—this time, next time, and every time after that, for as long as this goes on," she said. Perhaps sensing that their enterprise dangled on the end of a slender thread, no one objected to her demands. And so it went.

She didn't want to know what Andrew did with his money. In spite of their joint success, he remained broke.

It wasn't her problem.

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Joining the priesthood had been a mistake. Years hated, but Shinji didn't know what else to do with his life. At his age, abandoning the security of the church was a risky proposition, and he didn't want to fall into the cycle of migration from scam to scam, burning bridges for firewood but somehow still just barely getting by. He didn't want to end up like his cousin, Carmine.

"You know what's fun?" Shinji asked.

"I do not."

"Blowing through all this money." Shinji snatched a bale of cash from his roll cart and sent it sailing overboard. "Watch for falling prices!" he screamed over the deck rail. It wasn't clear if there was anyone walking below.

Shinji opened his community center every day at 06:30. There were always a few junkies waiting when he arrived. He would nudge them awake and ask if they'd had any breakfast, inviting them in for a free meal. Most of the time the junkies would roll their eyes. But they'd still come inside for the meal. He was happy to help.

"Lady, you look good in that shirt." Shinji had convinced her, after all these months, to try one on. He had convinced her but still she wasn't convinced. "I look like an idiot," Cameron said. Shinji frowned, hurt. "Why, you do not." She took off the shirt anyway, and tossed it back on the cart. "I don't want to do this anymore." A seagull took this opportunity to relieve itself, right on top of the cart. "Exactly," Cameron said.

Shinji had often thought about returning to Japan. New York didn't need him; he knew that, now. His extended family at the community center comprised an equinoctial procession of different faces, all with the same problems. He had to resist giving newcomers a rundown of all the many things that were (he knew, straightaway) going wrong with their lives before they'd even had a chance to speak. He was losing it; that state of grace from which all moral authority flowed. Shinji bin Sony would shortly resign his commission.

"You can't just quit," Shinji said, matter-of-factly, and smiled. "We've a contract."

Cameron dipped her finger into the seagull shit, dug it around defiantly, and, before he could stop her, smeared a dollop across Shinji's smugly curled upper lip. He took a full step backwards, nearly tripping over Andrew.

"Th—This is an outrage. Why, I've half a mind to—"

"Can it, shitface" Cameron said, and stomped down the ramp to the docks.

This gave Shinji an idea.

Drawn by morning to the glistening confusion of possibilities, awakening the self, conscripting the now reluctant, now impatient body in anticipation of the inevitable, predictably (yet nevertheless) violent shock to the senses, Shinji bin Sony places first one foot, and then the other onto the floor in front of him. He has overslept again.

He doesn't reach the community center until well after 06:30. Most of his regulars have already cleared out. This is fine. Shinji uses the time to tidy up the communal space. He gets the ones who stuck around to help. He'll pay them. Something.

There are a handful of remaining matters that must be attended to before he can return to Japan. He believes he is resolved; once these loose ends are tied up, there will be nothing left to hold him here. That's when he will find out just how resolved he really—he's pretty sure he wants to go home.

He doesn't remember being this... indecisive? This certainly isn't America talking.

That had been this morning, during the present tense. Before he knew it it was growing dark. The day was gone. Shinji shoed out the stragglers still poking at the afternoon dishes and closed up shop for the evening. Tonight he would walk the several blocks to his apartment alone. Inadvisable even during daylight hours, but Shinji needed the exercise.

Speed lace boots crunching snow, the gray of the walls, passing taxis, flickering selves caught red handed contemplating murder in retail displays. Shinji walked. There was nothing to stop him from doing it. He had the money. There was not even anyone he would need to say

goodbye to. Just get on the boat.

Crossing over in the opposite direction had not been so easy. More than likely they'd never let him back in. But would that really be so bad? The point of leaving was to leave.

These were idle thoughts. Shinji climbed the stairs to his small apartment and sat down at his desk to write a letter to his cousin.

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The branches and leaves turn back on themselves, an uncertain autumn, folding into security, is it me, is it me, is it me.

The mail came and Shinji climbed out of bed to retrieve it. The stairs were steeper in the morning. It was a big box. Cutting the tape with confident strokes of his pocket knife, green boards of Nabokov smiled up at him. He left the box on the table and went to make some coffee.

04:13. Just enough time to walk to work. He arrived with minutes to spare and greeted the early arrivals. It was all the same. Shinji switched himself off and got on with his day.

The smuggling business had proven hard to control. Shinji was desperate. He flashed on his cousin, in New York. Here was a guy who'd always help out. Making sense of the details could wait for later.

He didn't know how to say goodbye to Cameron and Andrew. Figured he wouldn't. that would alleviate the need to discuss his debts...

He'd simply not return to Japan.

Shinji was ready to return to Japan. All that was left was for him to set a date of departure. His uncle had made the arrangements. No slow boat for him, this time.

It was out of his hands. They'd cut off the tip of each index finger. He couldn't play the piano. He couldn't gamble. Shinji realized he couldn't visit his cousin while he was still using his name. He practiced calling himself Carmine in the mirror. It didn't feel very natural, anymore.

What did they expect him to do?

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Returning to Japan had been a mistake. Shinji was no longer a child. He didn't know this place, and everyone who had known him was long gone.

His cousin had left for America around the same time that he'd boarded the plane from New York. He'd still be on the boat. Ironical; maybe Shinji would even beat him back to America.

But that was unlikely. He'd forfeited his original travel visa by returning. It would take time to reapply for permission to leave. He hoped that Carmine would be comfortable, alone in his lonely apartment. Shinji had always been comfortable there.

This was great. What luck. Shinji (sorry, Carmine) made himself at home. His cousin had left the country, presumably for good, and he'd left all of this in place, just in time for Shinji (sorry, Carmine) to stroll along and assume control. He'd always suspected that Shinji had had a good thing going, here in New York, but now he could see it with his own eyes: the separate facilities, the free labor, the charitable cover—it was a ready-made

operation, for which Shinji (sorry, Carmine) was a ready-made captain. Whatever it was Shinji had been up to, Carmine would take it over and make it his own. Fit himself right into place. This was great.

Shinji's uncle had come through again. He always seemed to have solutions for bureaucratic problems. At least for the ones where members of his family were concerned. Shinji's flight took off within the hour.

Back in New York, Shinji splurged on a cab from the airport. When it set down on the roof of his apartment building, he immediately sensed that something was wrong. His plants. They were gone. He'd left New York three weeks ago, without emptying his apartment, without even terminating his lease agreement, and now his plants were gone. What could possibly explain that? Something was wrong.

Carmine had big plans for the public space on the roof of the apartment. Permits and convention be damned.

This was going to be great.

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Shinji was gone and Cameron didn't care. The snow had come again, blanketing the evidence of filth on the street. Andrew was bereft. What now?

He'd saddled them with significant debt. Three shipments were en route, but the shippers might refuse to release the cargo if outstanding invoices were not paid. Classic cash flow roulette. Cameron just wanted to walk away from it all. Maybe she would.

There had been no word from the son of a bitch. He'd simply disappeared.

No such luck with Andrew. Her brother could drive her crazy. He was already arranging some kind of insurance scam based on the losses that would be incurred from the three stuck shipments. If the shippers eventually relented, well, then, more money for the both of them.

Cameron wanted out.

Shinji was tapped out. He'd spent the last of his savings on the ticket home (his uncle was generous, but perverse). If they'd already let his apartment, what could he do?

He unlocked the door on the roof and headed downstairs to his apartment. Well, *the* apartment, whoever it belonged to now. That would take some getting used to.

Carmine answered the door. He spoke, acted without thinking.

"Oh," he said, and closed the door again.

Andrew was beside himself. The whole thing had come apart in his lap. All his carefully laid plans spilling onto the floor. How was he going to pay off the—No, something would work out. It always did. He flashed on the real estate Shinji had left vacant in Japan. Shouldn't be much trouble taking possession. He had the papers of incorporation. It would just be a matter of convincing the property manager, and that guy was already on the payroll.

Carmine had to think quickly. Much depended on what he said next. His cousin was patient, but even family ties could be stretched to their breaking point. He ran first one, then another elaborate explanation through his mind,

rocking the tape back and forth, searching with the knob of his tape machine for the sweet spot—he'd know it when he heard it.

Nothing sounded good.

Finally, Carmine opened the door again, but just stood there and said nothing. Shinji remained planted on the same spot in the hallway, just outside the door to his own apartment. Carmine looked left, then right, craning his neck for a better view down the hallway, then leaned forward and kissed his cousin on the cheek.

Smiling, he stepped back and watched to see how Shinji would react.



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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 airship 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.

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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.



J

Stan had always self-identified as a stork, but he had come to realize, in his old age, that he was more than likely descended from the *Threskiornis aethiopicus* species of ibis—the African sacred ibis. This transmigration made no great difference to him; he'd still collect his pension.

Stan had passed the civil service exam online, with help from a contract hacker. He figured that exhibiting the resourcefulness required to pull something like that off had to count for something. Anyway, no one had ever complained about his work after he got the job.

He liked to drive the mail truck.

He wore the hat, and the weird socks, pulled up over his long, slender legs. His beak checked the windshield as he rolled over potholes, or turned too quickly inside the tiny cabin. His articulate wing tips quickly sorted the mail. The families on his route always smiled and waved when they saw him ambling down their street.

Stan glanced in his rearview mirror and inched back onto the road, rolling slowly toward the next mailbox. His next package was too large to fit, so he extricated himself from the vehicle and made his way up to the residence's front door.

"What in the hell are you supposed to be?" asked the resident when he opened the door.

"A bird, sir," Stan sighed, leaving aside for the moment the question of his exact, accurately identified species. The debate was all too familiar.

"Fucking liberals," the man said.

"Indeed, sir," Stan replied, and walked back to his mail truck. He didn't feel much pride as a bird on a normal day. It was hard for him to get worked up over verbal abuse. If the man tried to assault him it would be a federal crime. And Stan was more than capable of defending himself. Anyway, this was his job.

Stan's tall knees bucked against the underside of the mail truck's dash as he pulled back onto the highway towards town. He adjusted the small fan mounted over the mail tray and hummed to himself an original composition that he planned to commit to tape some time in the following week.

Friday was payday.

So be it.

—

Stan never tampered with the mail. He did his job. It was the same every day. Mostly he kept his head down and avoided fraternizing with the other mail carriers. After some bad experiences early in his career he realized this was best.

On a typical day he went home after work and hit the Doritos pretty hard. Often he'd just sit there in his La-Z-Boy until it was time for bed. Sometimes he'd even wake up there in the morning. Most of what he needed when he woke up was within reach.

It wasn't strictly necessary to speak to anyone at work. Most days he didn't. Most of his conversations occurred between himself and the people who lived on his route. These conversations were by necessity short. The nature of the business dictated that soon Stan would have to move on to the next house. Still, he remembered most of their names, most of the time.

Stan thought that there must have been a lot of people out there living their lives in a similar fashion. Maybe, sometimes, they got lonely. He'd never know, and he didn't particularly need to.

He didn't really feel lonely. It was true that he was unique. Most storks (ibises?) didn't bother to live to his age, never grew to his size, or for that matter ever acquired human speech. He wasn't sure he'd want to talk to them anyway. He found that he didn't have much in common with other members of his species. It was better to keep himself at a remove from the goings on of the stork world.

That was what he told himself as he drove the mail truck down the street.

—

No, he was serious. There was another he had tried to be friends with, before college, but it hadn't worked out. Part of why he left town. He didn't like to think about that time. Nowadays it was Doritos and the mail truck.

And his music. When he wasn't snacking or asleep he tried to set down his ideas. His equipment was primitive, but he found he had no aptitude for operating complicated machines. He pressed the record button and played his guitar.

He didn't talk to anyone about this. It wasn't for them. Something happened when he played that he wouldn't have been able to explain. The recordings themselves were superfluous (though they did comprise a record of the experience).

In his bumbling way he was transported.

On the other side, the man he had come to know as the Chief presently resolved into view.

"Report," said the Chief, swiveling in his chair to face Stan and his guitar.

"Slow week," Stan said. "Three tracks, none of them mixed. I'm... not sure where to go from here."

"Don't worry about it," said the Chief, and broke the connection. Stan set down his guitar. What was that supposed to mean? He stopped the tape recorder and opened another bag of Doritos.

Thirteen years into his career as a mail carrier, Stan still didn't know what he wanted to be when he grew up. Spying with his guitar was okay, but he had always assumed he'd get famous for something... else. He still had no idea what that might be. His current pay was sufficient, so he was free to follow his conscience during his free time. He wasn't even sure that his career needed to encompass his interests.

Whatever, it was time for work.

—

The team was coming together. A delicate job in Japan. The Chief had hand-picked them all:

Stan, communications. Mild and reserved, Stan was a newcomer to the field. With his guitar always in hand, he hoped he could live up to his billing as the team's messenger and oracle. If not, well, how would anyone know?

Alix Graves, recon scout. Point man, so far out in front of everyone else that he was pulling up the rear. Private investigator and New San Francisco native. Weird sports glasses. His imaginary friend was along for the ride at no extra cost. This netted him all the capabilities of a

two-man team at a fifty percent savings.

Raven, hitter. Not really a bird, which led to some awkwardness with Stan. (Stan mostly deferred to the younger man's superior costuming). Raven's contempt for his teammates was evident. He didn't say much, but when he did speak it tended to make people uncomfortable. The target of his professional attentions would surely be made to feel worse. Raven's training mirrored the Chief's, but he was definitely (maybe?) human.

Dimension Man, transportation. An early skateboarding accident had triggered the onset of latent superhuman powers, namely the ability to transport people (including himself) and objects over great distances using only the power of his mind. The implications were obvious. Nearing forty, he still skated whenever he got the chance.

John Ratcliff, enforcer. Sometimes known as Super-Sonic, though the name had little to do with his skills: class 100 superhuman strength, physical invulnerability, prolific anti-establishment mythopoetics. Another refugee from the vintage New York team.

Finally, the Chief himself. Still wearing his favorite brown jacket. Still carrying his ancient, somewhat controversial weapon. Sporting that same wooden expression, only seen to crack a grin by those taking their final bows as they prepared to exit the stage. Something was up with him, but you couldn't tell what it was. That was the Chief, for you.

The mission would kick off in three days time. The men would fly to Japan aboard the Chief's peculiar pink aircraft (the Chief having thought it would be wise to reserve Dimension Man's equally peculiar talents for the main event). Once in-country the Chief would run the show from the big board in front of his captain's chair.

All that remained for Stan was to find out the spec for the job.

He figured he was ready.

—

The job did not go as planned. Discipline had broken down almost immediately. Or at least it had seemed that way; it was never really clear what anyone was doing at any given time.

First, they had materialized in the wrong place. The initial disorientation led to several unauthorized weapons discharges, each of which would need to be accounted for in the paperwork. Civilian bystanders were caught in the crossfire. Members of the team had mistaken the misfire as an incoming attack and responded in kind. This expanded the mishap's reach exponentially. When the smoke cleared the streets had turned red.

Ignoring the signals to turn back, Raven advanced to the objective, with John Ratcliff laying down suppressing fire. Stan was impressed, he'd never seen anything like it. Well, in real life. He aimed his guitar at the action, ensuring that the Chief would enjoy a clear view. He guessed that this was what they wanted him to do. Nobody had told him anything.

The general disorganization was exacerbated by the team's failure to locate the target. This had hardly slowed Raven down. He proceeded to carve a path through the civilian-clogged street. At least now the rest of the team could follow. Stan tracked his progress with the guitar. When Raven rounded a corner, Stan realized that he'd have to move forward as well. The crowd closed up behind them like a self-healing wound. Everyone just stepped over the bodies.

At some point Raven returned with the target in tow. John Ratcliff again encouraged the crowd to disperse. Dimension Man was ready with his portal, and Stan nearly missed the doorway as it closed up behind the team.

The first thing Raven did when they reached the ship was to stomp onto the bridge and pin Alix to a bulkhead, his hand stapling the taller man's frame to the wall like a thick sheet of tan, muscular paper.

"You. Said. No. Mission. Log." he rasped through clenched teeth.

"W-what?" Alix managed to get out, totally confused.

Nobody had paid any attention to Stan, standing by and strumming his guitar. Suddenly they all realized he was there, what he was doing.

"Turn that thing off," John Ratcliff said quietly, laying a hand on his shoulder. Stan immediately complied.

"Turn it back on," the Chief said, rising to his feet and raising voice. "I love this song."

—

None of it was real. Stan imagined himself participating in... whatever this was supposed to be. But that was as far as it went. The other players may or may not have existed, and he may or may not have really known they existed. Certainly, none of these characters lived on his mail route. And who could he tell? He'd take long breaks from playing his guitar.

Stan didn't know it was all being recorded.

The team relied on him more than he knew. There had to be a conduit between the Chief and the men in the field. Experiments with Dimension Man's portals had

failed; information must be transmitted by an alert, engaged consciousness (Dimension Man, distracted as he was by his other duties, could not fulfill the requirement). Stan might be inexperienced, but he was there, and he could just about do the job. Anyway, the Chief believed in him.

This all left Stan in an uncomfortable position. On the one hand he was happy to help, but on the other hand he had been telling himself that none of this was real. Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe the unreality of the situation need not impede his performance. Stan tried to keep a positive attitude. He decided to keep his head down and forge ahead.

When the Chief called him into his office he was relieved. Now he'd find out what this was all about. Maybe he'd even get a new assignment.

"Have a seat," the Chief said.

Stan performed a quick survey of the objects displayed in the Chief's office. Not much there. He wondered how long the Chief had been operating out of this location. "Nice chairs, boss," he said.

The Chief paused long enough for Stan to become worried he'd said something irretrievably stupid. Then the Chief began to speak, which was worse than the wondering.

"A periodic review of your performance records has revealed that your presence on away missions is literally more trouble than it is worth. Effective immediately you will remain aboard ship and relay mission data to me that has been transmitted to you via telepathic means by the newest member of our team..."

The Chief depressed a small switch on the side of his desk and the narrow door in the wall behind him slid open. Foley: [SCHLICK]

"...Cy-bra."

The Chief leaned back in his swivel chair and made a tent with his hands. He saw that Stan had noticed the affectation and doubled down on the (he imagined) oblique gesture. In this way the master/servant relationship was firmly substantiated.

Cy-bra emerged from the Chief's small closet and nodded to Stan. Unsure what to do, Stan nodded in return.

"Since you'll be working together closely, I imagine the two of you would welcome an opportunity to get acquainted."

The Chief stood up and exited, leaving them to settle the question between themselves.

Stan was more confused than ever.

—

Muted colors shifted slowly, or maybe it was just the light. Red and silver tones on nothing. Stan wondered if storks (or ibises) could even see color. Somehow, *he* did. Cy-bra lay next to him, still asleep. How had it come to this?

The Chief had put them together, working side by side on various jobs, and one thing had led, improbably as it might seem, to another. He liked to wake up this way, with no need to dwell on the things he wanted to avoid. Instead of himself he could talk to her.

But she was still asleep. He had to work out the reasons why she could be there, why he wasn't just crazy. He couldn't come up with anything convincing. She hadn't

just walked out of his guitar... but how *had* she arrived in his bed? He scratched himself, wishing he hadn't finished off that last bag of Doritos. Presently, Cy-bra awoke.

"We shouldn't have done this."

Stan was taken aback, but of course he'd wait to hear her out.

But, that was it. Cy-bra climbed out of bed and stepped purposefully into her clothes. Without another word she left the apartment. Stan figured he'd see her at work.

Work was less satisfying when he knew what he was missing. All along his mail route he could think only of Cy-bra, and his other job. he probably put some envelopes in the wrong mailboxes. This kind of preoccupation wasn't like him at all. Pretty soon customers would start complaining.

In the evenings he would sit and plink away at his guitar. Frustrated by his inability to resume the Chrysler Building, he would thrash about randomly, not even really trying to play one of his songs. He felt old and ridiculous. Underemployed. Didn't they still need him out in New San Francisco?

The answer was not forthcoming. He hadn't expected much, but this was... nothing. In the weeks that followed Stan went through a lot of Doritos.

"Oh, there you are," the Chief said, late one evening just as Stan was about to give up. "We thought we'd lost you."

Stan didn't know what this meant but he took his guitar out of the trash can and got back to work.

He kept the big box of tapes under his bed. It would not be long until he would need a bigger box. He wondered sometimes if he should digitize the lot. He put it off and put it off. Someday, he thought, it would be difficult to get a hold of a working cassette player.

Stan recorded as the mood struck him. It could, and did, happen at the most inconvenient times. He had to set the ideas down as quickly as possible; once they were gone, they were gone. He operated the little 4-track machine with the unshakable confidence of a self-taught expert. Tape hiss was his enemy. Superior technique was his ally.

At some point he realized that the Chief was probably keeping recordings of his own. He wondered if the Chief's equipment was primarily digital, thus avoiding generation loss and tape hiss. This somewhat lateral insight set him on a cycle of acute obsession, pondering the higher fidelity recordings that must exist in the Chief's vault. Stan was his own biggest fan, so of course he had to get his hands on them.

Cy-bra was not willing to participate in any mission that would violate the Chief's trust. Raven told him to fuck off and hung up the phone. Dimension Man had to pick up his kids. John Ratcliff didn't reply to his e-mail, telephone calls, or forum posts. Stan was on his own. Eventually he decided to just ask the Chief for the tapes. Discs? Whatever.

"It's complicated," the Chief said. "But we could probably get you your songs."

The Chief winked at him, and motioned for Stan to step back behind his desk. He depressed a switch inside one of his drawers and a panel dissolved to reveal the largest collection of bootleg stork/ibis recordings Stan had

ever seen. CD-Rs that Stan assumed must contain at least some of his tracks in perfect digital quality.

"Straight from the soundboard," the Chief confirmed.

Stan had to have them, and the Chief knew that Stan had to have them.

They could do business.

—

Part of the deal had been to surrender his position on the team. That was fine with him. The whole thing had been confusing. He never really understood his role in the first place.

After the break he never heard from Cy-bra, Dimension Man, or anyone else on the team. He figured it was just as well. These people were just not like him.

It didn't take long for him to settle back into his old routine. None of the last few years had seemed real. Before long, he convinced himself that they hadn't been. He picked up more or less where he had left off, delivering the mail and not speaking to anyone unless he was spoken to.

All of this was in service of continuing the real work. He couldn't continue paying his material into a system that denied him ownership (and access to clear recordings) of his songs. Whatever success the Chief had helped him attain, the spoils could never be equal to simply doing the right thing. Each of his songs was an insurance policy against old age, poverty, madness... He couldn't just turn them over to the enemy in exchange for a little temporary comfort. He placed the box of CD-Rs under his bed with the cassettes and affirmed that all of this had been in his

head, anyway.

For some weeks he came up with no new material, just practiced and refined his fingering on the trickier passages of old favorites. He had started to worry something was broken inside of him, but soon enough the familiar flow of bland, underdeveloped melodies once again began to trickle into his consciousness. It felt like taking the boat home. *This* was the work he had dreamed about. This was the work he would do.

A light had flipped off inside of his head. He noticed, but he didn't care.

Thirty years later he died.





YOU CAN'T GO TO AMERICA

The legend hung above the Hidden Door English School like a taunt. Daisuke didn't care. He was going to get some of that Disney money even if it killed him.

The program was not that expensive, really, but the first payment was more than he could afford. It was all he could do to stay current on his tuition at the English School. Hidden door, indeed. How would he ever get out of this place?

All day and all night he thought about getting rich. Trite aphorisms washed over him. "What is the sound of one hand getting money?" And: "Why ask why?" And: "A hard man is good to find." None of them were any help. He was still broke.

He stuck with his training. Every day he learned inane new American phrases. He was able to follow TV and movies now, without subtitles. He was less confident in conversation. At the end of each lesson he would cut the kuji and seal up his notes.

Daisuke had dreamed about leaving Japan his entire life. He wanted to be rich. Somehow, the two goals had gotten tangled up in his mind. One seemed like a prerequisite for the other. And how could that work?

He thought:

EARTH

You endure. Obstacles shatter against your hull. The water parts as you continue on your course unabated.

WATER

You react. Your insight flows around the problem, addressing it from several angles at once. You extinguish the troublesome flames sparked by the problem with your own final solution.

FIRE

You experience. You enjoy the conflagration. It amuses you to observe the opposition as it consumes itself with useless resistance. Oxygen fueling your fire, you burn through the problem on your way to the ultimate victory.

WIND

You engage. You contemplate the myriad possibilities inherent in tackling the problem, mindful of potential pitfalls and traps. You stay clear of the edge; after all, the winds are high, and you don't want to topple over the side into the abyss.

VOID

What is the sound of one hand getting money? No, seriously.

His will exhausted, Daisuke retired to his futon. He opened and closed several games in his emulator before finally falling asleep. Nothing was helping.

—

Daisuke gave up on giving up. He got out of bed and went through his junan taiso fitness routine. His calves hurt. So what.

It kept coming back to the money. He had to get out of Japan. He remembered suddenly a friend of his brother's, Carmine bin... something or other, whose cousin lived in America, and ran some sort of charity for those too poor to fend for themselves. He supposed that he fit into that category, and wondered if the charity could assist him. It wouldn't hurt to ask.

But he wasn't speaking to his brother. He had no idea how to reach Carmine... whatever his family name was. Another dead end.

It would be several more hours before anyone he knew would be awake. He decided to study his English School supplements. He skimmed the videos at 10x, defeating the purpose. Nothing stuck in his mind. He could only observe helplessly as the sense data skittered into and out of his consciousness. He couldn't muster the will to interpret, or retain, or reflect.

After an early breakfast he walked to school, reciting in his mind the rhyme of the week.

God damn
Another fucking payback with a twist
Them motherfuckers shot but the punks missed

It sounded better with the music. Daisuke had memorized the whole piece, for whatever that was worth. The other students didn't seem to like the material, but he was like, whatever; it scanned.

He checked his messages for work. No alerts. Twice in the last week he'd booked a job only to have it canceled at the last possible minute. Of course, he still had to pay the fees. It cost money to make money, which seemed perverse.

It started to rain. Daisuke pulled on his hood and hailed a cab.

—

It was no closer to happening. Daisuke tabled the ambition and tried for something more realistic: graduating the English School.

He noticed that his life was all plot. There were no descriptions even of what he looked like. He watched as the thought came and went, his awareness shifting even as he considered what it meant to be thus described. And then it was on to something else.

Daisuke graduated from the English School. Work picked up and then slowed down again. He returned to form: he had to get out of Japan. The monotony of the cycle was grinding him down.

Daisuke plucked raisins from a tobe ware bowl as he carefully considered his options. He could stay. He could leave. He could stay and enjoy the perks of his current work. He could leave and starve to death, or worse. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't do both.

This was not the plan.

He took refuge in the knowledge that he was not the first to suffer this dilemma. Young people were always leaving Japan, failing, and then returning home, embarrassed, never wanting to talk about what had happened abroad. He wished he could afford to fail like that, but he knew that there was no safety net for him and his kind. There was no one at home to take him back.

For several months he gave piano lessons. This went well until disagreements inevitably arose as to what sort of material he would cover. Daisuke refused to teach anything written after 1995.

But he made money. He saved money.

For a year he worked as a custodian in an Internet cafe. The antiquated hardware and uniforms demanded near-constant maintenance. He finally quit, again over discrepancies in the timeline offered to customers; the presentation didn't really make sense.

But he made money. He saved money.

For some indeterminate amount of time he managed a public relations firm. He considered this a personal failure and never wanted to talk about what had happened in the office. It was bad enough that some of his clients had gone on to dominate the entertainment cycle; he would be unable to forget them if he tried.

But he made an awful lot of money. And he saved.

At the end of five years he was ready to move to America.

—

Daisuke's marketing plan was to franchise the skills he'd learned as a child. He preferred married couples for the stability they brought to the finances of his schools (the lazy occult symbolism was never discussed). Candidates could train for their own trips to Japan while simultaneously operating cram schools targeted at students further down the chain. Everybody got what they wanted and the money flowed uphill.

He didn't ask for permission. Whatever the license holders in Japan might have preferred, this was America: freedom of speech!

Graduates of his program valued their investment, and tended to supply public relations gratis, effective at roping in yet more of the kind of people who sought out this sort of thing. Inside of a decade he had taken the operation global.

Except for Japan. There remained the question of who ultimately owned (or rather, controlled) the intellectual property. Daisuke had no solid claim on his style save for his improbable success. The Japanese had never tried to monetize the material overseas. To his way of thinking this meant that what he was doing was okay. For the most part, so far, the courts had tended to agree. But he wasn't comfortable that the tacit arrangement would last if the Japanese started to raise objections.

He had to find a way back into Japan.

Back when he had been working contract hits for the Americans he had been hired to understudy for an aging, but unusually reliable operator out of New York. It turned out that he had never had to step in, but he had taken notes (strictly against protocol) on the operator's Japanese connections. Searching through his notebooks he located the entries he remembered jotting down. The operator had moved freely between New San Francisco and New York, and pretty much anywhere else that he wanted to go. This lack of paperwork was ostentatiously suspicious, and Daisuke had made it a point to follow up on the item and find out what was going on.

What he discovered made his jaw drop. The operator was being manipulated directly by a god.

This could help with Japan.

It was a dumb way to think about it, but the signs were all there. The operator's orders were coming from inside his body. Daisuke knew the setup well: interpret thyself.

He examined his motivations and realized that he'd already traveled some distance towards sympathy with the operator's goals. Yes, he would follow this thread. The operator's mind opened to him and he extracted the required information. On his way out he left behind the patterns that would attract the attention of the god. Careful...

He boarded his corporate jet, headed for New San Francisco. These days he traveled light, taking with him only what staff would be necessary to facilitate his mission. And what was that mission? Daisuke wasn't yet sure. This was no way to run his business but it might yet yield the results he was after.

Once he arrived in New San Francisco he traveled by motorcade to the operator's compound. The single file line of cars was bound to attract attention, and that was intentional. The operator would know he was on his way.

"I'm here about the job," Daisuke said, maintaining eye contact with the operator even as he settled into the plush leather seat in front of his desk.

"Ah, yes," said the operator.

Arrangements settled, Daisuke retired to his quarters. Thirty-six hours until he shipped out. He reviewed his orders and then tucked them into the secure pouch he carried on his person.

It had been a long day.

—

Daisuke did not particularly miss the business. In recent years the demands on his time had become a nuisance. None of the trappings, none of the people, were essential to his purpose. The operator provided him with direction. His internal monologue ceased.

When a ticket came in he would place it in TAKEN status, then consider the best way to respond. Often he did not need to leave his chair. The operator's organization had established a policy of minimizing unnecessary travel. He only left the compound when circumstances demanded manual intervention.

One such situation obtained. Daisuke started his mission, exiting the compound and affecting travel via public transportation. He browsed a magazine to pass the time. Once the bus arrived at his stop, Daisuke resumed the street and hiked on foot to his destination. He found that the mechanical aspects of his present employment agreed with him. Every modular action fitted snugly alongside the next. No daylight was visible between modules.

At the end of his employment term Daisuke decided not to re-up. He still found the work agreeable, but perhaps it had distracted from his ongoing goal of gaining access to the Japanese market. In the years since he'd surrendered control of the day-to-day operations of his company, little evident progress had been made. It figured.

At any rate, the boss was back.

"I'm the boss, I can *be* late," Daisuke announced at the inaugural board meeting of the New Era.

No one present disagreed.

—

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.

—

The boy on the skateboard had attracted attention not because skateboarding was inherently interesting, but because he had wandered into a restricted area. The operator decreed that his progress should be monitored indefinitely, even after he left the restricted area. Daisuke worked out the details and the surveillance was commenced.

This kind of thing was becoming more common. The operator would fixate on some random civilian whose activities obviously contained no intelligence value. But the record would be created. After all, orders were orders. From time to time Daisuke would catch a glimpse of the bigger picture, and, wouldn't you know it, it was all there. He guessed that the operator really did know what he was doing. Summaries were the purview of a totally different department, so each time he caught a glimpse Daisuke would shrug and shortly forget all about it.

He thought back over the last few years and tried to remember how long he had been working in the office. It was no use. He gave up.

The collapse of his conception of history had been gradual, and he hadn't noticed it happening at the time. The shape of his thoughts now flattened into a schematic view of a singularly focused event: present time, present day. He checked all his connections and everything seemed to be in order, but there was no orderly progression from A to B, no sequential coherence he could discern in the arrangement of constituent parts, only a continuous,

everlasting moment that always seemed to be happening at the precise instant he attempted to observe it. He felt dumb. Was this heaven?

Moments later he was distracted by a comment from the operator. He was obliged to laugh.

—

RIN

"I am strong." Daisuke's mind smashed through itself. He was ready.

PYO

"I am me." Daisuke discerned the light. It was bright.

TOH

"It's okay." On this day, Daisuke gave a shit. Really.

SHA

"I am healed." Daisuke went through the motions, contentedly.

KAI

"I know what you're thinking." Daisuke gulped. The words were stuck in his throat.

JIN

"You don't know me at all." Daisuke was sure. Right?

RETSU

"I know what I'm doing." Daisuke's third eye opened upon a curious vista. He focused.

ZAI

"Words I manifest." Daisuke performed a freestyle vocalization.

ZEN

"Now I'm nothing." Daisuke's face drained of color and he climbed down off of his desk. His last day at the office would leave an impression. The operator withheld comment until Daisuke had taken his small box of belongings and vacated the office. At which point he turned in his swivel chair to gaze down upon the city, whispering to himself, "What was that all about?"

There was no one left to respond.



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Geo's plastic skateboard had been a gift from his father. He didn't want to be seen riding it in public, but it was all he had. The plastic had ablated as he cleared the gap over the nuclear reactor(?), leaving only the now very hot magnesium trucks, which also promptly melted and fell away. Geo wasn't sure what to think, and he was never quite sure how he had made it to the other side.

Gaining access to the facility had been easy. All he had to do was wait in the parking lot of The Cellar until it was time for the usual Friday night delivery of seventy-five-odd pizzas. He crouched in the bed of the delivery truck under some boxes, then, while the driver unloaded the order, he snuck through the temporarily open gate.

Once inside there were numerous options. Geo skated several small outcroppings before he discovered a large concrete mound that terminated in an attractive gap over... what was it, anyway? You know what, who cared.

It took a few minutes for him to work up the courage, but that gap was calling out to him. Not audibly, don't be ridiculous. He could see the jump unfolding in his mind. He knew exactly how to handle the approach. He only hoped that the inferior construction of his plastic board was up to the task.

It all happened more or less as he had imagined. Except for the part where his board melted. Geo didn't know what to think about the fact that no one had challenged him the whole time he was on the base. Eventually he ran out of steam and climbed back over the fence, then hitched a ride back into town.

The next day he knew something had changed. When Matt went to "trade punches" with Geo by hitting him on the arm with his fist, Matt broke his hand. "F-fuck, George," Matt had said. In response, Geo punched him through a wall.

Being a super-hero was shit, and Geo didn't adjust to the change in lifestyle right away. He designed a costume for himself one day during study hall. He had no idea what to do with it, so he ended up wearing it to skateboard.

It was a bad decision.

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Geo was patriotic, sure. He had integrated the flag into his costume. Beyond that, he tried to stay out of politics. People just couldn't get along. He tied the flag bandana around his head to signify that freedom was ever on his mind.

Other constituents of his costume included: football pads, cleats, fingerless gloves, rock t-shirt (stretched and ripped by the pads), loose-fitting cargo shorts. He figured that just about every interest group was represented, somehow, in his ensemble. At this age his view of the big picture was necessarily somewhat constrained.

"America first!" hollered Rolly, as Geo faceplanted, shredding his American flag do-rag on the pavement. His friends found the costume amusing. "These colors don't run," Wheels observed, as blood from Geo's fresh wound stained the solemn bandana. "Oh, say, can you see?" asked Kickflip rhetorically, gesturing to Geo's predicament. On and on in this vein. The comments eventually trailed off as it became apparent that the joke had run its course.

The fact was that no one believed him. Every time he had contrived to demonstrate his new powers, some interruption would occur, like the cops rolling up on their spot, or someone's mom calling them home for dinner. Even he had to admit that it all sounded like bullshit. But. Ever since he skated that gap something was different. He couldn't feel pain. He couldn't feel much of anything. Also, when he was on his skateboard, he could *fly*.

Like, in the sky.

Ultimately he decided to keep it to himself. No one had believed him anyway. He'd tried being honest but none of his friends had heard him, almost as if they couldn't perceive the idea. From now on he would proceed under a cover of secrecy.

But... what was there to do? From whence, and to where, was he proceeding? And how would he get there?

First of all, he had to get a new board.

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Of course, no number of boards would ever be enough. After his bedroom was full he began stacking them in the garage. This drew complaints from his mother, who aside from the space considerations also had questions about some of the deck graphics. Geo promised to get rid of (some of) them.

This led to his part-time business buying, selling, and trading skateboards. If anything, it only exacerbated the problem. Now he also needed a large work area where he could package up and label the boards. His mom gave up complaining when he started paying for his own food and clothes.

Geo's best customers were his friends. They had made fun of his super-hero costume, but now it had become a sort of group mascot. He devised a logo based on the costume and had it made into a rubber stamp for marking the bottom of the decks he sold. It was popular with his friends.

Presently, Geo's biggest problem was that he was getting bored with skateboarding. Not the business. The business was fine. But with skating itself. He told no one about this crisis of faith, and the profits continued to pour in.

When Geo finally gave up skating it was for health reasons. His knees, his back, his hips; none of them were working as well as they used to. It made him sad, but what was he supposed to do?

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Geo's handwriting was terrible. His mother helped letter the catalogs. It was never quite clear why he didn't just use a computer.

"I don't really care about any of this," his mother would say whenever he brought up skateboarding. She didn't want to talk about comic books, either. It was not long before she refused to do any more lettering. "Well, thanks for the work you have done," Geo said, and that was that.

Being a super-hero was less fun than he'd hoped. Basically, there was nothing for him to do. Now, with his back, he wasn't sure there was much he *could* do. Even without being needed he felt like he wasn't doing enough. At least he was making money.

Rolly told him about a mark who had shown up at The Cellar asking after him. An older man with long hair, dressed entirely in brown, like a UPS driver. Geo took his card and said he would get back to him.

A lot of his regulars came through this way. Word of mouth seemed to snag the big spenders. They'd just show up in person, having done all the legwork themselves. He often wondered if they'd even seen his ads. Why did he bother?

His inventory was light, so if this guy wanted to place a large order it would mean he would have to do some scrambling. Fortunately he kept some reliable sources on standby. And at least a couple of them owed him favors.

In his mind he was already spending the money.

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When he tried again he took along the boombox. It was already falling apart, having been dropped several times on previous excursions. This time he clamped it tight to his shoulder and tried to keep his balance.

The cassette door was long gone, victim of a prior fall. Even though he remained upright, somehow the cassette itself was falling apart. One of the reels rolled across the sidewalk, unwinding a long trail of brown tape. "Type one," Geo said, reflexively.

He bent down to scoop up the loose tape and the boombox tipped, ejecting the other reel from the now fully disintegrated cassette. Both halves of its plastic shell clattered noisily to the ground. He set down the boombox and without prompting its battery compartment popped open, dislodging two D batteries, which likewise rolled away from him in opposite directions.

Geo still wore his old green Vans everywhere he went, even though he never skated. They seemed to be the only shoes that really fit his odd-shaped feet. People in the board room always said they clashed with his suit, but what did they know?

He would sit at the head of the big conference table, the one painted with his logo, and preside over the day-to-day operations of his company. Now he was regional. Now he was national. Now he was global.

Now he didn't care.

"We've the money," the man who was always dressed in brown, like a UPS driver, said. "You've the goods?"

"Of course," Geo said, smiling again. He found he didn't even want to stop.

Business.

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PERSONAL INVENTORY

- I don't fall down. Others shatter against me and fall down.
- I am not hurt. I feel nothing at all.
- I don't know what any of this means.

Geo felt that there must have been a reason why he was chosen as the custodian of these remarkable powers, but he had no idea why someone like himself should have been chosen.

It didn't matter. His schedule was full of meetings and he didn't have time to think about it. He'd shoulder the burden and sort out the philosophical questions when he had a moment of spare time. Which would be never.

It was funny, he realized that this was the decision he was making, even as he made it. Call it a rare moment of honesty with himself. He terminated the inventory.

He'd think back to that original costume sewn while watching TV. Had some random show or commercial influenced him? He supposed that this was a general question rather than something specific to the context of his career as a super-hero. To be honest he couldn't remember most of the shows he had watched back them. Busy with his work, he had only occasionally glanced up at the screen.

The modern version of his logo had, of course, been modified from that original design. Let's say streamlined. It served well enough.

One of his minor annoyances was constantly being asked to explain the symbolism. Why had he chosen the American flag motif? As if it should need to be explained. He guessed that it did. And so he would suggest that it had all been a joke. This usually worked. His interrogator would laugh, wink at him, and then move on to something else.

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Geo wasn't certain when the interrogation had begun. Searching his memory it seemed that the interrogator had always been there. He strained upwards, craning his neck toward the aperture centered far above his head. Save for this solitary shaft of light, the tall narrow cell was completely devoid of illumination.

Geo felt around on the floor, his hands trailing through damp puddles. He realized now that he had wet himself, maybe several times.

How long had he been down here?

Always?

The interrogator was apparently taking a break. Geo used this opportunity to get his story straight. Whatever this was about, Geo had had nothing to do with it. It would be easy for him to sell this explanation because Geo honestly had no idea what he had done.

Had he in fact done anything?

The cell door creaked.

Day after day he kept track. He gave up trying to count after he noticed he'd filled every available surface with marks. It seemed to him now that the only life he could remember was his life in the cell. His only friend was the interrogator. Was this how they'd planned it? With him able to recall only his captivity? The interrogator asked questions that pertained only to his previous life. At this point Geo just didn't know.

What if the interrogator was himself? Geo had approached this most prickly proposition several times, but the environment always colluded to distract him. What could it be they wanted him to tell himself that he didn't already know?

The cell door creaked.

Geo was led outside, into an implausibly bright, sunlit half-pipe, seemingly constructed to competition standards. The guard issued him a blue plastic skateboard with chunky yellow wheels. Geo just didn't get it. What was he supposed to do? He rubbed his eyes.

The guard withdrew, locking the exterior door behind him.

Geo was alone.

"Skate," his little voice said.

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He was given full run of the half-pipe for one hour a week. Privileges could be, and were, revoked over the slightest infractions, perceived or otherwise. He was never explicitly told the rules, but he was able to piece together a working definition through a process of trial and error.

Back to his cell.

They were trying to convince him he was someone else. They would ask the second person questions about the real him, get him talking about himself in the third person. Cute. He wondered what they really wanted to know. At some point he decided that he was not going to give it to them. Immediately, his life took a turn for the worse.

No more skating for Geo. They'd broken him down, built him back up again without the desire to skate. His new focus would be the mission. Because of this new configuration he wouldn't even miss it. Besides, with his pending workload about to explode, there just wouldn't be time for hobbies.

His thriving business likewise fell away. All that remained, all that he could see his way clear to think about, was the mission.

Details of which arrived presently.

And it was all too much. The data dump overwhelmed his ability to file the incoming bits. He couldn't perceive, couldn't interpret. How was he supposed to

secure the objective?

He attacked it like a skating problem: plan the approach, gauge his time in the air, figure out where the wheels would touch the ground.

Skate the gap.

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He wasn't Cameron, or Andrew, or Shinji, or Carmine, or Stan, or Daisuke, or Daisuke's boss. He wasn't even himself. He knew that now. It had all been built up, on top of him, to provide him with a framework in which to answer the questions they wanted to ask.

The interrogation never ended. The interrogator never left. The questions were always still being asked.

He tried to remember each phase, the details, but already it was all slipping away. How was he supposed to tell the interrogator what he wanted to hear when he couldn't even keep track of the construct used to pry it out of him? It was all he could do to respond, at all. He simply didn't know the answers.

Let's try again: Cameron and Andrew, dead. Shinji (sorry, Carmine), dead. Shinji... he didn't know. Stan, back at the Post Office (unless he was at home, or out on his route). Daisuke, doing some job for his boss. Daisuke's boss remained a mystery.

He was pretty sure that he had gotten all of that right, but there was never any indication of how the interrogator was taking what he was saying. Just more questions. The cell door would creak and he would be alone again. The cell door would creak and he would have company. After a while he stopped trying to distinguish the two states. To him, it was all the same.

Geo sat on the floor.

The frame dissolved.

Plot concludes.

Stanley Lieber is busy.

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